

“You just have zero  
idea – without support  
it’s impossible.”

# Challenges for unaccompanied children in Lower Saxony: Recommendations for policy and practice

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**Family**  
for every child



**Flüchtlingsrat**  
Niedersachsen e.V.



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# 1 Introduction

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Among refugees, unaccompanied children are one of the most vulnerable groups. Thousands of children and young people are forced to leave their homes and move across borders. UNICEF estimates that 9,000 unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) reached southern European countries in 2019.<sup>1</sup> Separated from their families at a young age, they are exposed to incomprehensible dangers on their arduous journey to Europe. The dangers that many unaccompanied children are exposed to include child trafficking, sexual abuse and economic or criminal exploitation.<sup>2</sup> Once they have settled in a new country, they face the dual challenge of identity building as a young person without their family and their former network, and processing the (potentially traumatising) experiences they have lived through.<sup>3</sup> International frameworks, like the EU-directive on reception of applicants for international protection, highlight the safeguarding of children and their rights. Nonetheless, unaccompanied children are often denied access to basic rights and services because important decisions are often based on policies of border closure and deterrence within the European Union.<sup>4,5</sup> Yet questions of safety, protection and care are extremely relevant to young refugees. This is the motivation behind this research being conducted to gain new insights on the situation of unaccompanied children in Germany.

The area of work concerning unaccompanied children on the move grew after the numbers of unaccompanied children arriving in Germany increased significantly in 2015-16.<sup>6</sup> The unprecedented number of unaccompanied children arriving in those years led to an increase in societal attention and caused an expansion of capacities in care and support structures. After the increase of

unaccompanied children arriving in Germany in 2015 and 2016 (35,939 UASC claimed asylum in 2016), the numbers decreased significantly to 2,232 in 2020.<sup>7</sup> Reasons for this decrease are at least partly to be found in EU's policy of border closure – prominently the EU-Turkey deal in 2016 – that renders flight routes even more dangerous for unaccompanied children or prevents them from reaching the EU altogether.

In Germany, unaccompanied children who are registered are taken care of by youth welfare services. In 2019, the total number of UASC and young adult refugees in the care of the youth welfare services was 38,926. This number consisted of 14,916 unaccompanied children and 24,010 young adults.<sup>8</sup> The two most prevalent countries of origin in 2020 were Afghanistan (31.5 per cent) and Syria (22.9 per cent). The majority of UASC who arrived in Germany in 2020 were male, with only 21.8 per cent female.<sup>9</sup> Many unaccompanied children are 15 years or older once they reach Germany.<sup>10</sup> Knowing that most UASC reached Germany in 2015-16, it becomes apparent that a lot of former UASC are now aged 18 or above. Their situation will be considered alongside that of unaccompanied children.

The study's research focus is on the integration of children on the move. It aims to gain insights into the obstacles preventing and the successes of the integration of unaccompanied children. Focusing on the socio-cultural aspects of integration, the research wants to give space to the needs and perspectives of young refugees. The findings aim to inform policy as well as to support the development of practical guidance to change the situation of young refugees for the better. The understanding of the term 'integration' will be discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Radjenovic 2021: 1

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*: 6

<sup>3</sup> f. von Grönheim, Paulini and Seeberg 2021: 8

<sup>4</sup> European Parliament/European Council 2013

<sup>5</sup> Radjenovic 2021: 6

<sup>6</sup> cf. von Grönheim et al. 2021: 3

<sup>7</sup> BumF 2020a: 4

<sup>8</sup> Deutscher Bundestag 2020: 8

<sup>9</sup> BAMF 2021: 22

<sup>10</sup> Deutscher Bundestag 2020: 79; BumF 2020a:4

This study is part of a wider research project by Family for Every Child on the integration and reintegration of children on the move between the Middle East and Europe. Consultations were conducted through three member organisations, namely METAdrasi in Greece, Naba'a in Lebanon and Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen in Germany.

## Methodological approach

The research consists of three consultation types aimed at three different target groups: experts in the field, caregivers, and current as well as former unaccompanied children. This approach allows us to examine the topic from multiple perspectives and, most importantly, to include the voices and experiences of young refugees themselves.

Six interviews were conducted with experts in the field. Four interviewees were representatives of NGOs (Johanna Karpenstein from Bundesfachverband für unbegleitete minderjährige Flüchtlinge – BumF (the Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors)) and TN05 from Jugendliche ohne Grenzen (Youth without Borders) and refugee councils (Philipp Millius – Refugee Council Thüringen and Gerlinde Becker – Refugee Council Niedersachsen). Two interview partners (TN03 and TN06) work in youth welfare facilities in Lower Saxony. The interview partners were given the choice to appear with their name or stay anonymous.

Next, practitioners in the direct care of unaccompanied children from different parts of Lower

Saxony were addressed through group discussions, giving them the opportunity to share and discuss their experiences of caregiving. Two discussions were held with a total of 10 caregivers working in living groups for unaccompanied children. Another discussion was held with 4 guardians of unaccompanied children.

Finally, we conducted two group discussions with young people who came to Germany as unaccompanied children. 4 young people took part in the first group discussion, 5 in the second. Most participants were males, with only one girl in the first group discussion. While one person only arrived in Germany in 2020, most of the respondents have been living in Germany for between two and five years. The average age of the participants in the first group discussion was 17, while in the second group discussion most participants were in their early twenties. The names of participants have been changed to pseudonyms in order to maintain their anonymity.

In this report we will present the findings of the consultations, pointing out and contrasting the different angles that the consultation of experts, practitioners and young refugees highlighted. The findings will be complemented with results of other research and publications in the field. We will further point out difficulties in the situation of unaccompanied children and young adult refugees and present insights and claims on the changes needed in policies and practice.

## 2. Defining integration

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In order to consider both the successes and the obstacles related to integration, the term 'integration' has to be defined. Within the context of this project, integration is defined as:

*"The process of a separated child settling in a new location on what is anticipated to be a permanent basis, in order to receive protection and care and to find a sense of belonging in all spheres of life."*

While acknowledging different dimensions of integration, the study's main focus is on the social/cultural aspects of integration. The categories that were developed in order to analyse social/cultural dimensions include social cohesion, (access to) services and support structures, care dynamics, and young people's participation and expectations. Although not included in the initial focus of the wider research, the category of legal dimensions was introduced taking into account that the legal situation of young unaccompanied refugees is a significant factor that affects the way the young people are able to settle in and – as the definition suggests – find a sense of belonging in their new environment.

As this report focuses on the German context, it is important to acknowledge the critical discussion of the term 'integration' in Germany. This is because the term integration is often used in the sense of assimilation, thus imagining a rather static set of rules and norms that immigrants need to adapt to. Contrary to that assumption, we understand integration as a shared process of responsibility, that takes into consideration the lived realities of all persons. In our understanding it takes the host society to create good living conditions and enable the participation for all. When using the term, it is thus necessary to clarify what is meant by it; in this case it is clarified through the working definition of this research project.

## 3. Social/cultural dimensions

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### 3.1 Societal discourse and unaccompanied and separated children

To approach the situation of unaccompanied children in Germany, it seems reasonable to start by discussing the wider societal discourses around migration and refugees and their impact on the integration of UASC. A general observation on discourses on migration in Germany- as in other European countries- is the growth of right-wing attitudes and media attention on them, which affects public attitudes as well as policy decisions. One way in which this discursive change becomes visible is through refugees being increasingly depicted as a danger to social cohesion.<sup>11</sup> This tendency was strongly emphasised in all interviews. The experts interviewed illustrated that the swing to the right has had massive impacts on the refugees and their prospects of integration:

*"The way the social discourse has shifted so massively to the right and fewer and fewer people are arriving, the situation in which people are arriving is simply much more difficult and stressful. Of course, this has a massive impact on successful integration."*

**(Philipp Millius, Refugee Council Thüringen)**

Discourses that construct young – and specifically young male – refugees as potentially criminal and dangerous negatively affect the realities of the young people who come to Germany. Several interview respondents reported that the experience of discrimination and racism increases significantly and shapes the everyday life of young refugees:

*"So the institutional racism that one finds is particularly clear there and is also evident in other places. Yes, and to show such a general suspicion towards minors and young people leads, I think, simply to the fact that one [...] excludes such a form of belonging and self-image from the outset. And that's where I see the biggest obstacles."*

**(Johanna Karpenstein, BumF)**

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<sup>11</sup> BumF/Schwarz 2021: 4

This tendency towards rejection of refugees is contrasted with a discourse about their potential usefulness in light of a shortage of skilled workers in Germany. According to the BumF “[s]ince 2015, the German asylum and residence law has been increasingly dominated by the discussion on the shortage of skilled workers.”<sup>12</sup>

The dominant societal and political discourses not only impact the overall experience of young refugees but also have effects in specific fields that affect them:

*“What, I believe, has been particularly reflected in our work is that an actual image of those in need of protection, especially minors, [...] has simply shifted insofar as minors, especially male refugees, have been criminalised on the basis of individual acts [...] and this has certainly allowed many, many legal changes to be legitimised in the end, I would say in a political discourse. [...] This talk about young refugees [...] is finding its way into social work and in the din of these various legal changes [...] social work has also changed.*

**(Gerlinde Becker, Refugee Council Niedersachsen)**

One example of this is legal practice which is getting more restrictive as the interviews of the experts from NGOs and refugee councils illustrate. According to them, legal restrictions in the last few years – such as the restrictions on family reunifications and the declining acceptance rates of asylum seekers – can be seen as direct results of the general shift in the political discourse about migration. A striking illustration of the increasingly restrictive legal practice is the acceptance rates for unaccompanied children in Germany. While 93.2 per cent were given refugee status in 2015 the numbers have fallen dramatically to 58.7 per cent in 2020.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it can be stated that societal sentiments have a direct, apparent effect on the practice of jurisprudence.

