

BEYOND SURVIVAL

Improving intervention in Europe with Unaccompanied and Separated Migrant Children who fall through the protection system

UNICEF Spain • UNICEF France

Over the past 30 years, unaccompanied and separated children have moved from developing countries to European countries to escape difficult situations and in search of a better life and prospects. This phenomenon has required European child protection systems to overstretch and try to adapt to the specific protection needs of these children. These efforts have not always been successful or in the best interests of children: [Unaccompanied and separated children are often falling through the protection system due to the lack of responses adapted to their needs](#). However, some intervention models have been tried out and can be successful.

This report contains the main conclusions from a joint International Workshop on Unaccompanied and Separated Children living in the streets held in Madrid in December 2019. The workshop brought together around [50 experts and practitioners in 9 European countries](#). The report aims to propose an intervention model for the care and protection of Unaccompanied and Separated Children living in the streets, provides examples of positive practices from various European countries, and promotes new narratives with and about them.

Key principles: Children who fall through the protection system in Europe present a number of specific characteristics that must be understood in order to provide them with the attention they deserve: [they are children and right-holders, they are adolescents, and they are victims](#). The report stresses that the phenomenon of “[children living in the streets](#)” is [neither a natural nor a social trait](#), and it should not be accepted as one. The report also shows that [scared children can do scary things](#), and being scared leads to behaviour patterns which are dangerous for themselves and for other people. In many cases they may become “offenders” from the legal perspective, but it is often forgotten that those offences derive from severe neglect and even exploitation, so that requires a solid analysis from the perspective of Children’s Rights.

The risks faced by unaccompanied and separated children living in the streets: Some of the risks or unmet needs are so basic to survive that these children live in a permanent state of fear. [The lack of civil status/legal documents, discrimination, trafficking and exploitation, the lack of affective adult references, the lack of normalized friendships, the effects of trauma in cognition](#), affect their day-to-day behaviour and their development as children.

The report also describes how child protection measures are insufficient in many cases, as children remain living in the streets. The active, unpredictable mobility of these children, [their inadequate identification, and the nonexistent or limited cooperation](#) and communication between national services and institutions - as well as transnational cooperation and communication between countries -, only leads to further problems for the intervention.

Call for Action towards an integrative model of intervention for the care and protection of unaccompanied children in street situation. Recommendations are addressed to decisions makers at local, national and European level. Among others, the report mentions:

- [The need to provide documentation and to address legal and penal issues](#): In many countries, the lack of accepted documentation is one of the biggest problems in any intervention: in some countries the documents from the countries of origin are questioned regarding validity, in other countries only children who seek asylum are considered subjects requiring protection. It is also crucial to develop networking at every level.
- [Guaranteeing safe and protective environments](#) : Ensuring basic needs of children through outreach programmes, providing safe spaces for children through durable solution, and provide for sufficient and qualified professionals at every level.
- [Providing affective references](#) must be a core objective of any intervention: It is only when these children feel they can trust some adults can they decide to stay in one programme and start their process within the protection system.
- [Building new narratives](#) is a core element in the intervention with and around these children. They are subject to narratives which are often destructive and dehumanize them. The stories these children normally build around themselves do not help either.

Selection of positive practices: The proposed model can be achieved because significant elements have already been implemented by a variety of players. Short summaries of some key experiences aim to provide ideas for policy makers and for relevant agents that intervene with migrant children living in the streets.

