Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-024-00992-x

Characteristics and Views of Young Unaccompanied Migrants Transitioning to Independent Living in the Catalan (Spain) Protection System

Clara Sanz-Escutia[1] · **Laura Arnau-Sabatés**[1] · **Josefina Sala-Roca**[1]

Accepted: 13 October 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract
In Spain, unaccompanied migrant minors receive care provision from the government. This article analyzes the experience of unaccompanied young migrants in the protection system of Catalonia (Spain) and their preparation for the transition to independent living. A survey with 90 unaccompanied migrant youths who were about to leave care was conducted. The results show that many of the participants were in non-specific transitional housing placements (67.7%), with scarce opportunities for developing basic independent living skills. Moreover, 29.4% of young people were not aware of the existence of an emancipation plan, and 10.3% felt that they had not received any preparation for independent living. Although only 24.4% had completed secondary education or higher, the majority were enrolled in some form of training (82.2%). Nevertheless, most of the young people had had some paid unskilled work experience (83.3%) in their countries of origin. Despite this, when interviewed, only 10% of the participants were working, and their prospects for emancipation were challenging. Their main concerns were their legal status (40.2%), finding a job (41.4%), and finding a place to live once they reached legal age (34.2%). Moreover, the youths' social support networks were very precarious: 43.5% could count on only one person or no one at all when they needed material support, and their main source of support was educators. Implications for social work practice are discussed.

Keywords Unaccompanied migrant youth · Transition to adult life · Young people in care · Protection system · Preparation for adult life

Introduction

It is estimated that in 2020, there were approximately 1.7 million young migrants under 20 years in the world, which would represent 14.6% of the migrant population (UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). Unaccompanied migrant youth represent a heterogenous group with varied backgrounds, perceptions, and experiences (UNICEF, 2017), who often face maltreatment and human rights violations (Vissing & Leitão, 2021), with girls encountering additional obstacles due to their gender (Avignone et al., 2024). In recent decades, there has been an increased number of unaccompanied migrant minors arriving, prompting European governments to prioritize their protection and the support and resources available to them and reorganizing their welfare systems (Barn et al., 2021). In general, unaccompanied minor youths face unique challenges and vulnerabilities within the care system of the different European governments (Migliorini et al., 2022). However, little is known about their experiences while they are in the child welfare system, and their preparation and readiness for adult life when aging out of care.

These minors often enter the care system in their mid-teens, facing uncertainties regarding their residency status while transitioning into adulthood (Wade, 2019). In addition to the legal ambiguity, they also face emotional and psychological challenges, such as concerns about family

✉ Laura Arnau-Sabatés
Laura.Arnau@uab.cat

Clara Sanz-Escutia
Clara.Sanz@uab.cat

Josefina Sala-Roca
Fina.Sala@uab.cat

[1] Teories de L'Educació i Pedagogia Social, Edifici G6, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain

Published online: 28 October 2024

reunification, and the difficulty of adapting to new environments without parental support (Gimeno-Monterde et al., 2021). In fact, crucial aspects of their lives—such as relationships, psychological well-being, and readiness for independent living—are impacted by these challenges (van Es et al., 2019).

Although services are provided by both child welfare agencies and NGOs, O'Higgins et al. (2018) emphasize the lack of research on the effectiveness of these services to meet the challenges and needs of young unaccompanied minors. Researchers advocate for community-based approaches, improved legal and social support, and strong relationships between unaccompanied minors and their caregivers to more effectively meet their needs and facilitate their access to essential housing, education, employment, and healthcare (Gimeno-Monterde et al., 2021; Grage-Moore & Mendes, 2023; van Es et al., 2019).

Despite the efforts made to support unaccompanied migrant minor, there is still a gap in understanding how to effectively meet their unique needs. This is particularly true when it comes to addressing the psychological challenges they face, promoting their overall well-being, and adequately preparing them for the transition into adulthood (O'Higgins, 2019; O'Higgins et al., 2018). Moreover, there is a significant lack of research examining the lived experiences of unaccompanied migrant youth within the care system, particularly concerning their voices and their preparedness for the transition to adulthood before turning 18 (Grage-Moore & Mendes, 2023).

The Spanish and Catalan Context

In Spain, there has been an increase in the number of arrivals in recent decades, bar a slightly decrease in 2020 due to the pandemic (Puyo et al., 2021). Alongside Greece and Italy, Spain stands out as one of the countries with a higher proportion of unaccompanied and separated children (UNHCR, 2020). In 2022, in Spain there were 11,280 people between 16 and 23 years old who had residence permits as unaccompanied minors or young people out of guardianship (Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración, 2023), and 5670 were underaged unaccompanied minors in care (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2024). Of these, 1346 were in Catalonia (DGAIA, 2021).

The majority of them come from Morocco (71% of the total). They are typically aged between 16 and 17 and primarily male (girls accounted for only 10% of the total in 2017) (Puyo et al., 2021). Poverty and lack of opportunities in their countries of origin are the main motivation for this migration full of dangers (DGAIA, 2019).

Spanish legislation establishes that, since they are minors without a legal guardian, the administrations of the Autonomous Communities must assume their legal guardianship, just as they would do with abandoned or neglected Spanish children. They also must process their residence permit within a maximum period of 3 months. Moreover, in 2021, the law RD 903/2021 of October 19 provides a work permit when unaccompanied youth reach the age of 16.

Most of these unaccompanied migrant minors are in residential care until they reach the legal age of 18 (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2024; Puyo et al., 2021). In these residential centers, their basic needs are met, and they receive a program of educational activities focused on personal skills, autonomy, and integration into the host country, including learning Spanish and receiving educational or vocational training.

In these residential centers there is a specialized educational team with social educators who provide daily support and supervision.