Philipp Millius pointed out the interdependence between societal discourse and legal restrictions:

*“It is precisely these tightened laws that have a massive influence on the situation of refugees themselves and the question of how they arrive, how they secure their stay, but also on the discursive level. [On this level] they fuel a completely different social mood, which, so to speak, lays the breeding ground for racist agitation and violence against refugees and immigrants.”*

**(Philipp Millius, Refugee Council Thüringen)**

The experts repeatedly reported that dominant discourses also influence the attitudes of those who work directly with young refugees. One interviewee described that the fact that unaccompanied children need care and support is often not acknowledged. Instead UASC are confronted with the assumption: “Yes, they have already fled so far. They can easily manage all that on their own.” (TN06). The authors of a study on transitions of young refugees by the University of Applied Science and Arts Hildesheim (2021) come to the same conclusion and state that the forced strategies to survive on their own that young unaccompanied refugees developed during their flight “are equated with independence in the sense of everyday practical skills and thus associated with supposedly lower needs and correspondingly lower benefits are justified”.<sup>14</sup>

To counter hostile societal attitudes, the interviewed caregivers called for an openness in society as a prerequisite for young refugees’ integration. Johanna Karpenstein from the Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (BumF) called for a wider understanding of the integration of young unaccompanied refugees as a task for society as a whole and explained:

*“The moment you slow them down like this, throw rocks in their way and criminalise them... and to then be surprised that criminality also happens when there is a lack of perspective. It is so absurd that it is so obvious to say: exactly, we are talking about young people and strengthening their prospects is a task for society as a whole.”*

**(Johanna Karpenstein, BumF)**

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<sup>11</sup> BumF/Schwarz 2021: 4

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.: 2

<sup>13</sup> BumF 2020a:4f

<sup>14</sup> von Grönheim et al. 2021: 9



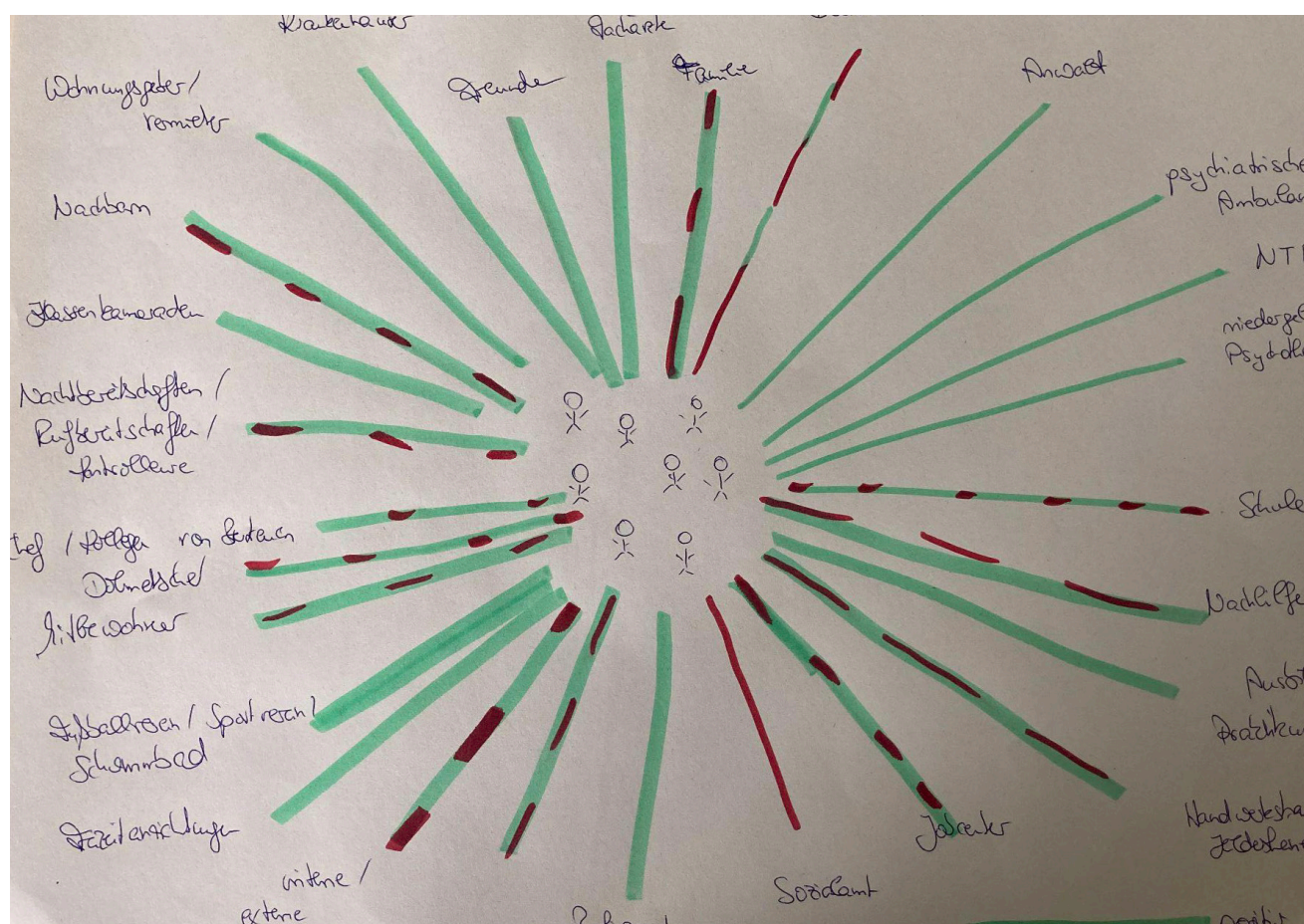
### 3.2 Support structures and access for unaccompanied and separated children

In Germany unaccompanied children are taken care of by the youth welfare services. Upon their arrival the children and young people are temporarily taken into care by Youth Welfare Offices and are looked after and cared for by the Child and Youth Welfare Services. This puts them on an equal legal footing with children and young people without a refugee background who have to be taken into care.<sup>14</sup> This legal equalisation of unaccompanied children with German youths through the social legislation (SGB VIII) is generally highly acclaimed. The Association for

Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (BumF) – the main lobby organisation for the rights of unaccompanied children in Germany – even calls these legal rulings “a ray of hope among the social codes”.<sup>15</sup> In 2019, 14,916 unaccompanied children and 24,010 young adults were housed and/or taken care of by youth welfare services.<sup>17</sup> The predominant form of housing for young unaccompanied refugees is in facilities managed by the youth welfare services. A minority is housed within foster families.<sup>18</sup>

The holistic care of UASC provided through the welfare system is referred to by the experts and caregivers interviewed as generally good, as it provides an appropriate reception for young people arriving in the country. Youth welfare institutions who

Figure 1 The multitude of relevant actors, TNE10



<sup>14</sup> von Grönheim et al. 2021: 9

<sup>15</sup> ibid.: 6

<sup>16</sup> BumF 2020b: 4

<sup>17</sup> Deutscher Bundestag 2020: 8

<sup>18</sup> BumF 2020a: 41



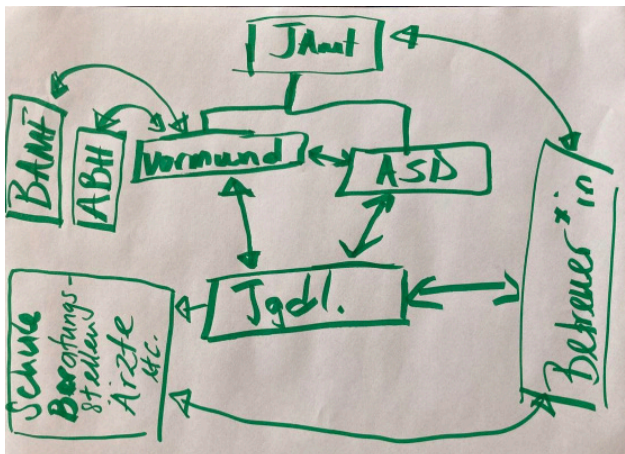


Figure 2 Network of care including Caregivers, Guardian, Youth welfare office and (federal) immigration office, TNE05



Figure 3 Network of care from young person: school, flat mates, friends and hobbies, TNJ01

house and care for UASC are responsible for all the spheres of these young people's lives. They ideally provide a safe environment for UASC and support them in settling in, learning German and going to school. In the care of the youth welfare services, young refugees should be able to develop prospects and goals for their future. In the best case this care should enable young people to gain competencies in order to be able to live independently afterwards. The interviewed caregivers explained how, especially in the beginning, it is essential to build a relationship of trust with the UASC and provide orientation. Asked about the main issues in the caregiving of young refugees, one caregiver pointed out the young refugees' lack of orientation when they first arrive in Germany:

*"Well, I see that there is a very high level of disorientation, [...] that is quite outstanding, the disorientation. Fear."*

(TNE09)

Caregivers, i.e. social workers charged with the caregiving within youth welfare institutions, are thereby central to the initial settling in of UASC, as they provide safety and initial orientation. They are the first contacts that the young refugees have in Germany.

