

Unaccompanied children in England and the United Kingdom

Minori non accompagnati in Inghilterra e nel Regno Unito

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Abstract

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking children in England and the UK are known as UASC and are children who have fled from unstable and dangerous environments. They have endured perilous journeys to the UK, and a high number of these children suffer from physical and mental health issues. They face many barriers to settlement and integration into society in the UK. This article is contextualised within the framework of the rights of the child and the rights of the unaccompanied child and explores a number of key themes: the reasons why children flee and the journey to the UK, arrival procedures, initial assessment and health checks, education of the unaccompanied children, the importance of religion and religious identity and unaccompanied children who become missing children. This last theme is a matter of great concern as these children are very vulnerable and are often victims of exploitation, re-trafficking and child slavery.

Keywords: unaccompanied children, United Kingdom, missing children, education, religious identity.

Sommario

I minori non accompagnati richiedenti asilo in Inghilterra e nel Regno Unito sono noti come UASC e sono minori fuggiti da ambienti instabili e pericolosi. Hanno affrontato viaggi pericolosi verso il Regno Unito e un numero elevato di questi bambini soffre di problemi di salute fisica e mentale. Incontrano numerosi ostacoli all'insediamento e all'integrazione nella società britannica. Questo articolo è contestualizzato nel quadro dei diritti dell'infanzia e dei diritti dei minori non accompagnati ed esplora una serie di temi chiave: le ragioni per cui i minori fuggono e il viaggio verso il Regno Unito, le procedure di arrivo, la valutazione iniziale e i controlli sanitari, l'istruzione dei minori non accompagnati, l'importanza della religione e dell'identità religiosa e i minori non accompagnati che diventano minori scomparsi. Quest'ultimo tema è motivo di grande preoccupazione poiché questi bambini sono molto vulnerabili e sono spesso vittime di sfruttamento, ri-tratta e schiavitù infantile.

Parole chiave: minori non accompagnati, Regno Unito, minori scomparsi, istruzione, identità religiosa.

Introduction

This article is focussed on unaccompanied children who have been identified as seeking asylum in England and the wider United Kingdom. The United Kingdom incorporates England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. While the legislation on unaccompanied children is applicable to the whole United Kingdom – it is not a devolved matter in Scotland and Wales –, much of the research and many of the case studies have been undertaken in England, due to the critical mass of the overall population in this country and the number of unaccompanied children. Worryingly, there is an unknown number of unaccompanied children living in the UK who have not sought asylum and are technically *invisible children* or *missing children*. These children are extremely vulnerable and are very susceptible to exploitation (Arbeláez *et al.*, 2023). This is compounded, as will be seen, by the number of unaccompanied children who *disappear* at the age of eighteen. These children are equally vulnerable.

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This article will commence with an examination of some of the terminology that is used and while some of this is generic to unaccompanied children throughout Europe, some terms are particular to the UK or have a specific interpretation in the UK. This section also includes a discussion on how terminology can become pejorative and objectify unaccompanied children, feeding into negative stereotypes adopted and disseminated by the UK press and by the media. Section two provides an overview of the relevant aspects of the human rights of children, focussing on the rights of unaccompanied children. This will be followed by short sections on statistics and reasons why children flee to the UK and their journey to the UK. A longer section examines arrival procedures and the Initial Health Assessments of the unaccompanied children and then another short section on the importance of religion and religious identity. The final three sections explore the importance of education and the obstacles to education, unaccompanied children who go missing and some concluding remarks.

1. Terminology

Before exploring the theme of unaccompanied children in the United Kingdom, it is important to clarify some of the terms that will be used. According to the United Nations, a child refers to anyone below the age of 18 unless decreed otherwise by a national law (United Nations, 1990). Separated children are those children who are separated from both parents or from those who previously had legal or customary responsibility for their care, but these children are not necessarily separated from other relatives. Unaccompanied children – sometimes called unaccompanied minors – are distinct from separated children in that they are: «children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law, or custom, is responsible for doing so» (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2004). In the UK, these children are referred to as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) (GOV.UK, 2025). Unaccompanied children can sometimes be identified in the UK as *abandoned children* or, if taken into care, *looked after children*.

