

VULNERABILITIES IN MIGRATION: THE CASE OF UNACCOMPANIED MIGRANT MINORS IN ITALY¹

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Abstract. Unaccompanied Migrant Minors (UMM) are, perhaps, the most vulnerable among migrants arriving in Europe. That requires institutions to guarantee their safety and adequate reception policies. Since 2012, the presence in Italy has more than quadrupled, raising 23 thousand UMMs at the end of 2023. During the same year, several regulatory interventions were promulgated involving UMMs' reception and placement.

This paper analyses the demographic characteristics, the migratory trajectories, the modes of arrival, the placement and the permanence of the UMMs present in Italy. It mainly refers to data from the Unaccompanied Minors Information System (SIM) managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. It also outlines the strategies implemented to meet UMMs needs. In fact, thanks to Law 47/2017, Italian legislation is considered one of the most advanced. The article briefly describes what has been achieved and what remains to do to meet the most important needs of UMMs. It is based on the assumption that the presence of UMMs in our country is no longer an exceptional phenomenon.

1. The migration experience and its influence on the life course

Each migrant has a personal history, although influenced by contextual factors affecting wider groups. Some of them need to escape from very harsh conditions (pushing factors) others are following a personal dream or pursue an improvement in their own lives (pulling factors). Most migrants enter Europe through regular channels, but these are not accessible to all. Many migrants have to travel irregularly often facing very dangerous journeys. Particularly in these cases, migration can expose people to risks, misery, exploitation and abuse. Such journeys can last a long time and be so intense emotionally as to remain strongly imprinted in those who undertake them. Children can be particularly hit by those experiences, especially if they have travelled alone or have lost their reference adults during the journey. As the journey can take years, most UMMs arrive close to adulthood but many of them left when they were children or barely teenagers. They thus face a triple transition

¹ The article is the result of the joint work of the authors. §1, 2, 6 are attributed to Paola Conigliaro, §3, 5.2, 7 are attributed to Francesca Di Patrizio and §4, 5.1 to Rita Serusi.

(Ismu Foundation, 2019): 1. from adolescence to adulthood; 2. from their origins to a new life in a different cultural and social context; 3. to overcome the traumas experienced before, during or after the journey.

Becoming adult is not necessarily a linear process. It can undergo shocks, jumps or reversals, especially when it occurs during migration. Furthermore, the passage from childhood to adolescence can take on different meanings depending on the cultural context, the social as well as the material condition at the origin. Migration can be a step towards entering into adult life, contributing to the construction of one's identity and outlining one's sense of belonging to a community. Moreover, arriving in a foreign country means learning or interpreting many codes, not only those of the verbal idiom. The effect is that these young people sometimes find themselves defining the contours of their personal identity precisely when they are subjected to conflicting stimuli. For example, the compliance with codes and rules, the definition of belonging, can be subject to antithetical stresses, becoming a further destabilising element for the minor. Therefore, to overcome the challenges of this complex transition they primarily need, while dealing with new codes, to believe in their own capabilities, to trust in others, to have a vision, a perspective for the future that allows them setting goals and expectations. On these elements they can build, or rebuild, a condition of serenity. A successful transition requires appropriate reception, opportunities for integration into the social context, and personalised support.

Also for this purpose Law 47/2017,² has introduced the figure of voluntary guardian that is extremely important for the development of the minor's positive life project. The law also covers some key moments, such as the first reception and the transition to majority.

2. UMMs: Definition, fundamental rights and regulations

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognises the implicit status of children as subjects of law, and not merely as objects of protection and care. Children have general and specific rights: life, health, development, participation, a name, an identity, to be heard, informed and respected, to education, play, family relationships, non-discrimination, international protection, prevention of all forms of exploitation and abuse. The concept of the "Best interests" of the child is paramount in all regulations, decisions and actions concerning the child. According to the Convention, a child is anyone below the age of eighteen.

UNHCR defines "unaccompanied children" those children who have been separated from parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult

² Provisions on Protective Measures for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors.

who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021) includes an explicit reference to unaccompanied migrant minors, recognising them as particularly vulnerable due to their migrant status and the absence of parental figures. Several provisions may concern UMMs, e.g. those relating to asylum and international protection.