*"The young person comes to us and the first person he or she knows are the caregivers. They don't know the bureaucracy around them yet. [...] When it [the bureaucracy] is then let loose on our young people, you notice that there is a bit of panic."*

(TNE05)

The lack of orientation was also described by the young people themselves. One interviewee stated that all aspects of life are extremely overwhelming in the beginning and that he would have not been able to handle it without support:

*"To come to Germany for the first time at the beginning, everything is still new. The language is difficult, the culture is difficult, you have to integrate and the entire system is different. You have no prior knowledge of it and you don't know exactly whether you could stay here or not. It's all hard to plan. You just have zero idea, without support it's impossible."*

(Omar)

In the group discussions held with caregivers, the respondents were asked to draw a network map of all actors and services that care for the young refugees.

Apart from caregivers and youth welfare offices that were already mentioned above, there are several more actors relevant to the caregiving of UASCs, which are illustrated in Figure 2. Firstly, the guardian: every unaccompanied child in Germany is assigned a legal guardian. There are different types of guardianships. The official guardianship is prevalent in relation to guardians in associations and voluntary guardians. The guardian is legally responsible for the minor and plays a key role with respect to asylum procedure or any residence regulations. Asylum claims by unaccompanied children have to be submitted by the guardian.

The immigration office and the federal office for migration and refugees are two key actors concerning the residence and asylum status of young refugees. Furthermore, youth welfare offices play a central role for the young people. They are responsible for the safeguarding of the UASC and allocate resources for their care. While the youth welfare offices' position is to act in the interest of child welfare, immigration offices represent the residence and asylum laws.

Further, access to general services like health services, counselling and education has to be mentioned. Access to school, higher education and work is key to the success of UASC in Germany. Not only does it enable them to pursue their goals and become a part of societal structures, but it is in many cases relevant to their residential prospects. This factor will be further analysed below.

One aspect that was emphasised by almost all interviewees and especially by the young people themselves was friends and leisure activities such as sport clubs. Figure 3 shows a map drawn by a young person who came to Germany as an unaccompanied child. This map just shows four aspects: friends, hobbies, flat share/roommates and school.

Compared to the maps drawn by the caregivers the young people's maps focused on the aspects relevant to their living realities. It shows that the complex legal system, with its multitude of different actors

and institutions responsible for the UASC's life, is not very significant in their everyday life. Instead, a daily routine based around friends, school and hobbies demonstrates that UASC are still teenagers, despite all their experiences and the challenges they face.

Concerning the access to society in young peoples' everyday life, aspects like clubs, sports or religion are described as focal points by the caregivers. The informal networks of family, friends and possibly the community of their country of origin are also important. Lastly, school and work are key door openers that not only help young refugees to get in contact with other people but enable them to build an independent life for themselves. It was emphasised by caregivers and interviewed experts that the young refugees need a social network that supports them and grants them further access into society.

The importance of a supportive social environment in the young refugees' daily life was pointed out as well by the study by von Grönheim, Paulini and Seeberg on the transition of young refugees. Contact with other young people through hobbies like sports or other activities gives young refugees the possibility to make friends and find similarities with other young people. Hobbies are thus not only a great opportunity for young refugees to get access into society, but also help structure their everyday life and provide positive experiences.<sup>19</sup>

In the following sections we will further examine certain aspects of the support structures and access to society for unaccompanied children. The results of our consultation will be presented as well as claims and recommendations that were developed based on the findings.

### 3.2.1 Qualifications and education of care providers

Regarding the support of unaccompanied children, a peculiarity lies in the fact that they are subject to both the youth welfare law and the asylum/residence

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<sup>19</sup> von Grönheim et al. 2021:34, 93

law.<sup>20</sup> Their legal situation is thus quite complex and obscure. Few actors are well versed in both areas. And still the complexity of UASC's legal situation is increasing due to the evergrowing number of newly enacted laws concerning refugees.<sup>21</sup> This leads to a situation where a lot of practitioners are not familiar with the specifications of the latest laws and the legal specificities of UASC. This holds true for caregivers and guardians as well as employees in youth welfare offices and immigration departments.

The lack of knowledge about the legal situation of UASC can even get dangerous when looking at the legal guardians, as they are the ones making decisions for the young people's legal situation. Johanna Karpenstein illustrated how misinformation leads to decisions that actually harm the legal prospects of the young people:

*"And what we then observed a lot is that such narratives as, for example, these [...] 'Afghanistan is safe' narratives were reflected in the concrete work of, for example, guardians, simply because it was no longer possible to differentiate what is a fact, what is a legal regulation, what is a discourse? Instead, the clinging to any kind of information led to the fact that the young people were supported in a way that was also based on very repressive, hostile discourses. This has meant, for example, that asylum applications for young Afghans have no longer been submitted, because it has been assumed that this makes no sense anyway."*

**(Johanna Karpenstein, BumF)**

She traced the decisions made by guardians not only back to misinformation but also to negative societal discourses. It is therefore preferable for caregivers and guardians to be professionally qualified so that they can counteract these discourses.

Another specificity emerges concerning the situation of private guardians. While they are usually only in charge of a few young people, or only one, their resources are still limited as they are voluntary guardians. The guardians interviewed expressed that

they only received a little training and sometimes felt overwhelmed when faced with the complex situation of the young people they were caring for:

*"And then there is the question of this experiential knowledge that you gain. It changes all the time. So I don't know what the current legal situation is or what the political situation is. And how do we evaluate that? And how do we deal with it?"*

**(TNE11)**

This does not only include the legal situation but also all aspects of the young peoples' lives. In a reader published by the German children's emergency fund in 2020, the authors state that the qualifications of guardians are not sufficiently regulated.<sup>22</sup> The guardians interviewed clearly voiced a need for more exchange and networking, which they cannot organise themselves due to limited capacities. The task of organising networking should therefore be carried out by the youth welfare offices.

Another interviewee pointed out that the specific situation of UASC has to be known by all actors involved in the caregiving. He emphasised the importance of qualifications not only for direct caregivers but also employees in immigration and welfare offices:

*"That is also another topic that is also of high importance and actually what the Refugee Council and also the BumF are doing: to educate the authorities and the people, what it actually means, what do the young people need? [...] The education about which clientele it is actually about, that is really essential in order to be able to give adequate help and support at all. And also to counteract such distorted views."*

**(TN06)**

This is also in line with the children's emergency fund's demand to install mandatory training for all social workers and administration secretaries.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Büchner, Hinz 2018

<sup>21</sup> González Méndez de Vigo, Karpenstein 2019: 21

<sup>22</sup> Rieger, González Méndez de Vigo 2019: 64

<sup>23</sup> ibid.



Besides the legal situation of UASC, a lack of expertise and awareness is also seen in relation to practitioners' sensitivity towards racism and adequate capabilities to deal with trauma. Philipp Millius from the Refugee Council Thüringen pointed out that caregivers and guardians often lack an empathy and a basic understanding of the reality and actions of the oftentimes-traumatised young people:

*"All too often, there is too little understanding of why the young person always comes home late during the week or things like this. [...] Or why the young person behaves the way he or she sometimes does, simply because they are under a lot of pressure, have a lot of crappy experiences to deal with and often have the feeling that their paths are being blocked or that their options for action are limited. This sometimes leads to a certain despair and may also cause problematic behaviour [...] Sometimes there is simply a lack of trauma-sensitive understanding of how to deal with such things in counselling."*

(Philipp Millius, Refugee Council Thüringen)

He also called for a stronger awareness of racism and discrimination, in order for professionals to reflect on their own prejudices and acknowledge young people's experiences of discrimination:

*"Especially in daily dealings with young people, racism and the experience of racism also play a role in the way professionals deal with young people. It can simply be paternalistic behaviour or that certain things are simply perceived as racist and where there are perhaps opposing views also from professionals. Definitely, there is still a certain need for catching up and training here."*

(Philipp Millius, Refugee Council Thüringen)

### 3.2.2 Maintaining of support structures

While the youth welfare system generally is a holistic system of care and appraised as such by the experts and caregivers interviewed, it was pointed out that the specific expertise and networks that stem from the experience of working with UASC are not present in all areas. Instead, the structures available for support differ in different places and regions. It further became

clear that all key actors need to neatly collaborate together to provide customised holistic care for young people.

