

Chapter 2

Child and Adolescent Care Services: Addressing the Vulnerability of Unaccompanied Minors in Barcelona

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ABSTRACT

Although unaccompanied minors became visible in Spain in the late 1990s, they are still seen as a new migratory phenomenon, provoking numerous debates and questions around appropriate responses. This chapter aims to unveil the rights and wrongs of the current protection system in Catalonia through analysis and discussion of the role of socio-educational intervention in overcoming the prejudice-based discourses and attitudes that criminalize these migrants. In a descriptive study, staff from all the centres of the protection system of the Barcelona General Directorate for Child and Adolescent Care were interviewed. Results showed that overcrowding in the protection system was causing tensions and dysfunctions. Great efforts must be made to develop individualized educational interventions adapted to unaccompanied minors' specific situations and to facilitate their integration. Five main recommendations and a range of future lines of research derive from these findings.

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INTRODUCTION

Although the social phenomenon of unaccompanied minors began to become visible in Spain in the late 1990s, it is still seen as a new migratory phenomenon of global dimensions, combined with increasing religious and cultural diversity, in addition to other globalizing factors such as the recent economic crisis, wars, terrorism and the current health pandemic. In this context, in the last two decades the arrival of these migrant young people, unaccompanied by adult carers, has been at the forefront of political and media agendas, giving rise to numerous debates, discourses and interventions. As new horizons of uncertainty have affected their reception and integration, the phenomenon has suffered overexposure in the public sphere, which at the same time has made other factors affecting these minors invisible (Trujillo, 2010). Popularized in Spain as ‘MENA’ (an acronym for ‘unaccompanied foreign minors’ in Spanish), they are seen as highly vulnerable boys and girls who need special attention from government institutions and the relevant specialists. They are children and adolescents under the age of 18 who migrate irregularly and without the company of adults from their countries of birth, which may suffer poverty, war, etc., to other geographical areas in search of better quality of life (Fuentes, 2014). Through the pre-migration, migration and post-migration phases, their experiences have major similarities in both the United States and Europe (Menjívar & Perreira, 2017) and have caused the same concerns: with regard to post-migration, for instance, the issue of the adequacy of resources catering for them. There is a huge gap between the rights they formally enjoy and the administrative and bureaucratic abuse they experience once they reach their destination (Barbulescu & Grugel, 2016). Furthermore, the causes of their mobility are hidden behind their categorization as ‘MENA’ and the homogenizing discourses classifying them (Marco, 2017), thus making the structural conditions behind their mobility invisible (Marco & Gómez, 2020).

Taking this phenomenon as a starting point, this chapter aims to unveil the rights and wrongs of the current protection system for unaccompanied minors in Catalonia through an analysis and discussion of the role of socio-educational intervention in overcoming the discourses and social attitudes, built around prejudice and intolerance, that criminalize them. Specifically, it focuses on the province of Barcelona as one of the most important reception areas that these children and young people, mostly from Morocco and other African countries, choose once they are in the peninsula. The main arguments derive from a study entitled “*Intercultural and interreligious dialogue to promote a culture of peace among young people and unaccompanied foreign minors in Barcelona and Melilla (ReligDialog)*” (RTI2018-095259-B-I00, MCIU/AEI/FEDER, UE), which set out to make migrant minors’ situation visible by identifying their main needs and those of the organizations attending them on a daily basis. Our analyses will offer guidance for government agencies responsible for their care, in addition to contributing to the design of guidelines for organizations working with them.

Background

Fostering a cohesive society cannot be disassociated from the situation of unaccompanied minors, who form an important part of it. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) identifies unaccompanied minors as a vulnerable group with increased risk of exposure to trauma, poverty and lack of education (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005). Protection of their rights, then, is extremely important (Söderqvist, 2013).

These rights are included in the 1978 Spanish Constitution, the European Charter of Children’s Rights, the European Charter of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the Convention on the

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