

BECOMING ADULT

Unaccompanied minors and secondary migration between Italy and the UK

Research Brief 8
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Key findings

- There are important differences in the reception policies for unaccompanied children in Italy and the UK shaped by different welfare regimes and labour market set-ups; the scale and type of migration; and by the social networks of different national and ethnic groups in each country.
- Young people are often aware of these differences and make decisions accordingly.
- These differences undermine the idea of a Common EU asylum system or Common EU action plan for unaccompanied children.
- Dublin III family reunification procedures are not working effectively which means unaccompanied children who could under certain conditions be legally transferred from Italy to the UK and other EU states end up turning to irregular means and going 'missing'.
- Italy's system for unaccompanied non-asylum seeking children, despite its problems, does provide pathways to legality and labour market integration for thousands.

Both Italy and the UK are party to EU law and policy on unaccompanied minors, although the UK opts out of parts of the Common European Asylum System. The two countries adhere to two different 'types' of policies in relation to this group which is illustrative of variation in practice more broadly across Europe. The variation includes the ways in which unaccompanied minors are typically institutionalized and the options open to them post-18.

A crucial difference concerns the fact that while in the UK almost all unaccompanied children are channeled through the asylum system, in Italy unaccompanied children have two potential institutional pathways: as (i) unaccompanied minors, or (ii) unaccompanied asylum seeking minors. If certain conditions are met, including a positive appraisal from care workers and a certain period spent in the country, unaccompanied children who are refused or who do not claim asylum in Italy can extend their legal residence for the purposes of education, work or training until the age of 19. If they can obtain a work contract in this time they can extend their legal residence further. Another important difference is that the success rate for asylum applications (including humanitarian leave) is higher in Italy than in the UK. This difference is especially acute for certain national groups such as Afghans who are much more likely to receive a form of protection in Italy than in the UK. Unlike the UK, Italy also does not deport refused asylum seekers to Afghanistan.

There is a substantial population of unaccompanied children in Italy that avoids contact with statutory institutions altogether, transitioning through Italy to reunite with family members or pursue opportunities in Northern Europe. Half of the 10,000 unaccompanied children estimated by Europol to have 'disappeared' in the EU in 2015 alone were thought to have done so in Italy, although this figure is contested.¹

Findings

Different opportunity structures

Italy and the UK have different traditions of immigration and different types of welfare regime. The UK model of migrant integration focuses on social inclusion and active citizenship whereas in Italy the predominant mode of inclusion is entry into the labour market. In both countries, access to statutory welfare for young people post-18 is strictly dependent on immigration status. However, in Italy, the informal welfare sector is more important and there is less of a strict link between access to welfare and immigration control. Italy is a southern Mediterranean welfare state, the main characteristics of which are the following: (i) state less present; (ii) heavy reliance on familiar networks; (iii) importance of Catholic tradition/religious institutions including in welfare distribution; and (iv) clientalism. The UK is traditionally seen as a liberal welfare state in which statutory welfare provision is more important relative to informal welfare in the 'welfare mix'. These differences in welfare between Italy and the UK, among other factors, mean different opportunity structures are available to unaccompanied minors coming of age in Italy and the UK. Young people are often aware of these and make decisions accordingly. Em, 16 from Eritrea, was passing through Italy to the UK. He commented that it was 'easier to be illegal' in Italy but that he'd heard from friends that life with

asylum was 'better' in Northern Europe and that he stood a 'good chance'. Others had similar reflections about the different opportunities:

"In Italy there are papers but no work and in the UK there is work but no papers!" (Mohammed, Afghanistan)

Turning 18 in Italy

The different make-up of unaccompanied children populations in the UK and Italy reflect the different opportunities which are in part shaped by Italy's post-18 pathway for non-asylum seeking minors and labour market structure. Furthermore, pre-existing social networks coupled with the availability of care and support structures are key factors as to whether former unaccompanied children in Italy can secure shelter and employment as they 'become adult'.

Italy has an existing population of labour migrants from Egypt, Bangladesh and Albania which are all among the main countries of origin for unaccompanied children in Italy. Some unaccompanied minors can draw on these social networks and on skills obtained through their previous work in their country of origin to find suitable jobs in Italy e.g. working with livestock, tailoring or as mechanics. In 2016, 2,685 non-asylum seeking unaccompanied minors were granted post-18 leave in Italy for study, training or work purposes, the majority from Albania and Egypt.²

Unaccompanied minors in Italy are often in regular contact with family members in their country of origin. The research in Italy showed innovative examples of 'best practice' where (through interpreters) social workers engaged with family members as well as the young people in a kind of 'triangular' guardianship arrangement. This allowed those caring for the unaccompanied children in Italy to negotiate with family members elsewhere and advocate for the child's best interests while also recognising that, for many unaccompanied children, their migration is part of a 'family migration project' which comes with expectations including debts to be paid back for the journey and contribution to the family income. Meanwhile, in the UK, because of the associated fear of return, young people frequently hid their links to family members. The Italian constitution contains protections against the forced return of minors, including reuniting with family members if it is against the child's will.

