



Education for unaccompanied migrant children in Europe

Ensuring continued access to education
through national and school-level approaches



Employment,
Social Affairs
and Inclusion

This policy memo provides a brief overview of national and school-level approaches to the inclusion of unaccompanied migrant children in formal education systems across EU Member States. The memo also discusses wider policy responses to the integration of these children into the host societies.

Definitions

This memo focuses on unaccompanied migrant children. Most studies, however, discuss the situation of broader groups of migrant children. For that reason, it is helpful to provide some definitions.

A **migrant child** is the broadest concept: it includes all young people under the age of 18 who have migrated (i.e. moved to and settled in a different country) for a period of one year or more or who have migrated on a permanent basis. Migrant children might arrive at their destination countries as economic migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers.

A **refugee child** is a displaced child who has been forced to cross national borders and who cannot return safely to his or her home country.¹

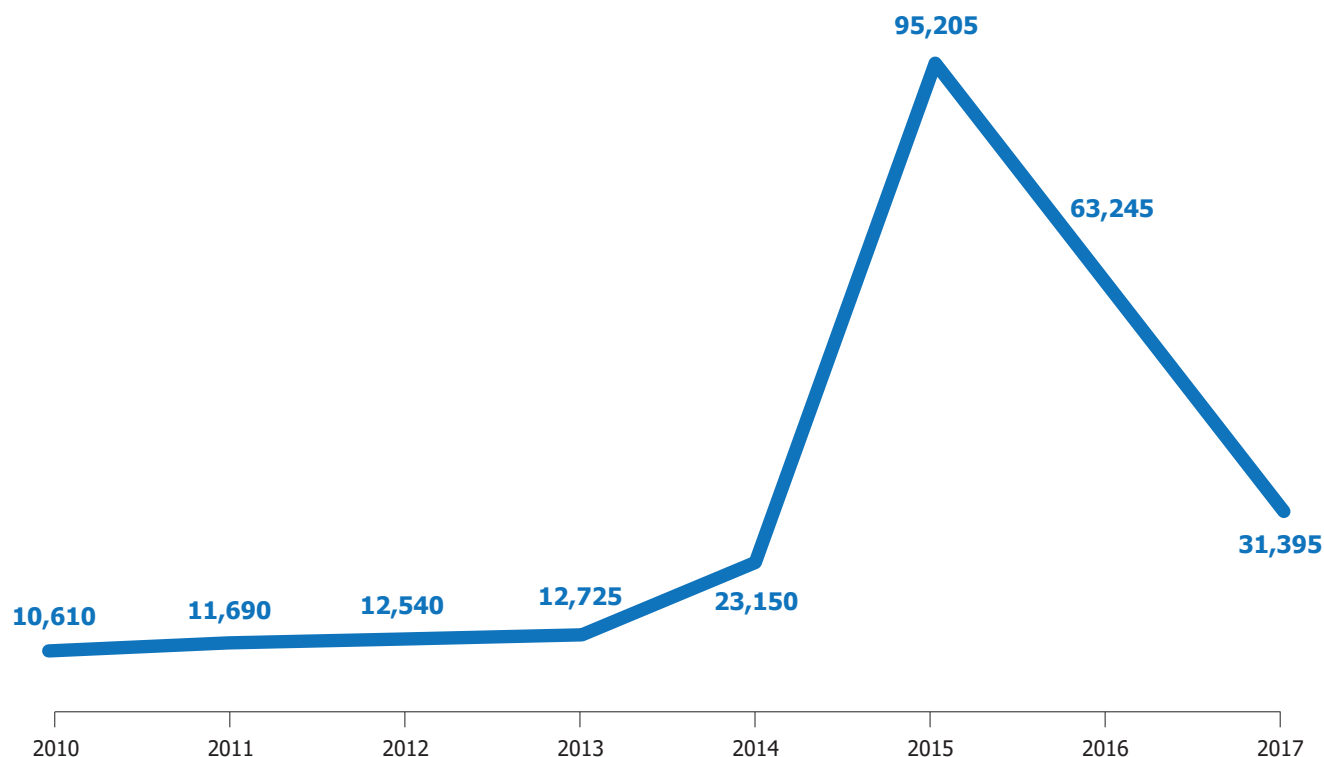
An **asylum seeker child** is a displaced child who has formally sought protection from the state they fled to as well as the right to remain in that country.²