When they leave care at 18 years old, they encounter significant difficulties because they have no family in the territory, many have not completed compulsory education in their countries of origin and have difficulties with the language (Alonso-Bello et al., 2020; FEPA, 2018). The transition to independent living is difficult for all Care Leavers and therefore they require support programs beyond the age of 18, and these programs are even more necessary for unaccompanied migrant youth.

The 2015 Law (26/2015, of 28 July) established that the Autonomous Communities had to develop educational support, housing support, training and job placement programs for care leavers. However, the development of these programs in most communities is very limited. Catalonia is the Autonomous Community where these programs have been most developed, and that is probably why many young unaccompanied migrants, once in Spain, go to this community. On the other hand, in Catalonia, apart from residential centers for unaccompanied minors, there are also independent living arrangements for young people aged 16–17, which consist of supervised shared apartments where young people are responsible for cooking, doing their own shopping and cleaning. In this case, social educators visit young people three or more times a week and are available every day by phone.

It is important to notice that the profiles and needs of unaccompanied migrant youth differ significantly from those of their peers in care who are Spanish natives or accompanied migrants. Gullo et al. (2021) found that they exhibit less psychological stress and a better relationship with their families than their native peers, but experience worse educational and occupational outcomes, limited support networks and more barriers in accessing aftercare supports.

Preparation for Adult Life and Pathways Planning

One of the most critical moments is when unaccompanied migrant youths turn 18 and need to start the transition process from care to an independent life (Melendro et al., 2022). Wade (2019) also highlights the challenges in preparing these youth for aftercare, particularly in the context of immigration law and policy. Moreover, residential centers have very little time to prepare them for emancipation, as many of them arrive close to the legal age. Sometimes the protective intervention implemented in the residential centers falls short of adequately addressing their needs before and during their transition to adulthood (Bravo & Santos-González, 2017; Fernández-Simo et al., 2021). The lack of effective support and preparation for emancipation delivered by institutions, in addition to bureaucratic barriers, increase their vulnerability and may hinder their access to employment and social integration (Gimeno-Monterde & Gutierrez-Sanchez, 2019). Overall, programs aimed at facilitating the transition to adulthood often lack stable and standardized organization, alongside the necessary financial and technical resources (Gimeno-Monterde et al., 2021). There is a need to provide more tailored services and resources such as planning individual pathways, involving legal (residence and work permit) and social support (educational and employment opportunities) (Jiménez-Franco et al., 2021) before aging out of care.

Evans et al. (2022) also emphasizes the importance of social connections and community engagement for unaccompanied minors, suggesting that these factors can ease their transition and improve their mental well-being.

Added Value

While considerable research has focused on the challenges and obstacles faced by young people in care during the transition into adulthood (see literature reviews by Atkinson & Hyde, 2019 and Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018), there are limited studies examining their preparedness for this transition (Trout et al., 2014) and their experiences and prospects upon leaving care, particularly at the national level and among unaccompanied minors.

Most of the studies that have been conducted on unaccompanied foreign minors have focused on their profiles and the difficulties they face when arriving in the host country. This means there is a lack of research from the perspectives of the young people themselves regarding their experiences in the protection system (Gimeno-Monterde et al., 2021) and the transitional care interventions provided in the residential settings prior to and during emancipation (Gullo et al., 2021). We therefore lack knowledge of how these young people perceive their own abilities and the preparation for adult life provided by residential settings in the moment of leaving care. Gaining an understanding of their experiences and perspectives would appear crucial to ensure that they receive appropriate support while they are in care and facilitate better transition outcomes to adulthood.

This article offers a comprehensive exploration of their profiles and experiences before reaching 18, which is essential for developing targeted interventions that promote a smooth transition into independent living. The study aims to deepen our understanding of the profiles and experiences of unaccompanied migrant youths in care and their preparation for adulthood prior to emancipation.

Literature Review

To conduct the literature review, the questions addressed were:

> What are the experiences of young unaccompanied migrant youths while in residential care?
> What is their preparation for adult life in the months preceding their emancipation?

To answer these, a search strategy following PRISMA guidelines, was employed to identify gaps in the literature and place the topic within a global context. Databases such as WOS, Scopus, and PsycINFO were searched using the keywords: "unaccompanied migrant youths", "residential care", "independent living skills" and "preparation to adulthood". The review covered studies from 2013 to 2023, focusing on Spain and international contexts. Inclusion criteria targeted peer-reviewed articles focusing on the preparation to the transition into adulthood of unaccompanied minors in care, while exclusion criteria filtered out studies focusing solely on transition to adulthood. A total of 24 studies were initially identified; after removing duplicates and applying selection criteria, 20 studies were thoroughly reviewed. Complementary searches through specific journals were also used.

The Current Study

Background

A survey research design was used to conduct the study, focusing on a representative sample of 90 unaccompanied migrant youth who were in the care system upon they arrival in Catalonia (Spain) and were nearing the end of their time in care.

The subjects were participants in the CAre LEAvers Moving Into adulthood (CALEAMI) project, a longitudinal study conducted in Catalonia focused on understanding the journey of young people with care experience as they navigate into adulthood. This study was funded by the Agencia

Española de Investigación (PID2019-105163RB-I00). The researchers declared not having any conflict of interest. The project was approved by the *Comité de Ética de la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona* (CEEAH) (the Autonomous University of Barcelona's Ethics Committee) (file number 4546) and by the DGAIA.

Sampling

Catalonia was selected for its significant population of unaccompanied migrant youths and its status as one of the first regions in Spain to provide a wide range of services and programs for care leavers compared to other Spanish communities (ASJTET, 2020).