Italy's pathway to legality for unaccompanied non-asylum-seeking children has multiple problems and can in some cases lead to labour market exploitation (e.g. cases of paying employers to give them the contract needed for the post-19 visa; or being expected to work for free). Many young people, as illustrated below, experience finding a job by the time they are 18 as a 'race against time'. Many feel limited to opportunities available within their pre-existing (familial, ethnic and national) social networks because of a range of factors, including poor Italian language skills.

"For 15 days I worked 10am to 4 or 5pm then I'd go back 9pm until 11/12pm or 1am. One week went by and then I didn't go. I said I was ill. The third day I called and they said 'don't come back'. I didn't speak the language. It was one and a half years ago... I felt lost... but I want to work well. It is important to get

this contract, so that it works out well. Ah, the contract is a great thing. It's so important!" (Mohammed, Egypt)

Many young people had significant problems finding employment without pre-existing social networks, including individuals like Bilal, 19 from Mali, who have humanitarian or refugee status in Italy:

"I've done high school twice – I also did it in my country...then I did six courses: mechanics with cars; iron work; packing; soldering with something called the *Time* project – something technical for foreign minors... I'm doing three months of internship to learn the trade at an agro-food centre... This stuff hasn't helped at all. I'm like a leaf in the wind... When you turn 18 in other countries they help you with work, a house, a permit, but not here. I've got six certificates and now I do *nothing*."

Former unaccompanied children with refugee protection in the UK feel more supported as they become adult as they can access welfare benefits without pressure to enter the labour market immediately. Young people in both Italy and the UK may nevertheless forfeit education and training opportunities which would help them to enter the labour market in the longer term because of pressure to earn money more immediately. A lack of familiarity with the language may pose a barrier to education and work opportunities.

Despite its important problems (see also below), Italy's post-18 pathway to legality for former unaccompanied minors is one of few models within the EU that seek to provide pragmatic pathways to legality and labour market integration for this vulnerable group.

Protection gaps

Several protection gaps exist in Italy which encourage, among other trends, secondary migration. Although it looks good on paper, the Italian guardianship model is not fit for purpose. It is reliant on volunteers and can often serve to hinder young people's progress through bureaucratic delays. Some guardians work with hundreds of young people and are unable to manage their caseload; others are poorly trained. Italy's new guardianship model, underpinned by recent legislation, has significant potential for resolving some of these challenges although its roll out is fraught with administrative difficulties.

Several other substantial protection gaps blight the reception system for unaccompanied minors in Italy which became especially acute in large cities during the 'Emergency' response to the 2015–2017 'European refugee crisis'. Accommodation for unaccompanied children in Italy has been poorly managed through private contracting arrangements, as demonstrated in several high-profile cases at the height of the 'Emergency' including evidence of corruption. In one case in Rome, after a centre was shut down, dozens of unaccompanied children ended up street homeless. Equally, in the major northern cities there have been acute shortages of accommodation since 2015.

Many unaccompanied minors and former unaccompanied minors in Italy experience periods of homelessness due to problems registering with the authorities upon arrival, being wrongly assessed as over 18, or exhausting their six months' entitlement to residence in a centre for post-18s without

finding work, as was the case with Bilal, 19 from Mali who has refugee status in Italy:

"You need to find a job to pay for a house. No work, you sleep on the street."

Italy's age assessment procedure has been reported to be 'inhuman and degrading' and frequently inaccurate. The research found countless examples of children wrongly assessed to be over 18 and experiencing long periods of street homelessness while awaiting proof of documentation of age from their country of origin. Many young men (as well as women) have experienced sexual violence en route to and within Europe. Genital examinations as part of age assessments are common practice and experienced as traumatic and shameful for young men. Moreover, the gender specific needs of male unaccompanied minors are commonly hidden within policies which view gender sensitivity in policy as only relevant to girls and women³. While proposals to strengthen the protection framework for unaccompanied children in Italy should be welcomed, advocates should also be careful not to close existing pathways for regularization.

Young people often transit through Italy to the UK. They are often pushed by a real or perceived lack of support and opportunities in Italy, but also influenced by factors such as English language, family and social networks in the UK. Dublin III procedures are not working effectively, meaning children who should be able to access legal transfers from Italy to the UK end up turning to smugglers/irregular means and 'going missing' instead. It is believed that as few as 20 reunions of unaccompanied children from Italy with their family members elsewhere in Europe have been completed to date, despite it being likely that several thousand children are eligible.