Italian legislation, with Law 47/2017, is considered one of the most advanced as regards protecting UMMs, addressing the various aspects that affect them in a coherent and comprehensive manner. According to Italian law, UMMs are non-EU or stateless minors who are present on Italian territory without the assistance and legal representation of their parents or other adults legally responsible for them. They cannot be rejected; they have the right to education and vocational training, health, a special residence permit, protection and placement in shelters for minors, reduced time for identification procedures. They should preferably be fostered by close relatives or a family. Article 11 provides for the appointment of trained voluntary guardians instead of institutional guardians. Article 13 defines accompanying measures to the age of majority and long-term integration measures, for instance the extension the protection system by the Juvenile court up to 21 years, new residence permit for study, work or pending employment purposes. Not all provisions of the law have been implemented due to the absence or late promulgation of some implementing regulations.

3. UMMs: Who they are, how many, how and by which routes they arrive

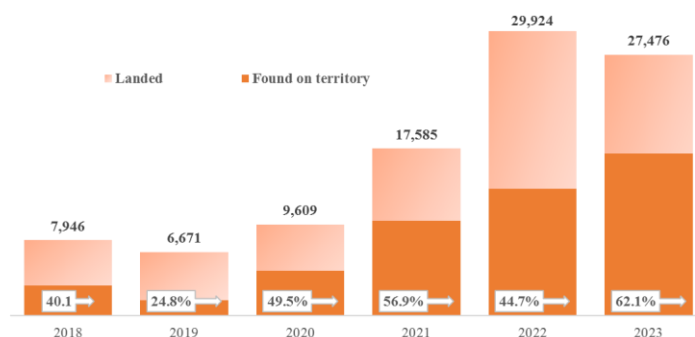
In order to provide effective interventions to support this highly vulnerable population, it is essential knowing the size and characteristics of the phenomenon. The official source referred to in this paper is the National Information System on Unaccompanied Minors (SIM), established by Law 47/2017 and managed by Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. The SIM collects information sent by police headquarters and municipalities on the personal data of minors, their mode of arrival (landed or found on territory),³ placement and stay in Italy (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2023).

The presence of UMMs (stock data at December 31st) is strongly influenced by the events occurred over the years. During the period of the so-called “refugee crisis” (2016-2017) there was an increase in the presence of the UMMs (in 2017 they were over 18,000, 3 times the 2012 data), which declined sharply in the next two years, characterized by Italy-Libya agreements. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the

³ ‘Landed’ means in this case that the entry is associated with a disembarkation event; ‘found on territory’ includes minors found in airport or port areas or on Italian territory (border crossings).

presence increase again (+73.5% in 2021 compared to the previous year). At the end of 2022 there was again a significant rise due largely to the arrival of Ukrainian minors fleeing the war that broke out on 24 February (25% of over 20,000 UMMs). On December 2023 there were 23,226 UMMs on Italian territory (a value well above that recorded in 2017), with the number of Ukrainian decreasing by about a thousand. The trend observed suggests that the presence of UMMs in Italy has become structural. It is not only linked to specific events and emergencies.

Figure 1 – UMMs inflow, by way of access. Years 2018-2023. Absolute and percentage values.



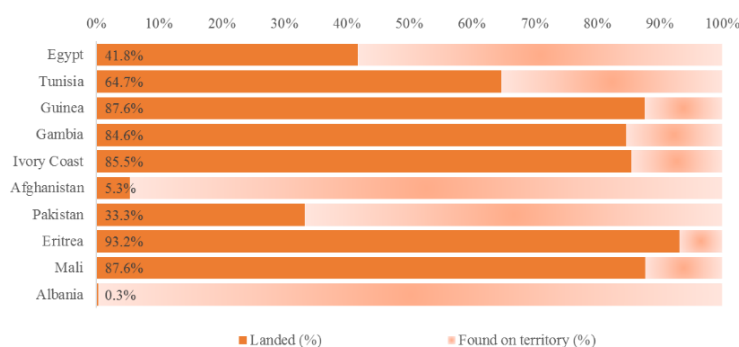
Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

Analysing flow data, available as of 2018, the general trend just described is compounded by different trends depending on the mode of arrival. Figure 1 clearly shows that arrivals by sea are increasing. In the last 6 years about 100 thousand UMMs arrived; those arriving by sea were 57% in 2021 and 62% (17,000) in 2023, when they are more than five times those of 2018. In 2022, despite the increase in land arrivals of minors fleeing the war in Ukraine, landings of UMMs continue to be large (45%). When considering the total landings of migrants on Italian shores (including adults and accompanied minors), UMMs make up 11% in 2023 (since 2016 this share has always been around 13-15%, where in previous years it was around 8%). In the first five months of 2024 arrivals decreased by 41% compared to the same period of 2023, particularly among those landing by sea, even if that remains the most common mode of travel, chosen by 55% of UMMs.