A simple random probability sampling was used, drawing on data provided by DGAIA (*Direcció General d'Atenció a la Infància i l'Adolescència*—the regional government of Catalonia's Directorate General of Child and Adolescent Care) from the 2002 cohort. According to official records, the total population of unaccompanied migrant youths was 1.444, of which 96% were boys (1.416) and 4% were girls (28), with an average age of 17.3 (SD = 0.5). Notably, 92% of them were exclusively placed in residential care. Given the small proportion of unaccompanied minor girls, they were intentionally excluded from the sample to minimize bias and concentrate the study on the experiences of male migrants.

The initial sample was carried out by a random sampling process and the administration provided us with contact information of the center in which they were located. Initially, 90 young people were selected, but 24 of them could not be contacted because they were not in the informed centers, or had run away, and five declined to participate. For this reason, the sample was complemented with convenience sampling. Seven centers with unaccompained young migrants were selected and 29 young people from these centers agreed to participate voluntarily. The final sample included a total of 90 unaccompanied young male migrants, aged 17–18, who were in care (or in extended care due to the COVID-19 pandemic) in Catalonia during 2019 -2020, reflecting a distribution very similar to that of the reference population.

Table 1 shows, the majority of the participants were from Morocco. With regards to age, 60% were 17 years old and 40% had just turned 18, although they were still under extended protection due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

All the participants in the study were boys who had arrived in Catalonia between the ages of 13 and 17. While 82.2% had a residence permit, only 18.9% had a work permit (see Table 1). The youths who had work permits had spent more time in the protection system (M = 3.05, SD = 0.93) compared to those without work permits (M = 2.51, SD = 0.67; p = 0.009).

Measure

A survey was designed to capture various aspects of the young people's life, including 43 questions regarding their personal characteristics (eight questions), education and work experience (nine questions), support network (five questions), skills and preparation for independent living (eight questions), service information and transition planning (six questions and one open-ended question), concerns about the transition (two open-ended questions) and life satisfaction (two questions and two open-ended questions).

The survey topics were validated by an external advisory committee comprised of 27 people (young people with care experience, managers from the administration, professionals and academics). Before launching the survey, measures were validated with four different profiles of young people with care experience using cognitive interviews (Willis, 2005). As a result of the validation, some changes were made: the wording of certain questions was revised, and nuances or explanations were added to others to clarify what was being asked more precisely. Additionally, some open-ended questions were included to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind their responses.

Table 1 Personal characteristics of the young people interviewed

N total	90 young people
Sex	100% boys
Nationality	73.3% Moroccan, 20% sub-Saharan African, 4.4% Pakistani, and 2.2% Algerian
Relatives in Catalonia	38.9% had relatives in Catalonia 61.1% did not have relatives in Catalonia
Type of housing	67.7% in residential centers 31.2% independent living arrangements One young person in family foster care (1.1%)
Age of arrival	15 ($M = 15.4$; $SD = 0.8$)
Time they lived alone before care	$M = .26$ years ($SD = .4$)
Residence permit	82.2% of the young people had residence permits
Work permit	18.9% of the young people had work permits

A copy of the survey is available on request.

Procedure

The data collection started in January 2019 and finished at the end of January 2020. Initially, the survey was administrated face-to-face, and it took over one hour to complete. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers had to adapt their approach, and in 51 cases, the survey was subsequently conducted via phone calls or a web interface.

The survey was translated into Darija by a bilingual research team member for the four participants who had difficulty understanding Spanish. Moreover, the Darija (Arabic spoken in Morocco) version underwent a transcultural adaptation process to ensure high accuracy (Beaton et al., 2000).

The survey was interviewer-administered, with all interviews conducted by trained members of the research team each of whom had experience working with or researching youths in care and received specific training on the study's protocol to ensure consistency. The bilingual interviewer, fluent in both Darija and Spanish, also administrated the Darija version to ensure clear communication with participants who were not fluent in Spanish.

The research team administered the survey after obtaining permission from the DGAIA and with the assistance of youth caseworkers, who helped connect the researchers with the selected youths. Prior to conducting the interviews, the youths were informed regarding the aims of the study and informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Data Analysis

Most of the data was quantitative and it was analyzed using Stata statistical package. Descriptive analyses (frequencies and means), chi-square tests, ANOVA and correlations tests were performed.

The open-ended questions were analyzed through a process of mixed categorization, inductive-deductive. To do so, descriptive matrices were used and the frequency of the topics was recorded.

Results

Education and Work Experience

The youths interviewed had not had much education. Only 4.4% had completed a baccalaureate or vocational training course, 20% had a secondary school diploma, 67.8% had only had primary school education, and 7.8% had had no education at all. When they were interviewed, 82.2% were undergoing training, mostly in initial occupational training for young people who have not obtained the secondary education certificate (44.6%) or occupational courses (20.3%), and/or were learning Spanish or Catalan (23%). Only six young people (8.1%) were doing vocational training, and three were in compulsory secondary education (ESO) (*Educació Secundaria Obligatòria*) (4.1%). Of the 17.8% who were not studying, more than half (10% of the total) had just finished a course, and were waiting to start another.

However, most of the young people had had some paid unskilled work experience (83.3%) in their countries of origin, mainly in shops, farming or the hospitality industry, or unpaid work (26.1%) helping in family businesses. When they were interviewed, only 10% of the participants were working and half of them (54.2%) were looking for a job. However, at the time of the interview, all the young people had formulated a plan for future employment and were undergoing training to achieve their goals.

Support Network at 18

As Table 2 shows, social support networks when they were reaching the majority of age were limited. Less than half of the young people could turn to four or more people if they had a problem. What is more, their main source of support were educators followed by friends and birth family.

The support network for financial and material difficulties was smaller compared to the network available for emotional support or counselling. In the face of these types of needs, the main sources of support were educators and friends. The scant significance of partners in the support network is also noteworthy: while 18.7% of the participants reported having a partner, only 2.3% identified them as a source of support.