For this study, group discussions were conducted in two different areas in Lower Saxony with caregivers working in two youth welfare institutions. Both institutions have long-term experience of working with unaccompanied children and are specialised in the care of UASC. The caregivers pointed out repeatedly that their facilities can rely on a good network which they build up over their long experience in caring for unaccompanied children. One caregiver drew a comparison to when the institution started working with unaccompanied children several years ago and pointed out the development of a good network in their city:

*"So when we started in 2014 or 13, there was nothing, really nothing at all. There were no schools, no language courses, no general doctors who would take them [the UASC]. So we searched forever. [...] They simply didn't want to treat them. And since then, it's just because so many of them arrived. A lot has changed. That's why I would say that there is now an excellent network in [name of city]."*

(TNE10)

In one of the group discussions, a caregiver in a more rural area pointed out the importance of gathering different expertise in the caregivers' network to be able to support the young people in all spheres. He also called for an acceptance that caregivers cannot do everything themselves, but should instead rely on the expertise of others in specific areas:

*"And then there is the caregiver and the caregiver must of course have a wide network. Yes, the wider the network, the better [...] I only have to know where I have to go to find the experts. Because I know that I can't do everything on my own. That actually helps young people directly."*

(TNE01)

One expert who works in a youth welfare facility pointed out how the access of the young people they care for is dependent on the facility's ongoing engagement with all actors involved. He described

how once certain boundaries are established, the young people's integration in certain activities is no longer a question:

*"As we have been working with UASC here for a while now, we have contributed to the fact that the entire infrastructure has adapted a bit. As far as school, hobbies, sports clubs and so on are concerned, the young people in this region are very involved and they are appreciated."*

(TNE06)

These outcomes clearly show that expertise and networks for the successful caregiving of UASC are acquired over years of working with them. On the other hand, this is in line with the finding that support structures are not as developed in areas where there have been fewer UASC in the past; this is also concluded by BumF in a recently published report.<sup>24</sup>

The reports of caregivers and experts further highlight that with decreased numbers of UASC arriving in Germany, the resources in specific services for them are being reduced or in danger of being reduced:

*"But of course that [existing support structure] also stands and falls with the funds that are available to schools, for example. This has really deteriorated in the last two years, simply because there are not so many refugees arriving anymore."*

(TNE10)

BumF states in the report mentioned above that the upkeep of support structures is extensively threatened. The downsizing of support structures leads to a devastating loss of expertise in the field, where it was built over long periods of work with unaccompanied children.<sup>25</sup> This is particularly unfortunate given that, as has been shown above, expertise on UASC is already rare. The numbers of UASC arriving in Germany could rapidly change or increase in the future, so that support structures have to be provided.

### 3.2.3 End of youth welfare at 18

Legally, youth welfare can be provided until the age of 21, in special cases even until 27.<sup>26</sup> In practice the decision on how long UASC are able to be cared for highly depends on the regional youth welfare offices. While the interviewed caregivers reported that in their areas youth welfare is regularly prolonged until 21, this is not the case everywhere.

Thus, one of the aspects that was most emphasised by experts and caregivers is the end of care through the youth welfare system as soon as unaccompanied children turn 18. They denounce that in drastic contradiction to the holistic care of the youth welfare services, young refugees are totally on their own as soon as they turn 18. Aspects that they now need to handle on their own include the asylum process, to earn their livelihood or to apply for social benefits and to organise their own apartment or place to live. In practice, former unaccompanied children who turn 18 and have to leave the care of youth welfare often get housed in refugee camps where the conditions are drastically worse than in youth welfare. The lack of support that young adult refugees experience was illustrated by Johanna Karpenstein:

*"And then there is a rupture and, so to speak, a complete cessation of any support structures. And only if individuals in counselling centres, volunteers, or those involved in youth welfare offices stay involved, only then do these young people have a chance to get access to support structures at all. So often they are not really of full age. And even if they are young and of age, they sometimes still have the needs and don't even know that they are allowed to assert them and how."*

(Johanna Karpenstein, BumF)

Another aspect that she touched in her statement is the controversial assessment of the age of young refugees. She implied that in practice young refugees are sometimes falsely assessed as being over 18, which has an immense impact on the care and opportunities they receive.

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<sup>24</sup> BumF 2020b: 40

<sup>26</sup> Hinz 2016: 43

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

Several of the experts pointed out how the age of majority is merely a legal dimension, which does not in itself lead to great changes in young peoples' lives. Instead, development and autonomy are ongoing processes that do not suddenly stop at 18, as von Grönheim, Paulini and Seeborg (2021) confirm.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, young people turning 18 have often only been in Germany for a relatively short period of time. Most of them have thus not yet been able to build an independent life:

*"And this age limit of 18 is a huge burden. It should be abolished from the outset and the age limit should be 21 for all. Youth welfare up to 21. Make no distinctions. [...] If I am over 18 years, then I am put into official accommodations, in refugee camps and I have to completely rely on myself. And if I am under 18 even if I am already 17 and three-quarters old, then I come in the context of youth welfare. And yes, that's really such a magic limit. [...] Can he or she take care of himself or herself? Can they manage here? How are their social contacts? Have they fully arrived in Germany? That is important and not the age."*

(TN06)

The overwhelming challenges that this demands are also voiced by one interview respondent who came to Germany as an unaccompanied child herself:

*"From 18, you're seen as an adult. [...] From the time after you had your birthday, the next day, when you have the appointment with your counsellor, they tell you directly to look for a flat and things like that. Then comes the stress [...] Although you think, 'You only turned 18; the world didn't end.'"*

(TN05)

The caregivers reported the severe consequences it can have when young people are forced to leave the youth welfare system even though they are not ready to build a life on their own. The overarching need for prolonged youth welfare becomes clear when looking at the statistics. According to the BumF, almost two-thirds (59.9 per cent) of all (former) UASC in the care of youth welfare are young adults.<sup>28</sup>

One interview partner who is responsible for a youth welfare institution argued that the decision not to prolong youth welfare is often based on financial interests. He criticised this practice, as young people who are forced to leave youth welfare but are not able to provide for themselves actually stay dependent on financial support by the state for longer. He thus called for the possibility for them to stay within the youth welfare which makes sure "that there is someone by his side who cares and looks after him and where he can check in with his worries and needs." (TN03)

All consultations show that there is a lack of support for unaccompanied children after they turn 18.

One interviewee illustrated how the sudden lack of support and stability in the transitions they face might keep young people from finishing their school or apprenticeships:

*"And then, for example, it is difficult for many of them to continue their education or schooling because they do not have the learning opportunities that they might have had in youth welfare. And what we have observed is that these transitional structures are not strong in Germany and are not used very much, so that many simply fall into such a hole in the end. There are support services that could be expanded, but they are not integrated in time before the youths are released."*

(Gerlinde Becker, Refugee Council Niedersachsen)

It is thus necessary to increase services of mobile care and other support structures that enable young people who left the youth welfare to succeed in their independent life.

### 3.2.4 Social networks

While caregivers take on an important role for the young people, the young people themselves pointed out that they would only ask their caregivers for all things related to formal tasks. Concerning emotional struggles, they would rather turn to their friends and peers. One young person described this:

<sup>27</sup> von Grönheim et al. 2021: 9

<sup>28</sup> BumF 2020a: 6



*"But if I have private problems, then maybe I can share that better with my best friends. About the problems I'm having. Yes, because here everyone is alone without a family. And they always think about their family. [...] Because when a new boy arrives here with us, then they are completely new and they don't have so much contact with each other. That's why we take care of each other. For example, if Hashem is a bit sad, then I just go to Hashem and then I say: 'Why are you sad?' Yes, that is life. Sometimes life is good and sometimes it's hard. But you always have to be strong."*

(Diar)

It became evident in the way that the young people described how they take care of each other that it is important to them that the person they are talking to understands their specific situation. This might not always be the case for their caregivers. The young people emphasise that they are all alone and all miss their families.

The social network that unaccompanied children have in Germany gives them support. The network might consist of relatives or the community of their country of origin as well as friends and other social contacts the young people have made since living in Germany. These informal support structures give young people the possibility of exchanging experiences and finding guidance. It may become problematic, however, if this individual support network – for example, one made up of more distant relatives – is based in a different part of Germany, and the young people upon their arrival do not have the opportunity to access the local youth welfare services there. This is due to a special law introduced in 2015 to regulate the allocation of refugees, including unaccompanied children, to different German regions.