There are very real dangers, of course, that the terms used for unaccompanied children can lead to labelling and, in some cases, the objectification of a child (Drammeh, 2019). All the terms that have been explained above can take on a pejorative meaning, especially in the context of the misrepresentation of migrants in the newspapers and media. Clayton (2019) draws on Berry *et al.* (2015) to identify two contrasting approaches to refugees in the media. The first view is an open-minded perspective that this is a global issue contextualised in the issues of war and conflict that displace people on a large scale. This view accepts that we all have a common humanity (Drammeh, 2019). Further, this view is coherent with an appreciation that we live in a world order that has experienced the extensive movement of forcibly displaced people. The latest figures indicate that 123.2 million people are currently forcibly displaced in the world (UNHCR, 2024). The second view is a perspective that is hostile: essentially a form of *othering* refugees as an unwelcome homogenous group and perceives them as a threat to the stability of the *host* countries. This second viewpoint is fed by negative stereotyping and misrepresentation of refugees by some of the – more right-wing – press and by the media in the UK. In terms of the situation of the unaccompanied child, there may be more empathy in the press and media, but they too can be characterised by the binary above and can be understood as victim or threat and as deserving or undeserving (Gupta, 2019). While this binary can appear too simplistic and views are normally more nuanced, it does help us to understand some of the conflicting perspectives on asylum seekers and unaccompanied children.

Even though the labels are commonly used, those conducting assessments and interviews with UASC, and those providing care and support, need to have an understanding that each child has her/his own personal history and has had a unique journey to the United Kingdom, often fraught with physical challenges and dangers. This makes them very vulnerable children and, even when granted asylum as an adult, which can be a great relief to them, they can still be prey to discrimination and disaffection in environments and contexts hostile to refugees (Chase *et al.*, 2019).

2. The United Nations *Convention on the rights of the child*

It is important to review the protections offered to UASC under the United Nations *Convention on the rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1990). A few articles of the UNCRC have a generic bearing on UASC, and some are more specifically focussed on this group of children (Williams, 2019; Ögtem-Young, 2024). Article 3, which has a generic bearing for all children, refers to the actions taken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies in relation to children. It is stated quite clearly that «in all actions concerning children» these organisations and bodies must take heed that «the best interests of the child shall be of primary consideration». Article 22 refers specifically to unaccompanied children.

Article 22 1. States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention and in other international human rights or humanitarian instruments to which the said States are Parties.

In other words, the internationally recognised human rights of unaccompanied children and young people must be respected. This applies to all parts of the process of arrival, seeking asylum, assessment and all potential care and procedures of support. These children should not be treated any differently from other children in the UK. Gupta (2019, p. 78) empathises this point for UASC children who arrive in the UK: «wherever they come from and however they arrive in the UK, all children are entitled to the same rights enshrined in the UNCRC as children born here». These are underlying principles that are to be applied to all unaccompanied children.

3. Statistics

According to Government reports, there were 7,380 UASC in England on the 31 March 2024 (GOV.UK, 2024). This represented a slight decrease from the figure of 7,410 of 2023. UASC account for 9% of all cared for children in England, an increase since 2020 when they accounted for 6%. UASC are predominantly male, and this has been consistently the case: 96% were male in 2024 compared to 90% in 2020 – which still represents the vast majority of UASC at that time. The UASC arriving at the UK tend to be mostly in the 16-18 age group and only 11% were under 16. This has implications for the care that they will require. The figures indicate that compared to other parts of Europe only a small number of UASC arrive in England and the UK. In 2024, 234,670 first time asylum applicants under 18 were recorded in the EU and over 37,000 of these were unaccompanied children. Several countries record high percentages of the number of

unaccompanied children seeking asylum – out of all children seeking asylum – for the first time: Bulgaria (65%), Slovenia (55.6%), the Netherlands (50.1%), Hungary 44.1%) and Cyprus (39%) (Eurostat, 2025).