The youths who reported receiving greater emotional support from educators were more satisfied with the center ($r = 0.36$, $p = 0.001$) and with their relationship with these educators ($r = 0.27$, $p = 0.016$). However, the support from educators was not associated with the youths' perception of their readiness to find employment, housing, or manage finances. Furthermore, no relationship was observed between the support network and life satisfaction or the frequency of experiencing sadness or distress.

Type of Placement and Skills for Independent Living

When these young people live on their own, they would have acquired basic household management skills, such as grocery shopping, cooking, and doing laundry. However, not all of them had the opportunities to develop these skills while in care. Regarding housework, 36.9% of the participants had never cooked before, 23.8% always did and the remaining 39.3% did sometimes. Furthermore, just under half (46.4%)

Table 2 Source of support and number of people, for each type of support

Source of support	Emotional support	Material support	Counselling
Mother	44.9%	9.1%	23.6%
Father	37.1%	6.8%	20.2%
Siblings	32.6%	11.4%	18%
Extended family (uncles and aunts, cousins, grandparents)	10.1%	9.1%	6.7%
Friends	43.8%	29.5%	37.1%
Educators	44.9%	60.2%	69.7%
Partner	2.2%	2.3%	1.1%
Number of people			
Nobody	11.5%	12.9%	7.1%
1 person	14.9%	30.6%	16.5%
2 people	13.8%	16.5%	20%
3 people	13.8%	10.6%	8.2%
4 people	8%	8.2%	8.2%
5 or more people	38%	21.2%	40%

did the shopping at least once a week (even if accompanied by an educator) and 79.5% did laundry at least once a week.

However, the opportunities to work on these skills vary greatly depending on the type of placement. Most of the youths were accommodated either in a residential center (67.9%) or in independent living arrangements (32.1%). In residential centers, the youths live with others under the continuous presence of educators, available 24 h a day, 7 days a week. While in the residential center, the youths attend external educational facilities nearby. Typically, there is a kitchen and cleaning staff present in the center, with educators overseeing the youths' schedules and routines. Independent living arrangements consist of apartments for a few youths, without a continuous educator present. Educators supervise them but the youths are responsible for cleaning and other household tasks. All the youths living in independent living arrangements had previously gained work experience (100% vs. 0%; $p = 0.004$).

Therefore, the results revealed some differences in preparation for adult life depending on the type of housing where the young people lived. Young people who were in independent living arrangements most frequently performed tasks involving the acquisition of skills for independence in the home. Specifically, 63% of the young people in these independent living arrangements cooked every day or one day a week, with only 11.1% of them never cooking, while in the residential centers 54.2% never cooked ($p < 0.001$). The same was true for doing the shopping and laundry. In the residential centers, 76.5% of the participants never or hardly ever shopped. In contrast, independent living arrangements were only the case for 11.1% of participants ($p < 0.001$). All of the young people in the independent living arrangements did the laundry, whereas only 72% of those in residential centers took on this task ($p = 0.001$).

Furthermore, the young people in independent living arrangements were also those who were most aware of all of the existing support resources available to them beyond the age of 18. While the young people in residential centers were practically only aware of supervised apartments, young people in independent living arrangements were also aware of residences (77.8% *vs*. 40.7%) ($p = 0.002$) and supervised rented rooms (75% *vs*. 18.2%) for former foster care youths ($p < 0.000$).

Youths' Preparation for Independent Life

Just under half of participants (44.8%) considered that they had received a lot of support and training for independent life, and 28.7% considered that they had received a fair amount of support and training. Only 10.3% considered that they had received no preparation at all.

Managing their finances was the skill in which the young people felt best prepared. Specifically, 79.8% felt they were very or fairly well prepared; the remaining 20.2% felt not very well or not at all prepared. They felt less well prepared for finding a job and keeping it, and for finding somewhere to live once they had reached legal age. In both cases, about two thirds felt very or fairly well prepared (62.1% for work and 60% for housing), while the rest of the young people felt not very well or not at all prepared. Interestingly, the type of placement did not appear to affect the youths' perception of how prepared they felt for the transition domains (managing money, finding a job and keeping it, and for finding somewhere to live).

The perception of readiness to find a job was not related to the level of education achieved, nor to the studies being pursued or previous work experiences; it therefore appears to be more of a personal attitude unrelated to preparedness.

Service Information and Transition Planning

From the age of 16, the young person's emancipation plan is designed jointly with their educators. This individualized plan includes their preparation for independent living, where they will live once they reach adulthood, and the potential access to transition support programs and resources.

A significant percentage of the participants (29.4%) reported that they were not aware of the existence of an emancipation plan or that they had not yet started to prepare for it. Only slightly more than half of the participants (55.3%) were aware of their emancipation plan and felt that their educators had assisted in its preparation. In contrast, 11.8% considered that they had made the plan and all the decisions regarding their future themselves.

A large number of young people (76.4%) were aware of the financial services provided for by the transition support program, but only about half of them were aware that they could have educational support once outside the protection system (51.7%) or that they could receive legal support (47.1%) from this program.

However, the most well-known program was the housing program. Most of the young people were aware of the existence of the housing placements to support the transition to independent living for youth 18–21 years old (Table 3), particularly the supervised apartments (89.9%).

In fact, 90.6% said that, once they reached legal age, they wanted to join the transitional housing program. Almost a quarter (24.1%) explicitly stated that they wanted to join it because they had nowhere else to go and would live on the street and 20.7% reported not feeling prepared to live independently. Other reasons to join the housing program were to be more independent than in the residential centers (15%), to be able to continue their studies (10.3%), and to live with fewer young people and be more relaxed (14.5%). Others said that if they had a job and were able to pay rent, they would not apply to join this program (9.2%).