Migrant children may travel and reach destination countries with or without their parents. When they arrive without their parents, they are often called unaccompanied migrant children or unaccompanied minors. The term 'unaccompanied minors' describes "all foreign nationals or stateless persons below the age of 18, who arrive in the EU unaccompanied by a responsible adult or who are left unaccompanied after their arrival".^{3, 4}

What do we know about unaccompanied migrant children?

In 2015, the number of migrants arriving in the EU peaked, many of whom were refugees seeking asylum, triggering a migrant crisis. Over the course of 2015 and 2016, 1.3 million people applied for asylum in the EU.⁵ Many of these asylum applicants in 2017, 31.8 per cent, were under the age of 18 years old. Of these minors, 13 per cent arrived alone, unaccompanied by a parent or a caretaker. Figure 1 shows the number of these unaccompanied minors applying for asylum from 2010 to 2017.

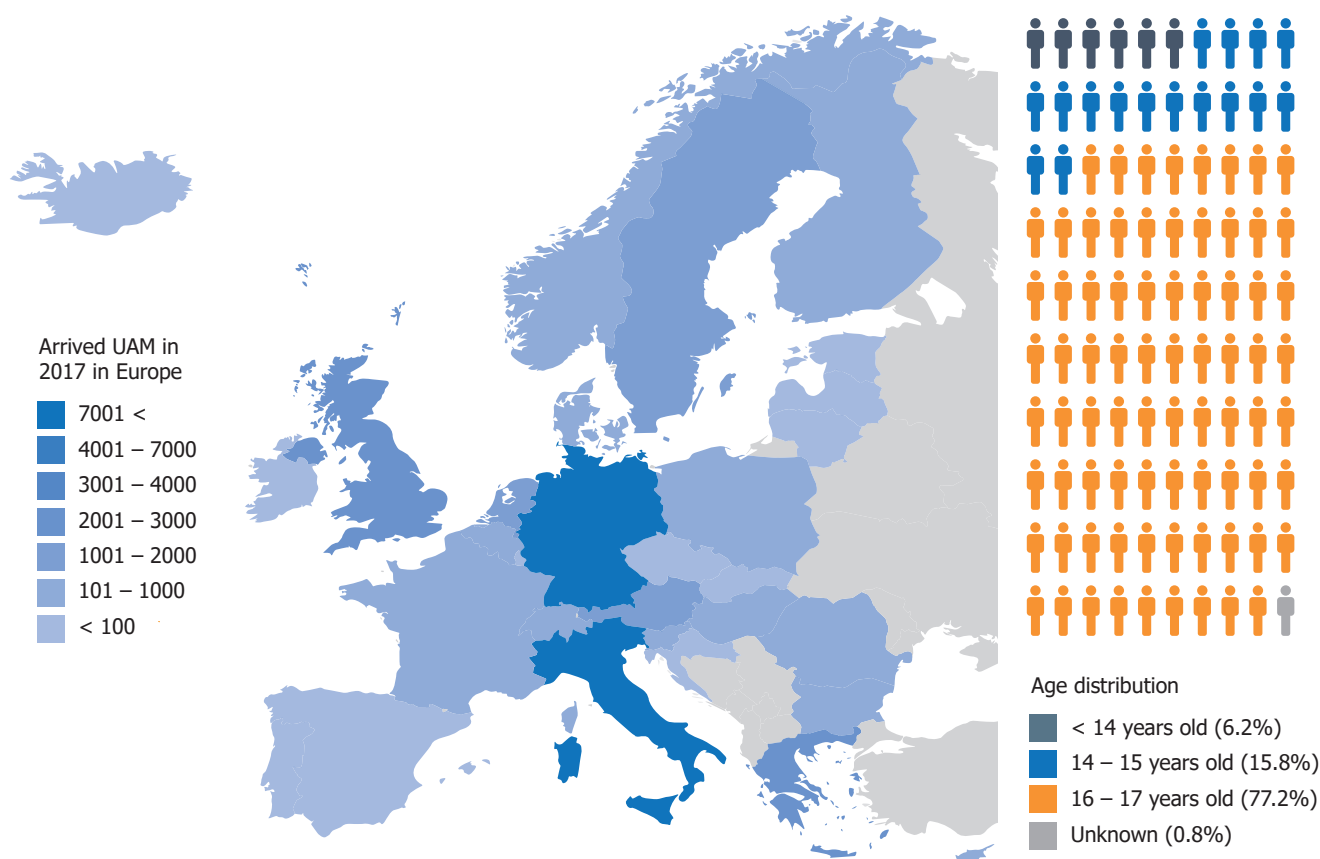
FIGURE 1: ASYLUM APPLICATIONS FROM UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN THE EU MEMBER STATES (2010-2017)