Thinking about the pitfalls of clandestine sea voyages and the number of deaths recorded (Abouelhassan, 2024), even among minors, one realises the huge dangers the UMMs face. In general, UMMs have very specific demographic characteristics, being 97% male and 73% aged 16 or 17. However, considering the country of origin, it is possible to highlight some peculiarities. For example, countries such as Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Eritrea have always had a lower incidence of boys (77%, 85% and 88% respectively in 2023). Ivory Coast and Guinea, on the other hand, are the

countries where the share of younger people under 16 is higher (45.3% and 39.2%). The share of younger people is also higher among those arriving by sea than those found on territory (30.3% vs 21.8%). In 2023 the largest share (18.2%) of UMMs came from Egypt. They are quite 5,000, decreasing on respect to 2022, when they were more than 7,000. Tunisian UMMs were in first place until 2021, they are 14.7% in 2023 (around 4 thousand, +25% compared to 2022). The flow from Guinea quadrupled in a year, and reached 13% of arrivals with around 3,700 minors. Young people from Gambia and Ivory Coast also increase, tripling the former and doubling the latter, with more than 2 thousand arrivals in 2023. In general, all arrivals from other sub-Saharan countries are increasing (in particular from Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Sudan), albeit with less significant absolute values. The inflows from South Asian countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh) continues to decrease, as does from Eastern European countries which in the past were among the first, in particular Albania. In 2022, the escape from the war brought 7,100 Ukrainian UMMs to Italy; they represent 23.8% of the total number of UMMs arriving that year, the second highest number of arrivals per country of origin. In 2023 new entries of Ukrainian minors fell to just over 200.

Figure 2 – UMMsinflow, by way of access for each citizenship. Year 2023. Percentage.



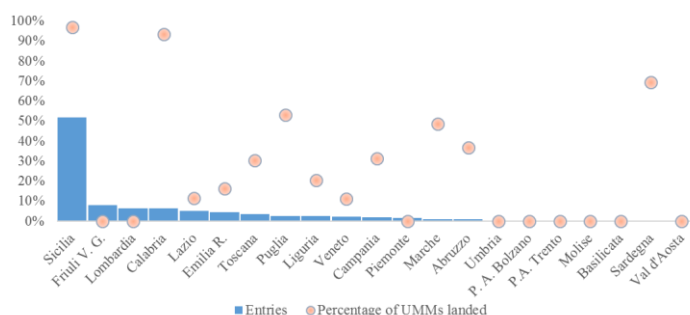
Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

The large group of Egyptian minors choose to cross the Mediterranean Sea in only 42% of cases, while the majority use the Balkan route, increasingly used to enter into the European Union even for UMMs (Fig. 2). This is undoubtedly the main entry route for UMMs from Afghanistan (95% are found at the Friuli border), also chosen largely by those arriving from Pakistan (67%) and to a small extent (35%) by Tunisian minors. A particular case is that of Albanian minors who are often directly accompanied by family members and found in airport areas, seaports or on Italian land territory. Minors from sub-Saharan countries arrive by sea in 80% or more of cases.

4. Impact on the territory

Sicilia, with 13,671 new entries of UMMs in 2023, remains the region with the highest number of arrivals (51%) (Fig. 3). In particular, the region was the first landing territory for more than 80% of minors who arrived by sea in 2023. Nearly 97% of minors arriving in Sicilia were involved in landing events that occurred in several harbours in its territory, mainly in the island of Lampedusa (69% of minors landed in Sicilia), island of Pantelleria (5.4%), Messina (5.3%) and Trapani (4.9%). The main nationalities of minors arriving in Sicilia correspond to the prevailing nationalities of arrivals by sea (Guinea, Tunisia, Gambia, Ivory Coast, and Egypt).