Concerns About the Transition and Life Satisfaction

Participants were generally **satisfied with their lives** ($M = 6.9$ out of 10; $SD = 2.6$). Almost all of the young people (86.2%) rated their level of life satisfaction between five and ten on a scale of zero to ten. Specifically, 21.8% gave it a ten. The participants who were most satisfied felt that they were on the right track, building their future, although they also said they missed their family. Those who were least satisfied felt that their needs were not being met, that they had no freedom in the centers, that their future was uncertain and that their family was far away.

Nevertheless, during the month prior to the interview, more than half of the young people (53.9%) **had felt sad or anxious**, and 24.7% had felt that way often or always felt that way. Only 21.3% had not felt sad or anxious during the previous month. The most frequent reasons for this feeling (Table 4) were relationships with their family, especially missing them (73.1%), not having a job (66.7%), not having money (50.8%) and health, either their own or that of a family member (50%).

Furthermore, a positive correlation was observed between young people's satisfaction with the center and with their lives ($\rho = 0.3$, $p = 0.01$).

The interviewed youths expressed concern about three issues: their administrative situation (residence and work permits) (40.2% of the cases), finding a job (41.4%) and having a place to live once they reach legal age (34.2%). Only 19.2% said they did not have any concerns related to the emancipation process, while 51.9% felt that they needed some transition support that they were not receiving. This support was closely linked to their concerns: more help in finding a job (25%), more support and information regarding their administrative situation (23.1%), and greater possibilities of entering assisted accommodation or help finding housing (19.2%). Also, 11.5% expressed the need for more training opportunities.

No differences were observed either by nationality or by type of housing placement in relation to young people's **concerns** about their emancipation process.

Table 3 Proportion of young people aware of transition support programs

Supervised apartments	89.9%
Residences linked to work placement projects	50.6%
Supervised rented room placements	36%
Economic subsidy	76.4%
Educational support	51.7%
Legal advice	47.1%
Socio-occupational placement programs	33.8%

Table 4 Reasons for sadness or distress in the month prior to the interview

Relationship with their family	73.1%
Not having a job	66.7%
Not having money	50.8%
Health, either their own or of a family member	50%
Education	29%
Other (documentation, uncertainty about the future, language, etc.)	28.8%

Differences in Youths' Profile and Preparation According to the Type of Residential Setting and Nationality

Some differences were observed depending on whether the young person was in a residential facility or an independent living arrangement. As we mentioned earlier, in the apartments that are intended as housing placements to prepare for transition, young people cook more during the week ($M = 9.4$ $SD = 6.1$ *vs.* $M = 1.7$ $SD = 0.3$; $p < 0.001$) and go grocery shopping more frequently ($M = 1.2$ $SD = 0.6$ *vs.* $M = 0.7$ $SD = 1.4$; $p < 0.001$). Additionally, other differences were observed among the young people who were in these housing placements. The young people living in independent living apartments were those who had entered the care system at a younger age ($M = 15.1$ $SD = 0.7$ *vs.* $M = 15.5$ $SD = 0.8$; $p = 0.09$; approaching statistical significance) and they had experienced more transfers (M = 4.25, SD = 0.83 vs. M = 3.3, SD = 1.61; p = 0.017).; rated their relationships with other young people higher ($M = 3.6$ $SD = 0.05$ *vs.* $M = 3.2$ $SD = 0.6$; $p = 0.02$); and felt less sad or anxious in the months prior to the interview ($M = 1.9$ $SD = 0.7$ *vs.* $M = 2.3$ $SD = 1$; $p = 0.05$). Furthermore, all youths living in independent living apartments reported feeling satisfied with their lives (100% vs. 84%; p = 0.008), and a lower proportion of them consumed substances (4% vs. 22.6%; p = 0.023). Interestingly, no significant difference was found in the perception of preparedness between the young people living in residential centers or independent living apartments.

Additionally, there were some differences in the results depending on the nationality of the young people. Although young people from sub-Saharan Africa had left the family home at a slightly earlier age than the Moroccans ($M = 13.9$ $SD = 2.2$ *vs.* $M = 14.7$ $SD = 1.6$; $p = 0.01$), no significant differences were found in the age of arrival due to the longer journey. However, compared to Moroccans, sub-Saharan African boys had spent less time in care ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 0.7$ *vs.* $M = 2.7$, $SD = 0.87$; $p = 0.08$; approaching statistical significance) and experienced fewer placement changes ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.6$ *vs.* $M = 3.9$, $SD = 1.5$; $p = 0.01$).

One of the most relevant differences was that 47% of young people from Morocco had relatives in Catalonia, while only 11.1% of sub-Saharan young people did ($p < 0.01$). The former were also observed to have entered the protection system earlier than the other young people ($M = 15.1$, $SD = 0.9$ *vs.* $M = 15.5$, $SD = 0.7$; $p = 0.03$).

It is also important to note that the young Moroccans had a higher level of education than the sub-Saharan Africans. Of the former, 71.2% had completed primary school and 24.2% secondary school, while only 55.6% of the sub-Saharan Africans had completed primary school, and 5.6% secondary school ($p < 0.001$). In addition, the young Moroccans also had more work experience in their country of origin than the sub-Saharan Africans (87.9% *vs.* 66.7%) ($p = 0.03$). However, no differences were observed in their perception of preparedness for the transition.

That being said, the young sub-Saharans expressed greater satisfaction with the center than the Moroccans $M = 8$, $SD = 2.1$ *vs.* $M = 6.4$, $SD = 3.1$; $p = 0.08$, approaching statistical significance) and life overall ($M = 8.3$, $SD = 1.8$ *vs.* $M = 6.7$, $SD = 2.6$; $p = 0.03$). They did, however, report feeling sad or distressed more frequently ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 0.09$ *vs.* $M = 2.1$, $SD = 0.9$; $p = 0.04$).

