

Quick Guide to unaccompanied minors

Nearly 90,000 unaccompanied children sought asylum in Europe in 2015, fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East and Africa to reach a place of safety. According to European Union data, 13 per cent of the applicants were younger than 14, travelling without their parents to the EU. Statistics agency Eurostat's figures refer specifically to children who have had their age established through age assessment procedures, meaning EU states accepted the minor's declared age. The number of unaccompanied minors has quadrupled since 2014.

More than 90 per cent of the minors travelling without a parent or guardian were boys and over half of them were between 16 and 17 years old. Half of the total were Afghan minors, while the second largest group were Syrians, at 16 per cent. Sweden received the most applications from unaccompanied minors (35,250), followed by Germany, Hungary and Austria. In 2016 just 3,175 unaccompanied minors reached the UK and claimed asylum: 65% of these were aged 16-17.

There have been repeated calls for the UK government to accept children from the camps in northern France who have relatives in the UK. Initially the government refused to consider taking any direct from Europe. Then, after considerable pressure and the [Dubs Amendment](#) in Parliament, it said it would take up to 3,000 from the camps in Calais and Dunkirk. The process was so slow and cumbersome that only 350 had been brought to the UK by February 2017, at which point the government announced that the Dubs scheme had been abandoned. By then the Jungle in Calais had been bulldozed, and all the remaining residents dispersed across France.

In January, Europol estimated that at least 10,000 child refugees have gone missing since arriving in Europe. It is feared many have become victims of exploitation by criminal gangs, including human traffickers who force them into prostitution, child labour and the drugs trade.

If those arriving in the UK are deemed by the Home Office to be under the age of 18, they will be in the care of the local authority where they are placed. The local authority has a duty to support them until the age of 18 irrespective of their immigration status. Often the Home Office disputes their age, sometimes disregarding comprehensive independent age assessments. Those under 16 will generally be placed in foster care. If you are interested in fostering one of the many asylum-seeking children who need a good home, check out the Christian charity [Home for Good](#). Home for Good's vision is a 'home for every child who needs one in the UK'. Those aged over 16 are generally placed in shared flats or supervised accommodation.

As with adults, unaccompanied minors have to endure asylum interviews to determine whether they have a right to stay in the UK. Most are granted temporary leave to remain for three years or until they reach 17½, by which time a decision on their claim may well have been made. At age 18 most will face a change in status. Some will be granted indefinite leave to remain. Others will have their temporary leave extended pending a decision. If their claim is refused, they will no longer be eligible for any form of benefits, and will be liable to be detained in an Immigration Removal Centre or removed from the country – if the Home Office can obtain travel documents for them, which is often not the case. If the documents cannot be obtained, they will be left destitute in the UK.

The difficulties that these vulnerable young people face is highlighted by the 2015 report by the Children's Society, [Not Just a Temporary Fix](#). Another very informative report, from the office of the Children's Commissioner, [What's Going to Happen Tomorrow?](#), raises many concerns about our treatment of unaccompanied minors.