Source: Eurostat, (2018)

The data includes all 28 Member States (MS), excluding Croatia between 2010 and 2011.

FIGURE 2: ASYLUM APPLICATIONS FROM UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN EU MEMBER STATES IN 2017



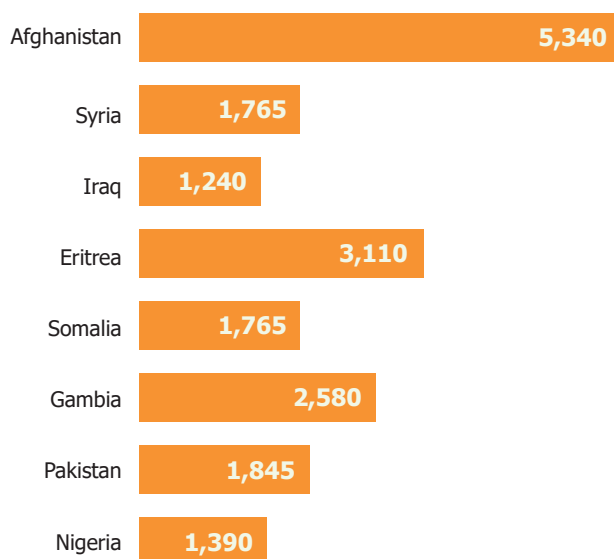
Source: Eurostat (2018)

In 2017, 77.2 per cent of all arriving unaccompanied minors were 16 or 17 years old, while 15.8 per cent were 14 or 15 years old. Only 6.2 per cent of minors were younger than 14 years old.⁶ Similar age distributions among arriving unaccompanied migrant children have been recorded each year since 2008. The unaccompanied minors are predominantly boys (88.5 per cent).⁷

In 2017, the major destination countries for unaccompanied migrant children were Italy (31.9 per cent), followed by Germany (28.9 per cent), Greece (7.8 per cent), the United Kingdom (7 per cent), Austria (4.3 per cent), and Sweden (4.1 per cent) (see Figure 2).

Afghanistan was the main country of citizenship of unaccompanied minors applying for asylum in the EU in 2017 with 5,340 arrivals, followed by Eritreans (3,110), Gambians (2,580), Syrians (1,765) and others⁸ (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: ASYLUM APPLICATIONS BY UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN THE EU, BY COUNTRY OF CITIZENSHIP IN 2017.



Source: Eurostat (2018)

Why is access to education important for unaccompanied migrant children?

Children may seek refuge abroad for a variety of reasons, including fleeing war, natural disaster, humanitarian crisis, prosecution, poverty or discrimination, to seek protection of fundamental rights, or better access to basic services.⁹ One of the fundamental children's rights is access to education.

As reported by the EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA),¹⁰ education, particularly inclusive education, which involves development of children's intercultural skills, parents' engagement in educational activities and attention to social and religious diversity, is also an important prerequisite for integration. FRA reports that access to education helps improve language skills and social cohesion among young people, prevents child poverty, and fosters participation in the host society. Research from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) suggests that mainstream schools in Europe are the main drivers of migrant children's integration, particularly by helping them to succeed in the job market.¹¹

The importance of migrant children's access to education, including that of unaccompanied minors, has been recognised and safeguarded by a variety of legal and policy frameworks at international, national and local levels.¹² Box 1 lists some of the most important legal and policy provisions for the protection of migrant children's right to access education.