In 2015 the so-called 'allocation law' was established. Before 2015 unaccompanied children were taken into the care of the welfare office in the place they were first registered. The new law established a mechanism of distribution along nationwide quotas. This law has been highly criticised by many different

actors. BumF states in its report on the allocation law that it is hardly possible for unaccompanied children to guard their rights in the process of allocation and the allocation does not respect child safeguarding.<sup>29</sup> Although it is legally stipulated to do so, the allocation law does not take into consideration the networks that unaccompanied children might have in certain places in Germany. Numbers calculated by the federal government show that 23 per cent of UASC leave the welfare system before being allocated, mostly to make their way to their relatives or friends on their own.<sup>30</sup> The BumF and other civil society actors have been demanding for several years to guard children's rights in the allocation process and create legal possibilities to reunite unaccompanied children with relatives.<sup>31</sup>

This problem also became apparent in one group discussion with young refugees. One respondent was a female refugee, who shared her experience of being forced to live in another part of Germany, whereas all her friends and cousins were living in Hamburg:

*"I am here alone. And I have many friends and cousins in Hamburg. But here I am alone. I want to go to Hamburg and everything would be ok."*

(Bahira)

In other parts of the interview she also mentioned that she often felt lonely being the only Arabic speaker in her residential group. The young person who shared this experience had only been living in Germany for a couple of months at the time of the group discussion. The fact that her wish of living with her friends and relatives is disrespected by the allocation system represents an obstacle for her to be able to adjust to her new living situation.

Another aspect that touches upon the social networks of unaccompanied children is the separation from their families. This is a permanent burden, which partly hinders young refugees from getting fully involved with their life in Germany. One caregiver illustrated the consequences that the permanent separation has on the young people:

<sup>29</sup> BumF 2020b: 39ff

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*: 35

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

*"From my point of view, it's a real ordeal for the young people that they're simply not there. And it's also clear that it will stay that way for the next few years. And that it won't be possible to see each other. I think that tears everyone apart."*

(TNE10)

This was also expressed by the young people themselves:

*"Then you always miss your family. So you are here alone. They are not here. That is hard, too."*

(Diar)

Not only do the young people miss their families, but they are often worried about the well-being of their families because of the dangerous situations that these families still live in. Asked about their wishes for the future, the importance of family becomes apparent once again:

*"I always think about my family and my future. Yes, that's it and the most important, the first point for me is how my family is doing. Family is the most important thing."*

(Diar)

### 3.2.5 Educational pathways

Access to language courses and school is reported by the caregivers as being a top priority. Schooling and language acquisition are major issues for UASC, as they build a foundation for the young people's independent development. The guardians and caregivers illustrated that a lot of the young people they care for are highly motivated to go to school and learn:

*"Many young people see this as a privilege. In our country, school is a matter of fact, but in certain countries, being able to go to school or being entitled to go to school is not always an option. They are very glad when they can go. [...] That's a win. Yeah, that's pretty neat to see."*

(TNE06)

They pointed out that as the young people come to Germany with very different backgrounds and previous knowledge, they need more support from the schools

as well as additional tutoring. The caregivers called for more support from the schools as well as public services in order to provide education adequate to the specific needs and preconditions of UASC:

*"I notice that it is difficult to integrate at school. Some [children] are very good and very ambitious, but those who come here illiterate, for example, have real difficulties getting in. So I think that maybe I miss more offers from the schools. In terms of schools, they really should be able to give them more support. Also from the public sector, I think. [...] So our kids from my location really need more help. Tutors are hard to find."*

(TNE04)

Educational pathways are further impacted by legal requirements. This particularly affects young unaccompanied refugees with unclear or negative outcomes of their asylum procedure. As this topic touches primarily upon the legal dimensions, it will be further discussed in the following chapters.

Another observation reported by the caregivers is frequent changes and ruptures in schooling and educational pathways. One caregiver illustrated how young refugees are often advised early on to start an apprenticeship. He instead called for some time for them to get settled and stable before leaving school. In his opinion, staying in school for longer allows the young people to settle in and get familiar with their new living situation:

*"So that they also have time to acquire the culture, the language, and to graduate from school, in order to then really open the door for a future outside of our house. And then there are points like the school, which can then build up a bit of an interdependence. On the one hand, school is the one that says: 'Okay, you've done well, you can do something. We will help you.' But on the other hand, school can also have a negative effect, along the lines of: 'You're good, get an apprenticeship right away.' In some places, however, this can also be a bit negative for the young person, because he or she is not yet ready. He or she has only been here for half a year, why should they go into vocational training right away? Why not give them more time? So that's an impulse from school where*

*I say that's negative for the young person at first."*  
(TNE06)

Another participant in the group discussions with young people, Aras, also called for more time for UASC in school, in order for them to figure out their interests and gain the competencies to be able to pursue them:

*"Yes, but I can't just become a metalworker. That's not my thing. Just give people a bit of time. [...] Just give them a month to do an internship, somewhere. Everyone has different needs."*  
(Aras)

### 3.2.6 Independent counselling

As has been shown above, support options for unaccompanied children are generally available in most places. However, it became apparent in the different consultations that they are not easily accessible for all young refugees. One interviewee who is involved with the migrant organisation Youth Without Borders explained how young refugees in the beginning are not familiar with the support structures and are thus dependent on their caregivers or guardians to advise them or connect them to further support and counselling opportunities. She points out how this can be problematic, as young people stay dependent on the caregiver's or guardian's choices, which may be influenced by misinformation or don't put the young person's best interest first:

*"In front of the counsellor or in front of youth services, it doesn't matter what your desires are. Or what you really want. The guardian gets told by the youth welfare office: 'If he does this and that, then he can stay in the youth welfare.' [...] And since the young people don't know anything or don't know any other network partners, they have no idea about counselling centres or organisations."*  
(TN05)

It is therefore important for young refugees to be informed about their rights and options in order to guard their own interests. This is also emphasised by Antje-Christin

Büchner (Refugee Council Thüringen) and Dörthe Hinz (Refugee Council Niedersachsen):

*"We therefore consider it particularly important that young refugees themselves have a basic understanding of the asylum and residence law processes that affect them. Awareness and knowledge of their own rights and options for action can reduce uncertainty and enable empowerment."*<sup>32</sup>

Among the existing counselling services like general asylum and migration consultation offices, youth centres and counselling opportunities in schools, the counselling opportunities that combine knowledge on asylum and the rights of young people have to be highlighted. These are so far provided through youth migration offices and a few specialised counselling offices by NGOs. The existing structures need to be expanded and financially secured in the long term.

### 3.2.7 Independent counselling

The previous sections have shared insights and findings on six central factors concerning the integration of unaccompanied children and young adult refugees. The factors of encouraging the qualification of professionals and the maintenance of support structures are broadly focused on the quality of support structures while those of ensuring youth welfare until 21, prioritising social networks, ensuring access to education and providing independent counselling address direct access for UASC to support services and enable their participation in society.

At this point it can be concluded that the protection and care of UASC is generally provided through the youth welfare system. The youth protection law guarantees that all unaccompanied children are taken care of. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the quality of support structures and youth welfare institutions differ. Although legally child welfare should always be prioritised where unaccompanied children are concerned, it is clear that that is often not the case when it comes to practice.

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<sup>32</sup> Büchner/Hinz 2018: 384



The obstacles UASC face concern all spheres of life. As presented in the introduction to this section, one indicator of integration is the development of a sense of belonging. The barriers young unaccompanied refugees experience hinder them from developing such a sense of belonging. Not only do they experience discrimination and rejection in society but they are subject to a system where they are 'administrated' rather than seen as individuals to be

supported and encouraged in their individual needs and wishes.

The obstacles that hinder UASC from becoming a full part of German society are greatly impacted by their legal situation. The following section thus focuses on legal dimensions of integration, as having their legal situation clear is in fact a prerequisite to most aspects of young refugees' lives.

## 4. Legal dimensions

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As has already been shown earlier in this report, the legal dimensions of integration have a significant impact on all spheres of young refugees' life and opportunities. In all the consultations that were conducted within the framework of this study, the interviewees from NGOs as well as youth welfare institutions emphasised the difficulties that young refugees face due to their insecure or precarious legal situation.