4. Reasons why young people flee and the journey to the UK

There are various reasons why unaccompanied children flee to the UK and seek asylum status. They are invariably fleeing from situations that involve some form of oppression, danger, conflict or warfare, and the movement is best described as forcible displacement, as opposed to voluntary displacement. Some of the children fear persecution in their own country, some flee because their parents have been killed, incapacitated or detained (Armitage *et al.*, 2022). Others are fleeing the prospect of being forced to serve in a military force as a child soldier or in some other capacity for the military (The Fostering Network, 2025). Some of the female children have fled to avoid being forced into an early marriage. There is evidence in the UK and in other countries that some girls will be pregnant when they enter the country of arrival, usually because of rape (Aleghfeli and Hunt, 2022). There are various ways in which unaccompanied children arrive on the UK (Gupta, 2019). Some will be part of a UK government programme. Some have made the journey through illegal means such as being smuggled in lorries or on boats. Others have been trafficked and have been employed in one of the forms of child slavery in the UK and they have been discovered by the Police and taken into care (Department for Education, 2017; Scottish Government, 2025). Many of these children have suffered trauma on their journey to the UK and will have experienced poverty and deprivation with little or no access to health care. Many of the unaccompanied children who arrive in the UK suffer from physical and mental health issues.

5. Assessment of the age of the child and health issues

On arrival to the UK, by whatever means, the unaccompanied child is assessed by immigration officers. One of the critical stages of being identified as an unaccompanied child, rather than an adult, is the process of an initial age assessment (Just Right Scotland, 2024). This process is initiated for a few reasons (Dembour, 2017). First, there may not have been any formal registration of the birth of the child in their country of origin. This means there will be no official documentation that can be used to prove the age of the child. Second, there may have existed official documentation of birth, but this has been lost, probably in the journey to the *reception* country. Third, documentation does exist but the authorities in the United Kingdom refuse to accept this as authentic. It may be that documentation was forged to allow a safe passage to the UK. Two screening officers, independently, must determine if the child is an adult – significantly over 18 –, or if the child is to be considered under 18 in which case, they are to be referred to the local authority who are responsible for the care of the child.

There is a second crucial stage which will determine the needs of the child and the kind of support that is required. If the child is deemed to be under 16, she/he will probably be placed into foster care. If the child is deemed to be between 16 and 18, she/he will probably live semi-independently. Foster care is accepted as a good outcome for an unaccompanied child, but the success of the foster care is dependent on several factors (Clayton, 2019). Normally fostering occurs when a family is fractured or unable to care for a child or group of siblings. Often the foster care provides a more secure and stable family life. While foster carers may be very welcoming towards unaccompanied children,

some of these children are acutely aware that they do not come from a fractured family; they have a *real* family in another part of the world. Further, the real family may have made significant financial sacrifices to send the child abroad and to safety. A further serious challenge emerges when the child reaches 18 and the foster family, which had been paid to support the child, may not be able to provide unpaid support.

There are serious concerns about the process of initial assessment as it is almost impossible to determine the age of a child from perceptions and questioning at an interview. There are further serious concerns about instances when the procedures of the age assessment have not been followed correctly, creating a flawed process and the strong possibility of an erroneous judgment (Dembour, 2017; Gupta, 2019). This effectively leads to an unlawful decision that could seriously jeopardise the safety of the child who has been deemed to be an adult. For example, the child may be placed in accommodation with adults, such as a hotel. A recent report, led by the Helen Bamber Foundation, criticised the government for not keeping appropriate statistics on the number of children who are treated as adults after the initial screening, nor does the government keep track of these individuals (Helen Bamber Foundation, 2024). This report estimates that over 1,300 unaccompanied children were assessed as adults between January 2022 and June 2023. While some have subsequently been re-assessed as children, following action, there remains a significant number of children wrongly assessed and vulnerable. One of the pressing matters is the physical and mental health of the newly arrived UASC. The United Nations Comment No. 6 (2005): *Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children. Outside their country of origin* emphasises the «right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health» and treatment that is covered in articles 23, 24 and 39 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 2005; Maioli *et al.*, 2021).