However, as pointed out in a recent paper by the Migration Policy Group (MPG) and SIRIUS (Policy Network on Migrant Education), children's integration and educational success still heavily depend on the way these national and policy frameworks are implemented.¹⁴ As indicated in the SIRIUS report,¹⁵ it is difficult to assess the scope of the problem and offer effective and timely solutions to address the existing needs of migrant children.

Despite several legal and policy provisions, access to both formal and non-formal education remains a challenge for many unaccompanied minors. As reported by FRA,¹⁶ the common challenges to accessing education across all age groups include: long waiting periods, language barriers, residing in remote locations, lack of information on educational opportunities, bureaucracy, limited financial support for asylum applicants, and racism. Research shows that most of these challenges, such as social isolation and exclusion, result from socio-economic disadvantage and may affect migrant children throughout their education. Lagging behind peers in the local language skills, and wider psychological factors, may also affect children's ability to perform well at school. Finally, a lack of parental support for unaccompanied children in their learning activities and failure to engage in their school life (for example, because of a language barrier, a lack of parental educational qualifications and skills, or restricted financial means) can also have a detrimental effect on children's educational success and wider integration.¹⁷

BOX 1: KEY LEGAL AND POLICY DOCUMENTS AT INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVELS

Key legal and policy documents that guide child protection issues for unaccompanied minors and their right to access education and health services:

- *The right for unaccompanied minors to receive mandatory primary education has been implemented by law in 12 EU Member States, including: Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, some federal states in Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden*¹³
- *United Nations (UN) 1951 Refugee Convention – (Article 22)*
- *UN Convention of the Rights of the Child – (Article 28)*
- *Council of Europe (CoE), European Convention on Human Rights – (Protocol 1, Article 2)*
- *CoE, Action Plan on Protecting Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe (2017-2019)*
- *The European Agenda on Migration (COM(2015) 240 final)*
- *EC Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors (2010-2014) (COM(2010) 213 final)*
- *Reception Conditions (OJ 2013 L 180) and Qualifications Directives (OJ 2011 L 337/9)*
- *EC Action Plan on the integration of third-country nationals (COM(2016) 377 final)*
- *EC Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage (OJ L 59)*
- *Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) 2014-2020*

How do unaccompanied migrant children access education?

In the 2017 Communication on the Protection of Children in Migration,¹⁸ the European Commission recognised the importance of education as a factor in providing an adequate reception for children and encouraging Member States to ‘ensure, within a short time span after arrival, equal access to inclusive, formal education, including early childhood education and care, and develop and implement targeted programmes to support it’.

However, in practice the situation differs in each country. For example, children seeking asylum are entitled to education in all of the Nordic countries¹⁹ and, in the case of unaccompanied children, to child protection services.²⁰ Yet there are no legislative obligations to provide undocumented migrant children with access to education in five EU countries: Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Latvia and Lithuania. Even though education for children is mandatory under the constitution in these countries, the decision to admit minors to schools is at the discretion of the individual institution.²¹ Moreover, enrolment to the public schools can be delayed between three to six months in various EU Member States and is dependent on the challenges discussed in the previous section, for example a lack of knowledge of the host language.

Educational provision can also be delivered in the accommodation centres if access to the mainstream school system is not available. According to the EU Reception Directive, a child’s right to education can be delayed by three months or more from the day they filed their application for asylum.²² For example, refugee children living in camps and reception centres in Greece can only attend integration classes offered by the Ministry of Education because of the overloaded national school system. This means that these children may not have access to public schools in the first months after arrival.²³ In France, refugee accommodation centres often organise in-house classes for recently arrived minors, including unaccompanied children, led by volunteers and professional teachers.²⁴ These children attend schools in separate classes for an undetermined period of time, or they are enrolled in mainstream schools where they receive additional language support and are taught a variety of subjects.²⁵

Education policies and practices supporting education of UAM

The European Commission (EC) aims to enhance collaboration among the Member States (MS) in the fields of education and integration.²⁶ To this end, the Commission promotes the exchange of practices or initiatives, and provision of funding, to projects supporting migrant children and unaccompanied minors. Overall, all supporting activities can be grouped into five main types of approaches:²⁷

1. approaches that focus on teachers and teaching

2. access to the mainstream education system
3. preparatory classes for host country language learning
4. approaches facilitating faster integration into the host society
5. approaches focusing on informal education.