The first aspect that was repeatedly emphasised in almost all interviews is the length of the asylum process in Germany: the bureaucratic procedures that lead to a final decision on individual cases can last up to several years.<sup>33</sup> Although the young people are taken care of by the youth welfare services during this time, the total lack of any long-term security hinders them from properly arriving, settling and feeling safe in their new surroundings. Johanna Karpenstein of BumF warned of the effects that these long waiting times can have on the young refugees:

*"It is a huge burden that this brings with it, this waiting state, this uncertainty, this feeling of: 'I am not legitimate'. Also, the uncertainty that this means in terms of family reunification [...] and in terms of access to education and the ability to concentrate and all such things."*

**(Johanna Karpenstein, BumF)**

This finding is in line with the results of the study by von Grönheim et al. (2021). These authors pointed out that the legal insecurities young refugees face not only keep them from developing a clear direction for their life in Germany, but also constitute a feeling of not being wanted which negatively impacts their identity building and hinders the development of a sense of belonging.<sup>34</sup>

What had already been mentioned by the interviewed experts and caregivers was especially emphasised by the young people who described their feelings around their prospects of stay.

They remembered the initial period when they did not yet know how long they would be able to legally stay in the country. They described that with the lack of certainty about their future, they could not properly settle and plan their future:

*"I couldn't plan my future and I didn't know whether I could stay here in Germany or not. [...] If you know very concretely: Ok, I'll stay in Germany, then you can also plan. In three years, five years I'll do an apprenticeship, then I'll work or I'll study. But if you don't know yet or you don't have a residence permit, then you're still desperate, so you try to do some planning, but you're not 100 per cent motivated to do it."*

**(Omar)**

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<sup>33</sup> Deutscher Bundestag 2021: 7

<sup>34</sup> von Grönheim et al. 2021: 7

Since in many cases a negative outcome of the asylum procedure is to be expected, other ways of ensuring residence must be pursued. Generally speaking, the German residence law is two pronged and divided into the asylum system and the remaining residence permits.<sup>35</sup> For those who are not eligible for asylum or who have received negative decisions, there is thus still the possibility of remaining in Germany through other legal avenues. For young immigrants, this is mainly pursued via §25a of the residency law, so-called training tolerations or a residence permit via a hardship claim. These regulations allow ‘well-integrated’ young people to obtain the opportunity to stay if they are currently in an apprenticeship or provide the so-called ‘integration achievements’. These achievements include things like successful school attendance for four years or an acquired degree and a ‘positive integration prognosis’.<sup>36</sup> To obtain a residence permit via §25a, applicants further have to be living in Germany for at least four years and have to apply for the residence title before they turn 21. These legal and ‘integrational’ requirements are difficult to fulfil for a lot of young people and thus constitute an obstacle to gaining a residence permit.

Beyond that, integrational achievements can be criticised because they assess a young person’s success at ‘integration’ based on single factors that can, in reality, hardly be measured. Furthermore, the exact definitions of ‘successful schooling’ and other such benchmarks remain unclear. This creates a norm that barely fits the reality and struggles of unaccompanied children and burdens refugees with the task of integration.

One of the practitioners described the difficulties that this legal framework entails in practice in foster care. She described how, upon the arrival of the children, she has to explain the situation and stress that from now on they should be successful in school, learn the language, etc., to be able to secure residency later on. She reflected that the children should really just feel secure enough to calmly arrive, and instead she puts strong pressure directly on them.

*“Sometimes it already starts when young people come here to Germany and you can actually say [...] right from the beginning: ‘Well, your prospects of staying here are poor. So you probably won’t get a residence permit’, and then you just start and already build up this pressure, cause you then say: ‘Okay, you just have to go via the integration track, after finishing school, vocational training and so on.’ And I notice myself that this also puts additional pressure on the young people and that you actually should say, ‘Man, they’re coming here to Germany: the first thing they really have to do is learn the language, and you can’t expect them to be just as fast as the kids here in Germany.’ But they have the feeling that this is expected of them, and then they also expect it of themselves, and that definitely puts a lot of pressure on them.”*

(TNE08)

In the case of a final negative decision in a young person’s asylum case and/or the impossibility of obtaining residence status through other channels the threat of deportation to their home countries arises. In 2019 out of the 2,056 decisions on pending asylum cases concerning unaccompanied children a total of 1,461 cases were denied, 377 of them with a prohibition of deportation (cf. §60 V AufenthG).<sup>37</sup> While unaccompanied children do not generally get deported from Germany, this does become a viable possibility once they reach the age of majority. Hence, once again, the threshold to majority becomes a serious obstacle, which threatens to drag the young people out of their realities.

Young adult refugees with a negative asylum decision who are not issued another residence permit stay in the country with the so-called ‘Duldungen’, which literally translates as ‘tolerations’. Tolerations do not constitute a residence permit but a suspension of deportation. They are usually issued and re-evaluated every three months, which creates immense insecurity in regards the young refugees’ likelihood of being able to stay, their prospects, and with an overarching fear of deportation. The tremendous emotional distress that the threat of a possible deportation entails was

<sup>35</sup> BumF/Flüchtlingsrat Thüringen 2019: 6

<sup>37</sup> BAMF 2019: 3

<sup>36</sup> Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2020: 7

strikingly described by some of the young people who had been at risk of deportation themselves at one point during their stay in Germany:

*"I mean you just fall asleep in your thoughts, in your sleep, when you're at school, you have nowhere to be with yourself. You can't be anywhere with yourself because there'd always be this thought in the back of your mind: 'Dude! Why am I bothering right now when I know that somehow someday someone is going to knock on my door and then they're just going to take me away?!' [...] That's really hard. I mean, you can never live here with fear and give 100 per cent at the same time. I could, but I've never given 100 per cent in my life, even though I wanted to. I still have these damned thoughts: 'Oh yeah, what's that? If I ever have this much success here, but get deported somewhere again...'"*

**(Aras)**

This interviewee – who actually still lives in Germany only with a toleration – emphasised that the fear of getting deported accompanies him constantly and he highlighted that the lack of legal security prevented him from fully settling. This precarious waiting state was also referenced by another participant who explained his doubts about going to school, getting a degree and finding a job in Germany while he was still lacking a long-term prospect perspective of staying.

*"Sometimes you think: 'Oh, I'm doing school, doing my apprenticeship, but what about my future? If I'm getting deported, then all of this will be for nothing.' For example, the job I was trained for and work for doesn't exist in Afghanistan. If I get deported, I have nothing to hold on to. I can't continue to work there and I can't further develop myself. That's what we all think. It was exactly the same for me always at school, in my free time, there were always thoughts like that. What would happen to my future?"*

**(Omar)**

It became evident that the psychological strain caused by deportations does not just arise when a deportation has actually been announced or is imminent, but merely from the fact that the option theoretically exists. This trend is reinforced by the development of increasing revocation and withdrawal procedures. In such procedures, asylum procedures that have already been decided positively are re-examined once the person reaches the age of majority. One expert describes how this tendency increases the uncertainty for young refugees:

*"And in the meantime it is becoming more and more widespread and we are getting more and more feedback from the practice of various field offices that minors or mostly those who are attaining majority from Eritrea and Syria also have to expect readmission and revocation procedures, depending on their individual residence status. [...] So of course that is simply a catastrophe per se, because it entails a huge amount of uncertainty."*

**(TN02)**

These findings jointly emphasise that the insecurities and pressure placed on young refugees by their insecure legal status is in fact one of if not the major obstacle to their integration. An obstacle that keeps them from being able to build a clear direction and a base for their future in Germany. The so-called 'integrational achievements' young people need to provide are putting a lot of pressure on them, causing them to drop out of educational paths or forcing them to choose careers against their will, thus once again increasing their burden. Given the fact that young refugees face many struggles in different spheres of life, the insecurity of their legal status in Germany causes further pressure that many of them cannot bear. Johanna Karpenstein (BumF) demands that "[e]verything that is happening in the context of asylum applications and the changes, [...] the increasingly restrictive system, [...] that this is considered as an obstacle to integration" instead of seeing responsibility for the success of their integration as only lying with the refugees themselves.



## 5. Young refugees' aims and experiences

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### 5.1 Experience of safety

A particular aim of the research was to talk directly to the young people themselves, to focus on their hopes and goals, and to explicitly ask about their perspectives. These conversations were particularly fruitful. A key element for the young people that was mostly voiced right at the beginning of the group discussions is the safety they are able to experience while living in Germany. The majority of the interviewees originate from war torn countries like Afghanistan and Syria. For them, the basic prerequisite for arriving and integrating was the knowledge that they no longer needed to worry about a threat of attacks, bombs and other types of violence.

*"My goal, like for everyone, was first of all to be safe so you don't have to think that you can just get taken away from home or a bomb explodes and eventually you're dead."*

(Talal)

They also reflected at the same time that this security is the very first condition for them to be able to think and learn and to simply be able to function.