Secondary migration within and to Italy

A high level of secondary migration exists between the South to the North of Italy yet there is poor coordination between the regions in terms of data sharing. This affects young people's ability to launch an asylum claim in one part of the country and progress it in another. Delays incurred, sometimes of several months, prevent young people from securing a post-18 visa. Ravi, 17 from Senegal, was wrongly age assessed to be over 18 upon arriving in a city in the North of Italy, despite being assessed as a child in the South where he had an active asylum claim. He explains that the lack of opportunities in the South of Italy coupled with poor reception conditions pushed him North:

"She [the teacher at the reception centre in Southern Italy]... wanted me to study. If you go elsewhere, she told me, you can study properly... She even got me the ticket! She gave me books and helped me a lot. Then...we had the problems... we go to school to study but I don't even know what's happening. Today even the teacher said to me 'what's up, why are you hitting your head?'" (Ravi, Senegal)

Some young people with a legal right to stay in Italy move North, to other parts of Europe, to work in the informal economy because of a lack of job opportunities in Italy. Driss, 19 from Mali has refugee status. He explained,

“Since 2013 I’ve not been in work. That’s 3 years without work. It’s... a lot of time. When you have a contract you’re free, when you don’t you’re not. When I have a paper maybe I’ll leave the country... I have to search a new solution, a new life... If you don’t work, if you have no house, no work, you have nothing, that means you’re finished. That’s it. There’s nothing...” (Driss, Mali)

A small number of (in the research mostly Afghan) young people migrate *back* to Italy after becoming appeal rights exhausted in the UK in search of a kind of ‘DIY protection’ because, at the time of the research, they calculated that they would not be deported from Italy and could work more easily in the irregular sector. A small number of young people in this position who had arrived in Italy from the UK directly or following forced removal were successful in obtaining documents in Italy, despite having previously claimed asylum and been refused in the UK. As one young person explained,

“In Italy there are some advantages to not being strict about the rules...” (Mohammed, Afghanistan)

The level of support in Italy is nevertheless experienced as significantly inferior compared to the UK. As Jal, 22 from Afghanistan, who spent six years in the UK aged 15–21 before ‘fleeing’ to Italy (to avoid forced removal to Afghanistan) at the age of 21, explained,

“UK is the UK, my friend, forget about UK. This is Europa, UK is not Europa! (laughs). The UK I had like a one bedroomed flat only myself. Here, one room you live two persons. UK, benefit like 50 Euro, £50. Here it like a week you get 20 Euro... I applied for a training... but we are still waiting, for the last six months, seven months. They don’t care... they say, ‘we give you documents... you go’... There’s no work.”

Policy implications

- Dublin III family reunification procedures must be made to work more effectively.
- The UK should explore new legal pathways to regularisation for unaccompanied minors who are at risk of transitioning into illegality as they turn 18.
- Policies should recognise that unaccompanied children may face pressure to enter the labour market because of factors including debt to be paid back for their journey.

1. Sigona, N. and Allsopp, J. (2016) Mind the gap: why are unaccompanied children disappearing in their thousands? openDemocracy, February 22 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/nando-sigona-and-jennifer-allsopp/mind-gap-why-are-unaccompanied-children-disappearing-in-thous>
2. Italian Ministry of Work and Social Policy (2016) *Monitoring Report: Unaccompanied Minors in Italy, 31 December 2016*. Available at: <http://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/immigrazione/focus-on/minori-stranieri/Documents/Report-MSNA-mese-dicembre2016-31122016.pdf> (in Italian).
3. Allsopp, J. (2017) ‘Agent, Victim, Soldier, Son: Intersecting Masculinities in the European “Refugee Crisis”’ in Freedman, J., Kivilcim, Z. and Özgür Baklacioglu, N. (eds.), *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*. (London: Routledge), pp.155–175.

The Becoming Adult project

The Becoming Adult project is a three-year ESRC-funded research project exploring the post 18 wellbeing outcomes of young people who migrated on their own to the UK as children from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Albania. While the main focus of the research has been on young people who arrive in the UK, the policy implications are relevant to Europe and beyond. Furthermore, the grant-linked studentship has enabled a comparative analysis of experiences of unaccompanied young people in the UK and Italy.

Methodology

The study comprises three research components addressing (i) how ideas about migration, futures, ‘becoming adult’ and wellbeing are conceptualised in different cultural media; (ii) unaccompanied young people’s lived experiences of becoming ‘adult’ after migrating on their own as children; and (iii) policy and practice governing unaccompanied young people.

Young people between the ages of 18–25 took part in research. A narrative enquiry approach was used, combining retrospective narrative interviews and longitudinal research with participants up to a period of 18 months. Questions were asked about: experiences of turning 18 and other key transitions; educational experiences and outcomes; accommodation and living arrangements; factors perceived to promote or undermine their health and wellbeing; migration history, influences and experiences; social ties and networks; experiences of social care and leaving care; family ties; and aspirations for the future. In addition to taking part in interviews, other young people engaged in the research through activities including photography, art, writing, and theatre projects. A core team of young people who had previously migrated to the UK on their own worked as core members of the research team. In total some 100 young people participated in the research in the UK and Italy. Fifty interviews with policy stakeholders and practitioners in four local authorities and a FOI survey of all local authorities in England offered insights into the governance of this population and the encounters between the asylum and child protection regimes and young migrants.

How to cite

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