In general, research suggests that supporting children and unaccompanied minors by using the approaches mentioned above can ease their transition process and, at the same time, integrate them into the mainstream education systems in Europe.²⁸ However, less is known about the effectiveness of particular programmes or practices that fall under these categories. Since many of the initiatives presented in the following sections have been introduced recently, solid evaluations of their effectiveness are still not available. Once sufficient evidence is gathered, it would be possible to assess their level of effectiveness and establish whether they are ‘best’, ‘promising’ or ‘emerging’ practices, as defined by the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) evidence criteria.²⁹

Approaches focusing on teachers and teaching

Recent migration waves into Europe pose additional challenges to the national education systems. These challenges may stem from a variety of factors, such as overcrowded classrooms, different and, on average, lower educational levels of migrant children, and linguistic barriers. While it is important for the policy and school-level actions to respond to the specific needs of migrant children, comprehensive and diverse education policy approaches are also required to take into consideration the concerns of the host societies.³⁰

In this regard, the literature suggests various initiatives which may strengthen the ability of education systems to provide for the education of migrant children. This may include the presence of skilled teachers and support to service providers;³¹ the need to establish “a comprehensive system of teacher education” in order to equip teachers with the relevant skills to work with migrant children;³² and community involvement in migrant children’s education, including involvement of teachers with a migration background, to take into consideration local culture while providing continuous learning, socialisation and development.³³

For example:

- Projects in the **Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia** (FYROM) focus on developing school curriculum and learning activities based on migrant children’s needs;³⁴
- In **Croatia**, UNICEF supported capacity-building programmes created to train teachers how to work with refugee and migrant children;³⁵

- In **Austria**, an e-learning tool for teachers was developed focusing on informal education activities to increase integration of migrant children through peace education and the Safe School Concept;³⁶
- The Connect project³⁷ in **Italy** and in the **UK** introduced 'cultural mediators' to assist children with their community engagement while providing guidance in the "provision of care".^{38, 39}

Access to the mainstream education system

The EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)⁴⁰ provides evidence that most of the EU Member states implement inclusive education initiatives for refugee and migrant children to avoid risks such as social exclusion, marginalisation or discrimination among others. Despite these initiatives, FRA also provides evidence that migrant children are still being segregated in schools.

There is a debate about whether it is better for unaccompanied minors to be integrated into regular, mainstream schools or to attend specialised education facilities. According to the MPI report,⁴¹ policy makers may face difficult decisions about incorporating clothing or dietary requirements in the mainstream schools, taking into consideration the social, cultural and religious needs of migrant children without compromising the needs of the host society. Nevertheless, European countries apply a variety of approaches to help integrate migrant or refugee children into the host societies.

According to the SIRIUS network policy brief,⁴² the concentration of refugee and asylum-seeking children in segregated schools is often caused by residence policies and asylum procedures, the location of the reception centres, or the presence of experienced teachers who have been working with diverse student populations. To ease the transition to formal education, most EU countries offer various activities for migrant children and unaccompanied minors. After this initial preparatory period, they join their peers in mainstream schools.

Faster integration into the host society

There is a variety of approaches, such as preparatory classes and various learning activities, which can accelerate migrant children's integration.

- In **Greece**, UNICEF⁴³ interviewed 130 refugee and migrant children, including unaccompanied minors, about their opinion vis-à-vis the educational offer available to them. A majority indicated that the educational provision was not tailored to their needs, often due to the language of instruction. Children in Greek refugee accommodation centres have been able to attend support classes since the beginning of the 2016/2017 school year, in parallel to primary and

secondary education. Teachers use adapted text books for children for whom Greek is a second language.⁴⁴ Another project in Greece, organised by the Society for the Development and Creative Occupation of Children (EADAP), used learning and integration activities to help prepare children to enrol in schools. This project was implemented at the "Mellon" shelter for unaccompanied children and single mothers.