*"With us, I think what is very important is security. If you feel secure, then you can learn better, think better and work better. But if you don't, and there's no security, you can't work, you can't learn, you can't do anything. That's why security is very important for us. And we also feel better in Germany than in Afghanistan. Yes, that was important to us."*

(Milad)

On the other hand, for most of the young people interviewed, their parents, siblings and/or large parts of their family are still living in the insecurity of their countries of origin. This creates a big ordeal for the young people who describe that their thoughts are constantly with their families, worrying about the evolution of the situation in their countries, as one of the interviewees described:

*"So for me, I'm in Germany. There are no wars here. There aren't as many problems here as in Afghanistan. But when our parents are far away, I mean they are in Afghanistan and I am here. I always think about my family because I think: 'Oooh, what happens now?'"*

(Milad)

### 5.2 Individual aims and wishes

With regard to their visions of the future, it became clear that the young people are particularly focused on their educational opportunities. One interviewee, Talal, expressed: "After security, education was also very important, for me to have the opportunity to further my education and to study, to be able to study." Another participant emphasised that it is very precious for him that theoretically all educational paths are open to young people in Germany which he directly connects to freedom:

*"We have so many paths that are open to us. For example, if you want to become a doctor, you can do that or something else. So many possibilities here in Germany. And everyone has to be grateful that you have so many opportunities here. You can be so free here, freedom is what you call it, isn't it?"*

(Hashem)

Another central finding was how much the young people pursue their own dreams and hold on to very concrete goals they wish to achieve. The interviewees talked about being satisfied once they saw that they had been able to achieve their own goals. For example, Talal said: "I am also very happy with everything I have achieved so far."

### 5.3 Impact of society's expectations

Practitioners shared the impression that children experienced a lot of pressure from their families back in their home countries to immediately start working in order to be able to send remittances: "You notice that most of them [UASC] are under stress, pressure and

control from their parents. There is a reason why they are sent here.” (TNE04)

Practitioners also noted that some children came to Germany, or were sent there by their parents, with very wrong assumptions about the financial situation. They believed that they would be able to get rich immediately by living in Germany:

*“So there are very often totally skewed ideas that prevail when people come to Europe, about what to expect there. They often completely miss the point, i.e. they are very naïve, very blue-eyed, according to the motto: The money is lying on the street. And that’s not a saying now, but that’s what a lot of the guys really told me.”*

(TN03)

Some of the practitioners consulted traced these expectations back to different cultural backgrounds, arguing that people coming from rural areas in particular don’t aim to follow special careers depending on their interests:

*“Also sometimes the question is not at all: ‘What do I want to do?’ It’s just: ‘I want to earn money so that I can live, so that I can live in security. I also want to feed my family, which still lives in the country of origin.’ And my question is not: ‘How do I get the money?’ I want this money and I want to work.”*

(TNE10)

Although the desire for immediate prosperity certainly exists, in the discussions with the young people, however, a rather different picture of the situation emerged: while there were also young people who showed a great incomprehension of the fact that they were expected to stay in school beyond basic level qualifications, several other former UASC complained about the expectations from their caregivers, like Aras whose direct counsellors recommended that he leave school after lower high school (Hauptschule). He stressed how he had not yet had enough time in school to feel comfortable in the language and to start working in a professional environment.

*“They wanted to leave me with a lower secondary school certificate. Even now it’s difficult for me to know all the technical words. Of course, I can talk in normal language. People can understand me well. [...] But wait: hello? You’re in a company, no one has time to give you German lessons, help you with maths.”*

(Aras)

Being forced to leave school early was also a significant issue for Talal who had to drop out of his A levels because of his prospects of remaining in the country. “I really wanted to do the IB [International Baccalaureate]. I was totally motivated and that was practically just my dream.” But starting vocational training was in his case the only way to secure his residency in Germany: “That’s why I had to drop out of high school and start an apprenticeship.” (Talal) In his case getting a university degree was his main goal. Aras reflected that in his opinion the idea that refugees mainly want to do apprenticeships or immediately start working without further education is connected to societal prejudices and stigma about them:

*“And people think that foreigners all become either painters, cooks, roofers or tilers. Bullshit. Bullshit.”*

(Aras)

This illustrates a contradiction between the young people’s wishes and freedom of choices and a societal discourse around the utility of migration as an influx of workforce. Utilitarian ideas of migration were also partly reflected in the experiences of some of the caregivers and experts:

*“So where do our young people work? They work in care, they work in the trades, they work in catering. All the German children here today don’t want to go there. [...] They all want to study and stop working and earn a lot of money. And then we can be happy when young people come to this country and say: ‘Of course I’ll go to a bakery at night, if you pay me reasonably.’ [...] So it’s actually perfect: we need people who want to do something. And there are people who say: ‘Hey, I would like to earn money.’”*

(TN03)

While this holds true for some young refugees, several young people emphasised that it was and would be very harmful for them if they had to follow certain careers against their real interests.

## 5.4 Experiences of care in youth welfare institutions

The role of the care facilities in reaching and figuring out these individual goals, however, is assessed very differently, as previously indicated. On the one hand, young people emphasise that without the facilities they would never have made it:

*“And if I then compare myself with the other boys who have also fled and have received a little less support from the state or from the caregivers, they still have no goals, they live here in safety, but somehow they have no goals for the future. Therefore, it was very important for me that I received all the support from one or the other authority. Because in the end then I knew: ‘Okay, this is my goal and this is the way I have to go so that I am also just happy and could achieve all my wishes.’”*

(Tala)

In some cases, the young people reported that they have very positive connections with the support they experienced and their caregivers:

*“At the top left is my former caregiver. [...] Yes, and she held my hand for a very long time at this point and at some point she opened the door for me and kicked me out into life. And she said: ‘Here you go: this is life.’”*

(Aftab)

These last two quotations illustrate that these young people experienced safety in the care of the youth welfare facilities and had the opportunity to work out their individual interests so that they feel able to pursue their interests and wishes on their own.

On the other hand, one interviewee who is herself a former UASC also shared negative experiences that she connects to youth welfare. She criticised a lack of empathy by the caregivers and pointed out that young refugees often feel restricted in the youth welfare system and are not given the opportunity to take part in the decisions that affect them:

*“And yes, the best young people for the counsellors and the youth welfare office are young people who don’t say anything, don’t talk, just do what they say. But there are actually a lot of young people who are like that because they think: ‘If we don’t know the language, then we have to be quiet somehow.’”*

(TN05)

This statement highlights the consequences that these negative experiences have on the young people. While she pointed out that it is also the responsibility of the young people themselves to accept counselling and support structures, she concluded that sometimes in youth welfare the young refugees get treated in a way “which somehow hurts them and takes that strength away from them and you don’t have the strength to go on any more” (TN05).

This interviewee is involved with the migrant organisation Youth Without Borders. The group unites young people who came to Germany as UASC and supports their interests. In a system that tends to prioritise legal restrictions before the well-being of young people, the group empowers UASC by coming together as people with shared experiences. They aim to give a voice to the young people themselves and engage in political work to demand the right to stay and opportunities for unaccompanied children.<sup>38</sup>

## 5.5 Experiences of discrimination

In order to connect the experiences of young people with the matters that have already been addressed, the effects of social sentiments on young people should be analysed. The young people interviewed voiced negative feelings about things being imposed

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<sup>38</sup> <http://jogspace.net/about/>

on them, not being trusted, and not being provided the same opportunities as other young people around them.

*“Somehow I have the feeling that the system doesn't really trust us. And that's why all the bureaucratic processes are very long, we can't get a work permit, we can't get a residence permit and somehow everything has its reason, that the system doesn't trust us.”*

**(Talal)**

But it is not only about trust: the young people also clearly struggle with societal prejudices and discrimination, as presented in the section on societal discourses. There is a particular feeling among the (former) UASC that they need to prove that they are not living off social security benefits, paid by taxes.

*“And I get up every morning at 7 o'clock to go to work. I work until 4 p.m., then come home. And then I go to work a mini job. It's like this all week. Just so that I'm not dependent on the state. So that I don't depend on the Jobcenter or some shitty government agency. I'm sorry that I express it like this. So that if someone at the end looks at me on the street and says: 'You just live off our welfare money' – so that I can just slap him right in the face and say: Look here: 'I can bring you the whole bills that I have worked until now. I think you're also benefitting off my taxes.'”*

**(Aras)**

In addition, the effects of immediate discrimination experienced by the young people and prejudices spread through the media were also brought up in the interviews. This was especially expressed by a young activist who fled Syria several years ago and who now advocates for the rights of young refugees in Germany within the organisation Youth without Borders. She strikingly expressed how the criminalisation of refugees in public discourses has deprived her of her motivation to put effort into integrating.