Limitations

In order to avoid bias, females were excluded from the sample due to their limited representation among the unaccompanied youth migrant population. However, future research should include a gendered approach for a better understanding of the experience and needs of unaccompanied migrant minor girls, as some gender-based differences are observed in previous research (Avignone et al., 2024). Additionally, while the sample structure closely resembles that of the population, the specific sampling method used may limit the generalizability of the results, and findings should be interpreted with caution.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, we have gathered relevant information about the experience of unaccompanied young migrants in the Catalan protection system and their preparation for the transition to independent life.

The **profile** of these unaccompanied migrant youths is very heterogeneous, although they do share some common factors. They are mainly young boys who have migrated from African countries during adolescence primarily for economic reasons, and upon their arrival in Spain, they are placed under guardianship as minors. Typically, this entry occurs through the southern part of Spain, but they leave the centers to travel to Catalonia because this autonomous region provides transitional support resources after the age of 18. These data are in line with research conducted in Catalonia (DGAIA, 2019; Quiroga et al., 2009) and in other Autonomous Communities in Spain (Bravo & Santos-González, 2017; Gimeno-Monterde & Gutiérrez-Sánchez, 2019; Gullo et al., 2021). Some characteristics associated with their origin have also been observed. For example, sub-Saharan youth tend to begin the migration process at younger ages, while more young Moroccans have higher levels of education and previous work experience. Some of these differences have also been observed by the DGAIA (2019). Despite such differences between these

unaccompanied minor youth, there are also some common difficulties and barriers that they face.

The majority do not speak Spanish upon arrival, so the first thing they need is to learn the language in order to access training and employment. This fact, combined with the age close to adulthood at which they enter into the care system, makes it very difficult for them to complete their formal **education**. The majority of them have very low levels of education; only one-fifth of the participants had completed secondary education. Due to them not having completed compulsory basic education, educators guide them towards non-regulated vocational training courses that enable them to enter the workforce as quickly as possible, even if these jobs may be low-skilled.

Moreover, they experience **high mobility** through different care facilities. This instability, as supported by previous research (Sebba et al., 2015), may impede academic progress, social integration, and the establishment of crucial social support networks.

Furthermore, many young people in our study had **precarious social support networks**, mainly relying on social educators in housing placements and residential centers. Interestingly, youths who received more emotional support from educators expressed higher satisfaction both with the center and with the educators themselves. However, relying solely on professional support is problematic as it ceases once individuals leave care or transition programs. They also looked to their friends as a source of financial and material support, even if their friends were also in precarious situations and their possibilities for support was also limited. These youth should be encouraged to form meaningful relationships with local adults and to broaden and diversify their social support networks through mentoring programs, collaborative families, and participation in community activities, programs, and services, as described by both Courtney et al. (2020) and Montserrat et al. (2021).

The study has also identified some **deficits in the preparation** for transition for unaccompanied minors in care. According to existing regulations, starting at the age of 16, young people develop an emancipation plan with their assigned professional tutor, which outlines how they will be prepared to acquire the necessary independent living skills and where they will live when they leave care. We concur with previous researchers regarding the necessity to implement targeted socio-educational programs that equip young people with essential skills in the two years preceding legal age (Gimeno-Monterde et al., 2021; Harder et al., 2020; Jariot et al., 2015; Sirriyeh & Raghallaigh, 2018) while also stressing the importance and the right of youth participation in decision-making regarding their emancipation pathway (Kri et al., 2023). According to Catalan administration regulations, young people should work with their tutors on their emancipation plan starting at the age of 16. However, a quarter of the participants were not aware of the existence of their emancipation plan or had not yet been involved in its formulation or decision-making process. This suggests that in certain facilities, the emancipation plan may be limited to merely determining the youths' living arrangements upon leaving the center, and/or they may not perceive it as their obligation to provide youth with essential independent life skills, perhaps assuming that such responsibility lies with transition support programs for care leavers.

In terms of their prospects towards emancipation, all of them wanted to access the housing program for care leavers while in care, mainly because they do not have access to other housing options, and in some cases, the opportunity to continue their studies. Additionally, while in the recent years there has been a doubling in the number of housing program placements according to ASJTET (2020), transition programs often struggle to meet the demand, lacking sufficient vacancies to accommodate all young people seeking access (Comasòlivas-Moya et al., 2018). Nonetheless, for those who do access them, they will find themselves having to perform daily tasks (such as buying groceries, cooking, or managing finances) from day one, highlighting the necessity for them to have acquired these skills prior to leaving the care system.

Even though many of the participants felt prepared to face the transition, many facilities didn't have enough opportunities to go shopping, cook or manage money, which are basic skills they will need for independent living. This is one of the most notable findings of this study and is consistent with previous studies (Fernández-Simo & Cid, 2017; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). However, there are significant differences between the two types of housing placements regarding the opportunities for developing such skills. The independent living apartments for youths aged 16–18 seem to be better places to promote opportunities for autonomy skills development than residential centers. Additionally, those youths who were in these apartments reported feeling less sad and anxious and having better relationships with other youths. Overall, the majority of young people expressed satisfaction with the care facility, and there was a positive correlation between satisfaction with the facility and satisfaction with their own lives.

Surprisingly, in the present study no differences were found between youths in residential centers and those in independent living apartments when it came to the perception of preparedness with regard to independent life skills. This perception was not related to work experience or level of education. Interestingly, those youths who had been in care for a longer time reported feeling less prepared. This raises the question of whether they felt less prepared due to a better sense of realism or because institutionalization had disempowered them.

Taking all of the above into consideration, conducting a study to examine the experiences of these young people after turning 18 would be valuable to understand the real impact of the type of placement and supports they received.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The findings from this article highlight several key implications for social work practice. Six aspects seem fundamental to be considered in order to offer a more holistic and sustainable support for unaccompanied young migrants transitioning from care into adulthood.