- Preparatory "LEDU" classes in **Greece** aim to improve the educational skills of refugee children to help them integrate into the official education system of the country more quickly and easily. The LEDU location can host around 80 pupils per day where they can learn Greek, English, mathematics, geography, computer science or art.⁴⁵ LEDU classes are provided by Save the Children Greece and its partners.
- In **FYROM**, UNICEF started a 'pre-curriculum programme'⁴⁶ for refugee children who are in the pre-integration phase to help them integrate into society. The programme is particularly targeted at children who had interrupted their schooling for an extended period. According to UNICEF and the Ministry of Labour and Education, the programme also helps to involve parents in children's school activities.⁴⁷

Preparatory classes for host country language learning

There are many socio-cultural differences among unaccompanied minors who arrive in Europe. Because of their long journeys and ad hoc stays in the refugee camps, some of them have not received any education for a year or longer. Therefore, several Member States have introduced preparatory language classes to ease the transitional period of migrant children and continue their education.

- In the **Netherlands**, about 60 schools offer first-reception education for the newcomers. The main focus is to teach the Dutch language and introduce them to Dutch society while preparing them for the mainstream school system.⁴⁸
- In **Sweden**, the local authorities in the city of Malmö offer introductory or pre-school classes to newly arrived children who speak little or no Swedish. The main goal is to strengthen children's identity through languages (mother tongue together with the host community language), so within about one year the children are able to join regular school activities.⁴⁹
- In **Germany**, children attend preparatory classes for one or two years before they are admitted to mainstream schools.⁵⁰
- All new students in **France** are evaluated to assess their language and education level. Pupils lacking sufficient proficiency in the French language are required to

attend special classes called “UPE2A”, Pedagogical Unit for Newcomer Non-Francophone Children, for no longer than two years.⁵¹

Approaches focusing on informal education

In order to facilitate faster integration into the host country communities and prepare unaccompanied minors for independent adulthood, many EU Member states provide after-school activities. These informal education services range from guardianship or mentorship programmes offering individual guidance, to family and community centres where group activities allow building new skills and a sense of belonging.

- In **Sweden**, a professional mentoring programme, run by SOS Children Villages, offers educational services such as workshops, information sessions or homework support.⁵²
- In **Greece**, UNICEF runs a non-formal education programme which helps the Greek government to support refugee children through various activities such as communication, interpretation, teacher training, homework support, early childhood education and non-formal education for children on the move.⁵³
- In the **Netherlands**, “Happy Nest”, an after-school programme for children who are accommodated in the reception centres,⁵⁴ provides numerous recreational and educational activities like handicrafts, music and drama. These activities help children to expend their areas of interest and help to build relationships with others, particularly with the local community.
- In **Ireland**, the Unaccompanied (Separated) Children’s Service of the City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB) provides educational and services support through various programmes such as: a Refugee Access Programme, after-school activities, holiday or summer camps, a Study Buddy Programme, an Outreach Programme, and a drop-In service where children and youths receive support in education, employment, housing, social welfare, wellbeing and health. The aims of these services are to empower young migrants to integrate into Irish society and live their lives independently and healthily.⁵⁵

In summary

Recent years have seen a considerable increase in the number of migrants and refugees arriving in EU countries, including many children who are often unaccompanied. This influx of young people, many of whom were deprived of access to education for a prolonged period, has put increasing pressure on formal education systems in Europe.

EU Member States have adopted different approaches to ensure continued access to education, to accommodate the educational needs of migrant children, and to mitigate the risks associated with an education gap. These approaches include preparatory classes, various integration activities and non-formal education approaches. However, challenges remain with regard to developing effective long-term actions to avoid the difficulties that migrant children face from the sustained effects of an education gap in their transition to adulthood.⁵⁶

Endnotes

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Produced for the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC).
Researchers: Milda Butkute and Barbara Janta (RAND Europe).

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018
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