*“But after that... over time, you're no longer motivated because you don't see any meaning in life at all. When you are discriminated against, when you see in the media or news how refugees are belittled [...]. Then you have no desire to do anything at all. And in the media you only see other young refugees, how they are criminalised, how they take drugs and whatnot. Stupid things like that, which really shouldn't be reported by the media, because if one or two do that, it doesn't mean that they are role models for the others, because not everyone is the same.”*

**(TN05)**

Through the different consultations the feeling became apparent that the societal climate against refugees is worsening. One young person who shared his experiences of discrimination during the group discussion pointed out the damaging effect of grouping all young people together. He stressed that integration could not be expected of just them, but that this must be done by both sides. He saw the majority of the lack of understanding in the host society, where he proposed to teach integration in schools:

*“To be taught more integration in German schools – absolutely. They absolutely need that. Because it feels like it's getting worse and worse every day, and it's really not getting any better. I know this from my situation. Maybe other boys have experienced the same thing. Many Germans in general or who are in school, I don't know if they have seen it on TV or they have been taught it in the families. But the word 'refugee': Oh no, go away with it! [...] Yes, I can understand why people are afraid. But the thing is, you can't lump them all together. They really need that integration. So I think instead of learning grammar and politics all day, they need to be taught a little bit of integration as well, so you know they don't run away when they hear the word 'refugee' or when they just see that somebody has a different background than them.”*

**(Aras)**



## 6. Conclusion

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The settling in of unaccompanied children in German society goes along with several challenges. First off, legal insecurities pose a tremendous obstacle for unaccompanied children. Secondly, experiences of racism and discrimination negatively impact the young refugees. Last but not least, the existing youth welfare system is faced with particular challenges when it comes to the caregiving of unaccompanied children. The relevant institutions and societal actors thus need to do justice to the particularities that go along with the admission and integration of unaccompanied children.

This research's interest lies in the challenges and successes in the integration of unaccompanied children. The underlying definition of integration highlights two aspects that are the most relevant in the context of this research: firstly, to receive protection and care, and, secondly, to develop a sense of belonging in all spheres of life.

Concerning the first part of this definition, protection and care, we can conclude that unaccompanied children – if they are acknowledged as such – do generally experience protection and care in Germany, as they are cared for by the youth welfare system. The challenges in the youth welfare system responsible for the care of unaccompanied children have been illustrated throughout the report. A central finding is the necessity for the youth welfare system to adequately respond to the needs that go along with the specific situation of unaccompanied children. Child safeguarding has to be prioritised throughout the admission and caregiving of unaccompanied children, as it currently takes a back seat due to the special legal situation in which these children are placed.<sup>39</sup>

One aspect that appeared particularly relevant is the situation of former unaccompanied children who reach the age of majority. While they legally have the right to stay in the care of youth welfare until (at least) 21,

in practice turning 18 often comes with the danger of abruptly losing almost all care and support structures. It became apparent through the consultations with experts as well as with caregivers and young people that the protection and care the young people experience in the youth welfare system allows them to quietly settle in and become able to build a foundation for their future life. Losing this safety and care at 18 deprives a lot of young refugees of these opportunities. Furthermore, questions of legal status often emerge at the age of 18. Young refugees who are not granted asylum or another secure residence permit have to live with so-called 'tolerations' and are thereby threatened with deportation.

Legal insecurity and the pressure this amounts to on young unaccompanied refugees build one of the two overarching tendencies that we identified as negatively impacting the integration of young refugees. The restrictive legal situation denies young refugees the security on which to develop a clear plan and build their future. Instead, they are faced with a great insecurity that impacts all spheres of their life and also constitutes a huge psychological burden. The predominant importance of security became apparent in the group discussions with young unaccompanied refugees. On the one hand, being able to live in Germany means safety for them. On the other hand, they need the legal security that they can stay in Germany and do not have to fear deportation. In the consultations with the young people it also became clear that they highly value the opportunities they have in Germany – especially those who have already been living in Germany for several years – and have developed clear goals for their life here. It thus has to be the task of youth welfare, but also, in a broader view, of German society and the political and legal system, to provide a prospect for young unaccompanied refugees and enable them to build a life in which they can achieve their goals and wishes.

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<sup>39</sup> Further detailed information can be found i.e. in the reports by the Association for Unaccompanied Minors (BumF): [https://b-umf.de/material/?filter=berichte-und-studien&type=post\\_tag](https://b-umf.de/material/?filter=berichte-und-studien&type=post_tag)

The second identified overarching tendency is the overall societal discourse on migration and refugees. The strengthening of far-right political actors and their reception in the media leads to a societal climate where young refugees are increasingly exposed to discrimination and racism. Facing these negative and hurtful experiences on a daily level, young refugees are likely to gain a feeling of not being wanted as part of society. The young people interviewed pointed out how this takes away their motivation to actively become a part of society.

These findings lead back to the working definition's second aspect of integration: the development of a

sense of belonging. It is clear that the two aspects of legal uncertainty and a hostile societal climate actively hinder young unaccompanied refugees from developing a feeling of belonging towards society. Both aspects thus have to be acknowledged as barriers to integration. At the same time, they have a far-reaching impact on other aspects of the admission, support and settling in of young unaccompanied refugees. Another legal framework and practice that gives young people the secure prospect of staying in the country would prevent problematic situations in various areas, which have also been highlighted in this report, from the very beginning.

## 7. Recommendations

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Taking into consideration the findings on support structures and access for young refugees as well as broader societal and legal prerequisites for integration, we call for the following changes in policy and practice to enhance the situation of unaccompanied child and young adult refugees in Germany.

### Qualifications of care providers

Professionals (caregivers, guardians, youth welfare services) must be specifically instructed and educated on, for example, the legal situation of unaccompanied children and young adults, conducted through independent organisations and experts. Additionally, awareness about trauma and sensitivity towards racism must be ensured. Furthermore, the youth welfare offices should promote the exchange of experiences and networking among professionals. In the immigration and youth welfare offices, training for caseworkers and special representatives is needed for the specific needs of UASC.

### Maintain and expand support structures

Support facilities and counselling centres specialised in the needs of unaccompanied children must be maintained on a long-term basis. Dismantling structures due to declining numbers is short-sighted, since UASC need sustainable and appropriate support over the long term. It is evident that UASC will continue to arrive in varying numbers in Germany in the near future. In addition, the local networking of support structures must be funded in order to ensure holistic support for unaccompanied children arriving without the care of their family.

### Youth welfare until the age of 21 should be the standard

Youth welfare should be granted by the youth welfare offices until the age of 21 as a general rule in order to enable the young refugees' safe arrival and to give

them enough time to establish an independent life. The transition into independence must be facilitated and assisted by measures such as mobile care.

### Take social networks into account during the allocation process in Germany

Relatives, friends and the community of their country of origin can all be essential references for young people. They can offer them emotional support as well as the opportunity for informal guidance and the exchange of experiences. A separation from their social network, which additionally might feel very arbitrary to the young people, provokes frustration and can leave them with a feeling of powerlessness. Therefore, the social networks of UASC (e.g. relatives, community or friends) should be taken into account in the allocation process. Generally speaking, the practical implementation of the allocation law must be based on the best interests of the child and must permit reunification with relatives living in other parts of Germany.

### Ensure access to education and enable educational pathways

UASC need fast, continuous access to school, secondary education, language courses and opportunities for extra tuition. This access should not be age-dependent and should be available to all UASC and former UASC. It should allow a focus on language acquisition and settling in in the beginning of the young person's stay in the country. Youth welfare offices, youth welfare institutions, foster families as well as schools must therefore collaborate to enable educational pathways for the welfare of and in the best interest of the young people. Youths should at all points be instructed and advised about the available options for their educational and professional careers and be given the opportunity to make their own decisions according to their own interests and aspirations.

## Specialised and independent counselling

The legal situation is extremely complex and therefore hard to understand especially for UASC. In practice, they do often depend on the advice and, particularly importantly, the decisions taken by their guardians and custodians. It is therefore crucial that they have access to independent counselling, which provides young people with information about their rights and options and empowers them to voice their interests.

## Enable family reunification

The separation from their families is a permanent ordeal for UASC. Unaccompanied children in particular must be granted the opportunity to reunite with their own family – if this is in the best interest of the child. Family reunification must be made possible for all UASC and implemented rapidly. In order to unite families, the federal government must create the legal prerequisites to enable not only parents but also under-age siblings to be reunited with UASC.

## Early and long-term prospects of stay

UASC need early and long-term legal security. A secure residence title is a central prerequisite for unaccompanied minor refugees to be able to build a

secure plan for a life in Germany. Uncertain residence prospects, lengthy processes, fear of deportation and pressure from integration services are unacceptable for young people and prevent a stable arrival.

The creation of legal certainty and security for young refugees must include:

- Quickly creating long-term prospects of staying.
- No deportations of UASC and young adults from youth welfare.
- The prospect of staying should not be dependent on integration achievements.

## Integration and creation of prospects for UASC should be understood as a task for society as a whole

UASC should be able to participate in all areas of society. This requires a societal self-perception in which UASC are recognised as part of society and their opportunities are seen as a task for society as a whole. Their rights have to be safeguarded at all times and cannot be infringed due to political sentiments. Education about discrimination and the sensitisation of society to racism is a prerequisite for equal participation for all.



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