It seems necessary to ensure planned preparation for independent living through tailored socio-educational programmes during the two years prior to reaching legal age. Additionally, increasing the number of independent living housing placements with varying support levels and combining life-skills training directly in housing settings is also important; Moreover, it is crucial to offer structured support beyond the age of 18, to ensure continuity with their education; Additionally, promoting ongoing monitoring and involving social workers, educators and psychologists in a collaborative approach to address emotional and developmental needs is essential. Finally, promoting mentorship programs and encouraging community involvement, to help young people build natural and meaningful relationships with other adults locally to broaden and diversify their social support networks.

Acknowledgements We thank care-experienced young people who participated in this research for sharing their expertise and wisdom, and for their extraordinary contributions to research, policy, and practice. We also thank the Federación de Entidades con Proyectos y Pisos Asistidos (FEPA, Federation of Organizations with Projects and Assisted Accommodation) and the Direcció General d'Atenció a la Infància i l'Adolescència (DGAIA, the General Directorate of Child and Adolescent Care of the Regional Government of Catalonia's) for their collaboration in the study.

Author Contributions All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Clara Sanz-Escutia, Laura Arnau-Sabatés and Josefina Sala-Roca. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Clara Sanz-Escutia, Laura Arnau-Sabatés and Josefina Sala-Roca and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding Open Access Funding provided by Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona. This research was funded by the*Agencia Estatal de Investigación(Spanish State Research Agency) (PID2019-105163RB-I00) with the support of aFormación del Profesorado Universitario(University Teacher Training) grant (reference FPU16/04885).*

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest (financial or non-financial).

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The project was approved by the *Comité de Ética de la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona* (CEEAH) (the Autonomous University of Barcelona's Ethics Committee) (file number 4546) and by the DGAIA.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

References

Alonso-Bello, E., Santana-Vega, L. E., & Feliciano-García, L. (2020). Competencias de empleabilidad de menores inmigrantes no acompañados en Canarias. *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research, 1*(9), 16–29. https://doi.org/10.7821/naer.2020.1.433

ASJTET. (2020). *Memòria 2020*. Àrea de Suport als Joves Tutelats i Extutelats. https://dretssocials.gencat.cat/web/.content/03ambits_tematics/07infanciaiadolescencia/ASJTET/MEMORIA-Dades-2020-ASJTET.pdf

Atkinson, C., & Hyde, R. (2019). Care leavers' views about transition: A literature review. *Journal of Children's Services, 14*(1), 42–58. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-05-2018-0013

Avignone, T., Pacheco-Alises, G. F., & Jiménez, M. T. (2024). Is there a gender-based analysis of unaccompanied migrant minors? A systematic review of the evidence. *Children and Youth Services Review, 156*, 107313. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107313

Barn, R., Di Rosa, R. T., & Kallinikaki, T. (2021). Unaccompanied minors in Greece and Italy: An exploration of the challenges for social work within tighter immigration and resource constraints in pandemic times. *Social Sciences, 10*(134), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10040134

Beaton, D. E., Bombardier, C., Guillemin, F., & Ferraz, M. B. (2000). Guidelines for the process of cross-cultural adaptation of self-report measures. *Spine, 25*(24), 3186–3191.

Bravo, A., & Santos-González, A. (2017). Asylum-seeking children in Spain: Needs and intervention models. *Psychosocial Intervention, 26*(1), 55–62. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psi.2015.12.001

Comasòlivas-Moya, A., Sala-Roca, J., & MarzoArpón, T. E. (2018). Los recursos residenciales para la transición hacia la vida adulta de los jóvenes tutelados en Cataluña. *Pedagogía Social. Revista Interuniversitaria, 31*, 125–137. https://doi.org/10.7179/PSRI_2018.31.10

Courtney, M.E., Okpych, N.J., Harty, J., Feng, H., Park, S.E., Powers, J., Nadon, M., Ditto, D.J., & Park, K. (2020). *Final wave of CalYOUTH study surveys former foster youth at age 23*. https://www.chapinhall.org/research/calyouth-wave4-report/

DGAIA (2019). *Els infants i joves migrats sols acollits a Catalunya. Estat de situació actual i avançament de resultats de l'estudi*. https://treballiaferssocials.gencat.cat/web/.content/03ambits_tematics/07infanciaiadolescencia/Estrategia_acollida/avancament_estudi.pdf

DGAIA (2021). *Informe estadístic mensual: Desembre de 2019*. https://dretssocials.gencat.cat/web/.content/03ambits_tematics/07infanciaiadolescencia/dades_sistema_proteccio/2021/2021_12_informe_DGAIA.pdf

Evans, K., Pardue-Kim, M., Foster, R., & Ferguson, H. (2022). Social connections and community engagement trends among unaccompanied refugee minors exiting foster care. *Journal of Mental Health and Social Behaviour, 2*, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.33790/jmhsb1100168

FEPA. (2018). *Joves en procés d'emancipació: anàlisi de resultats. Enquesta FEPA Catalunya 2018.* https://www.fepa18.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Enquesta-FEPA_2018.pdf

Fernández-Simo, D., & Cid, X. M. (2017). Análisis longitudinal de la transición a la vida adulta de las personas segregadas del sistema de protección a la infancia ya la adolescencia. *Bordón. Revista De Pedagogía, 70*(2), 25–38. https://doi.org/10.13042/Bordon.2018.54539

Fernández-Simo, D., Cid-Fernández, X. M., & Carrera-Fernández, M. V. (2021). Socio-educational support deficits in the emancipation of protected youth in Spain. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 51*, 329–346. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-021-09631-3

Gimeno-Monterde, Ch., Gómez-Quintero, J. D., & Aguerri, J. C. (2021). Unaccompanied young people and transition to adulthood: Challenges for child care services. *Children and Youth Services Review, 121*, 105858. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105858