Figure 3 - Total UMMs entries and incidence of arrivals by sea, by region (*). Year 2023. Percentage.



(*). The region is the region of arrival

Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

The second region for number of entries of UMMs in 2023 is Friuli-Venezia Giulia (2,204, or 8%). These are always minors found on the territory and, as seen above, they mainly come from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Egypt, but also from Kosovo and Bangladesh. The third region is Lombardia with 1,892 entries (6.7%). The next regions of arrival are Calabria, with 1,690 minors (6.2%) who arrived mainly by sea (94%); Lazio (1,405 or 5.1%) and Emilia-Romagna (1,215 or 4.4%), where the majority of minors were found on the territory (88% and 84% respectively). Comparing entries in 2023 to 2022, only two regions show increasing values: Sicilia (+ 3,883 UMMs) and Friuli-Venezia Giulia (+351). Both regions are border territories: one for minors crossing the Mediterranean, the other for the UMMs crossing Europe following the Balkan route. All other regions in 2023 recorded a reduction in new entries, certainly for the northern regions, such as Lombardia, Piemonte, Liguria, and Veneto, the decrease is mainly attributable to the sharp reduction in Ukrainian minors, while the reduction in entries in Emilia-Romagna is linked to the decrease in Albanian minors. The other region that

recorded a reduction in the entry of UMMs in 2023 by almost 2 thousand in Calabria where the decrease is mainly in landings.⁴

5. Responding to UMMs' needs

5.1. Hospitality and assistance

In order to provide adequate tools for the protection of minors, in compliance with international conventions and our fundamental values, Law 47/2017 dictates specific provisions that represent the regulatory framework for the reception of UMMs and define a system that distinguishes between a first and a second reception.

The law states the establishment of governmental first reception facilities specifically for minors to meet immediate relief and protection needs. The maximum period of stay in such facilities is set at 30 days. For the continuation of the reception, it is provided that all UMMs are accommodated in second-level facilities of the Reception and Integration System (SAI). These must allow the implementation of individual integration projects and the achievement of working, social, and cultural autonomy, until the attainment of the age of majority (including in the following 6 months), unless extended until the age of 21 years to complete the integration path started. In the event of unavailability of places in the facilities of the SAI network, minors are housed in second-care facilities accredited at the regional or municipal level. The recent D.L.133/2023⁵ provides, in case of momentary unavailability of reception facilities for minors, the temporary placement of the minor - who on a first analysis appears to be older than sixteen - in facilities for adults, in a specific section dedicated to minors, for a period not exceeding ninety days.⁶ There is also a third form of hospitality, foster care, which consists of the service of help and support from a family or a single person: among all the different forms of hospitality, this one comes closest to the *Right of the child to a family*.⁷

In 2023, 59% of the children who entered the country were assigned a place in first reception facilities as their first placement, while 31% of minors were taken in directly by second reception (Fig. 4). In this first stage of reception, minors housed with private individuals approached 10%; in 2022, foster care placement with

⁴ Presumably due to the 26 February 2023 boatwreck off the Ionian coast of Calabria (known as the Cutro disaster).

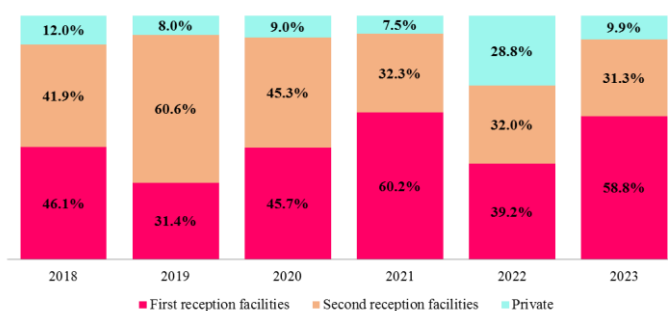
⁵ "Urgent provisions on immigration and international protection, as well as for the support of security policies and the functionality of the Ministry of the Interior", converted with amendments by L.176/2023.

⁶ As of July 1st 2024, 120 minors were reported to be housed in 20 adult facilities.

⁷ Law n. 184/83 regulates the adoption and custody of children.

families was about 29% due to the weight of Ukrainian children who were almost all placed with families (97%). Nearly 70% of minors who arrive in Italy by sea are placed in first reception facilities, this percentage drops to 40% for minors found in the territory.