When implementing the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health and facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health under article 24 of the Convention, States are obligated to ensure that unaccompanied and separated children have the same access to health care as children who are... nationals (United Nations, 2005, p. 15).

UASC have an Initial Health Assessments (IHA) within twenty days of being taken into care. This is normal practice for all Looked after children (Mohnani *et al.*, 2025). A recent small-scale study conducted in Camden in England examined the IHA for 101 UASC (Armitage *et al.*, 2022). The largest group, 57 out of 101, came from countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Eritrea, Sudan and Ethiopia). Nine came from Vietnam, and eight from Afghanistan and Albania. A significant percentage of these children (67%) had experienced physical assault or abuse and 16% had been tortured. In all 54% of the children had scars that were consistent with the disclosures of physical assault/abuse and torture. In this sample, 25% of the children had latent TB and 6% had hepatitis. These health concerns can be very broadly compared with the findings of other European studies (Williams *et al.*, 2020). However, the most important issue is not necessarily the similarities or differences in prevalence of TB and hepatitis – and other diseases – in the unaccompanied young people compared to other parts of the UK or Europe. Instead, it is of vital importance that there is an early diagnosis and treatment of the children, for their future health and the health of the wider population. Around three quarters of the unaccompanied children in this study in Camden suffered from mental health problems, and this high prevalence of mental health issues is reflected in other parts of the UK and Europe. These children can suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and emotional/behavioural problems (Mohnani *et al.*, 2025).

Another serious issue has been highlighted by the Children's Commissioner for England that relates to girls who were accommodated in hotels (Children's Commissioner, 2023). While the majority of UASC are male, 10% of the unaccompanied girls who have been accommodated in hotels were victims of rape, sexual assault or sexual exploitation on their journey to the UK. These girls are highly traumatised and extremely vulnerable. The Children's Commissioner has questioned the level of care received by these girls, who often suffer from serious mental health issues.

6. Religion and religious identity

Some current research explores the issues of the sense of identity and belonging of unaccompanied children. One area that deserves more attention in research is the importance of religion and religious practice for many of these unaccompanied children. Drammeh (2019) notes the role of religion and places of worship in the construction of a sense of belonging for many UASC; attendance at a weekly church service can become part of a *jigsaw of belonging*. It can be a stabilising link to their previous life and culture and a source of continuity in their identity (Scott *et al.*, 2022). Some studies from Ireland indicate that, despite the absence of parental encouragement and support in religious practice, a substantial number of the UASC continued to practice their religion. However, they often have to adapt their practice within new cultural and social norms in the *host* country. For example, Muslim children conflating two prayer times into one or attending the Mosque on a Saturday or Sunday instead of a Friday (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010; Ní Raghallaigh, 2011). In the UK, one small scale study has examined the religious practices of unaccompanied girls, the majority arriving from Sub-Saharan Africa – especially Somalia, Eritrea and Nigeria – and the understanding that social workers had of the importance of these practices for the girls (Larkin and Woodcock Ross, 2024). Sometimes the religious practice was fraught with tensions due to a mistrust of male figures of authority and, for some, religious practice recalled oppressive practices towards women (Ekström *et al.*, 2019).

7. Education

School and other forms of education can have a positive effect on the lives of UASC. The routine of school can support a sense of a more normal lifestyle, especially when contrasted with the precarious and dangerous journey to the UK (Drammeh, 2019). Where successfully integrated into school and where friendships are established, the UASC may have a lessened feeling of stigma because being part of a school community provides them with a sense of belonging. There are some practical obstacles that can militate against UASC entering onto a positive educational experience. UASC are supposed to be placed in education within twenty days. However, this is often not the practice as delays can be caused by Asylum seeker dispersal which moves UASC to different locations. Delays can also be caused by the impact of children settling into temporary accommodation (Câmara, 2024). A report by the Children's Commissioner for England identifies a much higher rate of UASC not in school in 2022: 21% (Children's Commissioner, 2023). This report also comments on the challenges facing some local authorities, which have responsibility for schooling, in accommodating UASC in schools. Some schools may not have the resources to accommodate a child who will have distinct need of language support (Gladwell and Chetwynd, 2018). There may be issues in developing relationships with other pupils and teachers as these groups may not be aware of the serious challenges the UASC have faced in their journey to the UK, and the