Gimeno-Monterde, C., & Gutiérrez-Sánchez, J. D. (2019). Fostering unaccompanied migrating minors. A cross-border comparison. *Children and Youth Services Review, 99*, 36–42. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.01.035

Grage-Moore, S. G., & Mendes, P. (2023). What are the factors that influence outcomes for unaccompanied humanitarian refugee minors leaving out-of-home care in Australia. *Social Work & Policy Studies*, *6*(1). https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/SWPS/article/view/17496

Gullo, F., García-Alba, L., Bravo, A., & Del Valle, J. F. (2021). Crossing countries and crossing ages: The difficult transition to adulthood of unaccompanied migrant care leavers. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(13), 6935. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18136935

Häggman-Laitila, A., Salokekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2018). Transition to adult life of young people leaving foster care: A qualitative systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 95*, 134–143. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.08.017

Harder, A. T., Mann-Feder, V., Oterholm, I., & Refaeli, T. (2020). Supporting transitions to adulthood for youth leaving care: Consensus based principles. *Children and Youth Services Review, 116*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105260

Jariot, M., Sala, J., & Arnau, L. (2015). Jóvenes tutelados y transición a la vida independiente: indicadores de éxito. *Revista Española de Orientación y Psicopedagogía*, *26*(2), 90–103. https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/3382/338241632007.pdf

Jiménez-Franco, D., Berzosa-Callén, R., & Gimeno-Monterde, C. (2021). Experiencias de transición a la vida adulta de jóvenes que migraron solos. Un estudio en Aragón (España). *Prospectiva, 32*, 37–56. https://doi.org/10.25100/prts.v0i32.10933

Kri, K., Križ, K., & Petersen, M. (Eds.). (2023). *Children and young people's participation in child protection: international research and practical applications*. Oxford University Press.

Melendro, M., MiguelenaTorrado, J., De-Juanas Oliva, Á., Dávila, P., & Naya, L. M. (2022). *El tránsito a la vida adulta de jóvenes de sistemas de protección y jóvenes vulnerables* (pp. 1–247). Dyckinson.

Migliorini, L., Rania, N., Varani, N., & Ferrari, J. R. (2022). Unaccompanied migrant minors in Europe and US: A review of psychological perspective and care challenges. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community, 50*(3), 273–285. https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2021.1918613

Montserrat, C., Iglesias, E., Gómez, C., Gallart, J., Bedoya, Z., & Llosada-Gistau, J. (2021). *Estudi sobre la situació de la joventut migrada sense referents familiars a Catalunya*. Universitat de Girona. https://www.udg.edu/ca/Portals/47/OContent_Docs/Document_sintesi_joves_migrats_sols_14.05.2021.pdf

O'Higgins, A. (2019). Analysis of care and education pathways of refugee and asylum-seeking children in care in England: Implications for social work. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *28*(1), 53–62.

O'Higgins, A., Ott, E. M., & Shea, M. W. (2018). What is the impact of placement type on educational and health outcomes of unaccompanied refugee minors? A systematic review of the evidence. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 21*, 354–365. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-018-0256-7

Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración. (2023). Menores no acompañados y jóvenes extutelados con autorización de residencia. https://www.inclusion.gob.es/documents/2178369/2280852/Nota_Menores.pdf/

Observatorio de la Infancia (2024). *Boletín de datos estadísticos de medidas de protección a la infancia. Boletín número 25*. Ministerio de Derechos Sociales. file:///C:/FINA/articles/articles%20IARS/article%20Clara/perfil%20extutelats%20mena/2024–03%20CASW/2a%20submission/boletin25.pdf

Puyo, A., Bravo, A., Ortigosa, E., Rojas, A., Barandiarán, K., & Maroño, A. (2021). *La acogida de menores migrantes en España.* Fundación por causa. https://www.observatoriodelainfancia.es/oia/esp/documentos_ficha.aspx?id=7632

Quiroga, V., Alonso, A., & Soria, M. (2009) *Somnis de butxaca. Menors Migrants No Acompanyats a Catalunya*. Fundació Jaume Bofill. https://fundaciofica t.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/informe_mmna_fpt.pdf

Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., & O'Higgins, A. (2015). *The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data*. https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Linking-Care-and-Educational-Data-Overview-Report-Nov-2015.pdf

Sirriyeh, A., & Raghallaigh, M. N. (2018). Foster care, recognition and transitions to adulthood for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in England and Ireland. *Children and Youth Services Review, 92*, 89–97. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.02.039

Trout, A. L., Hoffman, S., Huscroft-D'Angelo, J., Epstein, M. H., Duppong Hurley, K., & Stevens, A. L. (2014). Youth and parent perceptions of aftercare supports at discharge from residential care. *Child & Family Social Work, 19*(3), 304–311. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12003

UN. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2020). *International migration*. https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock

UNHCR (2020). *Re-Location of Unaccompanied Children from Greece to other EU Countries.* UN Refugee Agency. UN Refugee Agency. Retrieved September 23, 2024 from https://data.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/78746

UNICEF (2017). *A child is a child. Protecting children on the move from violence, abuse and exploitation*. UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_A_child_is_a_child_May_2017_EN.pdf

Van Es, C. M., Sleijpen, M., Mooren, T., te Brake, H., Ghebreab, W., & Boelen, P. A. (2019). Eritrean unaccompanied refugee minors in transition: A focused ethnography of challenges and needs. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth, 36*(2), 157–176. https://doi.org/10.1080/0886571X.2018.1548917

Vissing, Y., & Leitão, S. (Eds.). (2021). *The rights of unaccompanied minors: Perspectives and case studies on migrant children*. Springer Nature.

Wade, J. (2019). Supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people: The experience of foster care. *Child & Family Social Work, 24*(3), 383–390. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12474

Willis, G. (2005). *Cognitive interviewing: A tool for improving questionnaire design*. Sage.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.