Figure 4 - UMMs by type of reception facilities of first placement. 2018 - 2023. Percentage.



Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

The first reception system dedicated to UMMs remains fragmented in different organizational forms. Only 7% of the minors who arrived in 2023 were placed in government first reception facilities specific for minors, 7% were placed in temporary facilities activated by the Prefects while and 45% of the minors, their first home was in reception facilities accredited by municipalities and regions or in emergency and temporary facilities. In 2023, the average length of stay of minors in first reception facilities was 103 days, well beyond the maximum time stated by law.

The analysis of the placement of minors in second-care facilities also highlights some critical points. The network of the SAI, which should represent the privileged placement for the second reception of minors, despite having registered a gradual expansion in recent years, still has a limited capacity and houses a very small part of UMMs (just over 6,000 places available; Ministero dell'Interno-Anci, 2023). Most of the minors in the second reception are housed in accredited facilities at the municipal or regional level with different specializations, but those with the largest presence of minors are the Social and Educational Communities (13% of minors) and Family Communities (5%). Differently from the SAI system, these facilities often only provide the minor with room and board and just in a few cases they offer activities and services specifically dedicated to the integration of the minor. It should also be noted that in 2023, the average length of stay in second-care facilities was about 4 months. It is a very short time to implement interventions aimed at integrating and accompanying the minor in the transition to adulthood, towards his or her autonomy.

Indeed, the placement of UMMs is not grounded on a single system, but rather on an uncoordinated set of different types of reception places. This produces evident management difficulties for local institutions and has an undeniable impact on the predictability and linearity of the child's path to protection and inclusion. This undermines fairness of treatment and opportunity and have a destabilising effect on minors, operators and the institutions themselves.

5.2. Supporting roles: the figure of the voluntary guardian

Law 47/2017, in order to pursue the supreme interest of the minor more incisively, introduced the figure of the voluntary guardian. This role has so far been the prerogative of institutional figures (social worker or the Mayor of the municipality in which the child is placed). The voluntary guardian, defined as “*l'asse intorno al quale ruota l'intero sistema italiano di protezione e accoglienza dei minori stranieri non accompagnati*”⁸ (Di Pascale and Cuttitta, 2019, p. 13) is a private citizen, appropriately trained and certificated, who exercises the legal representation of the minor. The guardian represents and assists the child in all his/her choices, in compliance with his/her abilities, inclinations and aspirations; ensures access to rights without any discrimination; promotes the psychophysical well-being of the child; follows the paths of education and integration; monitors the conditions of reception, safety and protection; administers any assets. The territorial distribution of voluntary guardians is uneven and not always linked to the actual presence of minors. Some regions, since the promulgation of the Law, have been more active than others in launching training courses: among them Lazio, Liguria, Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna and Campania. Training activities decreased over time, drastically reducing during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. As of December 31st 2022, there were 3,783 voluntary guardians listed in the registers of Juvenile Courts, an increase compared to December 2018 (3,029), the first year in which voluntary guardian was established; in the last year, they grew in particular in Piemonte and Liguria (Agià, 2023).

In 2022, half of the guardians are concentrated in 5 regions: Piemonte (504), Sicilia (457), Lazio (440), Lombardia (375) and Campania (290). The highest number of matches in 2022 occurred in Sicilia and Calabria (among the regions with the highest presence of UMMs in 2022). However in these two regions, as well as in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna and Lombardia, there is a shortage of

⁸ [Our translation] The axis around which the entire Italian system of protection and reception of unaccompanied foreign minors revolves.

guardians, compared to the presence of UMMs⁹: the average number of UMMs per guardian is respectively 8.6, 11.8, 10.1, 7.9 and 7.7.

6. The relevance of the time factor for future outcomes

In 2023, 24,375 minors left the hospitality and assistance system: 47.3% due to coming of age and 41.5% due to voluntary leaving. The remaining 11.2% of exit events can be attributed to other reasons such as foster care, tracing of parents or legally responsible adults, assisted voluntary return, relocation, and return home of Ukrainian minors. Voluntary leaving occurs more frequently among those arriving by sea (48.6% vs. 32.5% those found on territory), but above all, it is at the beginning of the reception process that there is the greatest risk of UMMs voluntary leaving. The first 4 months turn out to be crucial: 73% of leaving occurred during this period are due to voluntary leaving. In case of voluntary leaving, the system loses all information about the minor and any ability to intervene in his/her support.