challenges they continue to face when confronted by a new culture and language (Crafter *et al.*, 2021). These challenges are difficult enough for children who have sought asylum with one or both parents to support them in the country of arrival but greatly exacerbated for UASC who can feel the added pressures of separation, loneliness, and uncertainty. Where a child has been placed in temporary accommodation there may be inadequate internet provision which has an impact on their ability to engage with schoolwork at home. There is some limited evidence about an attainment gap between UASC and many other children (Hutchinson and Reader, 2021; Hutchinson, 2025). This attainment gap is similar to that experienced by children with disabilities and special needs. This area of research should be pursued to provide concrete evidence of the educational outcomes of UASC to help determine where interventions are required.

8. Unaccompanied children who go missing

Unaccompanied children are much more likely to go *missing* than any other group of young people in England (Missing People, 2024). Initial research findings in 2016 provided evidence of this and research in 2020 revealed that 13% of unaccompanied children in care went missing in that year. Going missing can be caused by a number of factors such as the continuing control and influence of traffickers, dissatisfaction with provision of care, disengagement with school, fear of the official immigration procedures and the anxiety when approaching the age of 18 and the subsequent significant decrease in support (Gupta, 2019). A more recent government intervention in England led to unaccompanied children being housed in hotels. Between July 2021 and January 2024, seven Home Office hotels were used to house unaccompanied children. They were supposed to act as *emergency accommodation* and were deemed to be unlawful in 2023 (Ayeb-Karlsson *et al.*, 2024). These hotels were not only unsuitable for longer term residence but contributed to the number of missing children. There were 440 missing episodes of the 5,400 unaccompanied children placed in these hotels between July 2021 and June 2023. While many of these children were recovered, 118 were still missing, according to the last reports. Some of these children were as young as 12. These missing children are vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking, 2024). The age of 18 is a crucial age for UASC because at this point, they normally lose the status and rights of UASC and are classified as adults. At this stage there are various pathways and some UASC approaching this age make provision for living in the UK without documentation, essentially going missing or becoming invisible. This makes them especially vulnerable to exploitation by others. Williams (2019) argues that social care workers must challenge the decrease in support for the former UASC and «emphasise their status as care-leavers» (p. 189), as people who still require support.

Conclusions

While the number of Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK is relatively small compared to other parts of Europe, they are a group of children who require significant support from a wide group of professionals and agencies. They arrive in the UK fleeing unsafe environments and are often forced to leave their family behind. The journey to the UK has been very dangerous and the children have had insufficient nourishment and no health care. A high percentage of the children have issues in their physical health and the majority have issues in their mental health. They face barriers in language and culture and some face difficulties in gaining access to appropriate opportunities in education. There are serious questions around the number of children

who are wrongly assessed as adults (Dembour, 2017; Gupta, 2029). While this presents many challenges, those children who have been identified as unaccompanied children, whether initially or subsequently, are entitled to their right to care. No matter how they arrived in the UK, they are, according to the provision of the UNCRC, entitled to their full rights as a child. If there are inconsistencies and failures in the initial assessment and in the care system, then, these must be addressed, and this is where new research studies, building on extant studies, can highlight the need for review and change.

As stated at the beginning of this article we commented, with concern, about those children who are never identified as unaccompanied children and become *invisible children*, and those who *disappear* at the age of eighteen. These children and adults over eighteen are often being exploited. The children are being denied their rights as a child and the adults, who may be technically stateless if their asylum status has not been granted, still have human rights as stateless persons (United Nations, 1948; UNHCR, 2025).

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