6.1. Coming of age

Reaching the age of majority, the most important guarantees provided for minors cease to apply: the prohibition of refoulement, the right to be placed in appropriate facilities, protection and special procedures for requesting it, education, health. Many UMMs come of age within a few months of entering the reception system. Most of them (64%), had been in the system for less than one year before coming of age, 30% for between one and two years and only 6% for more than two years. The shorter the period of reception, the more difficult it is to build a solid project for remaining in the country, as shown by research on the education and training pathways of UMMs conducted in Milan (Bonomi and Terzera, 2023). Also to overcome this hurdle, the law provides that an UMM who has reached the age of majority may pursue a personal development project until the age of 21. This option, known as “*prosieguo amministrativo*”,¹⁰ requires submitting a project assessed and approved by the Juvenile Court. From the age of 18 years of UMMs, legal guardians, whether institutional or voluntary, are no longer responsible for them. Nevertheless, they may play an important role in creating an effective support network for the young adult, both before and after his/her coming of age. Indeed, it is widely recognised that the transition to this new legal status is a delicate moment.

⁹ Article 11 of Law 47/2017 states that the individual guardian may “assume guardianship of an UMM or several minors, in the maximum number of three, unless there are specific and relevant reasons”.

¹⁰ i.e. administrative continuation - Article 13 Law 47/2017.

At international level, several initiatives exist to support young adults, formerly UMMs. Some projects aim to define and train supportive figures (peers or experienced adults) to act as mentors or social guardians for young people recently of age (Bracalenti and Landi, 2023). They facilitate the creation and consolidation of meaningful relationships, compensating for the lack of social capital, supporting the recognition and development of the young adults' capabilities promoting their self-fulfilment and well-being.

In Italy, there are two National measures for the UMMs' autonomy, promoted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. The first, "Percorsi", is a programme for socio-occupational integration of UMMs and young people up to 24, who have arrived as UMMs. An individual grant provides support services for the enhancement and development of skills, social and labour insertion and orientation towards autonomy. The measure includes six-month traineeships that can be extended for a further six months. Between 2016 and 2020, approximately 2,000 socio-work integration paths were completed. A new call for tenders ('Pathways 4') for 750 dowries closed in June 2024. The second is PUOI (*Protezione Unita a Obiettivo Integrazione* – i.e. protection and integration), project targeting foreign nationals, including UMMs, under international protection, in the framework of the Global Compact on Refugees. The cooperation between the reception system, companies and employment services allowed for the definition of customised integration paths, which included job orientation and a six-month traineeship, as well as additional support measures. Each integration pathway was financed by an individual grant. 3,000 projects were launched between May 2019 and May 2023.

7. Final considerations

The arrivals and the presence of UMMs in Italy have increased over the years, regardless of specific or emergency situations. In particular, arrivals by sea are increasing and are characterised by a greater presence of the youngest and of minors who leave the reception system before reaching the age of 18. On the other hand, the reception system, while showing improvements, is too often unprepared to deal with what has become a structural phenomenon. There are evident organisational and management difficulties, particularly in the areas with the highest number of UMM arrivals (Sicilia and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, but also Calabria). Even the great added value of volunteer guardians is diminished by an inadequate territorial distribution of them and a network of support services that is late in being organised. All this has an impact on the predictability and linearity of the child protection and inclusion pathway, also leading to strong inequalities between children in relation to the opportunities they have the chance to encounter. This is compounded by the urgency

to intervene competently and effectively, as the time before the child comes on age and leaves the statutory protection system is very short. Although the hosting system provided by the law is considered excellent, further efforts need to be made to achieve a functional network capable to respond to the specific and particular needs of UMMs. This, of course, requires an accurate knowledge of the phenomenon, which is useful and necessary for all stakeholders, but especially for policy makers. In order to better identify the needs of UMMs, it is necessary to use, in addition to the data available in the SIM, other data sources (e.g. the Student Register of the Ministry of Education and Merit, the Residence Permit Archive of the Ministry of the Interior) that allow a multidimensional knowledge of the phenomenon and a longitudinal reading of the pathways taken by UMMs.

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