

UNACCOMPANIED MINORS

IN AUSTRIA:

VULNERABILITIES AND RISKS

OF CHILD TRAFFICKING AND

OTHER FORMS OF VIOLENCE,

EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE



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Unaccompanied minors in Austria: Vulnerabilities and risks of child trafficking and other forms of violence, exploitation and abuse

Andrea Götzelmann-Rosado
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March 2026



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

In recent years, a significant number of unaccompanied minors¹ from third countries arrived in the European Union (EU). This was also the case in Austria: From 2015 to 2025, 41,472 asylum applications from unaccompanied minors were registered (Mol, 2026).²

Many of them had no intention of staying in Austria – for them, Austria was only a transit country (Mol, 2025h:83). Unsurprisingly, a large number of asylum procedures were therefore discontinued due to unknown place of residence of the applicants.³ However, it remained unclear what exactly happened to these minors after they could no longer be located in Austria. Had they reached their destination?

Unaccompanied minors are in a situation of particular vulnerability due to their age, distance from their place of origin and separation from parents or guardians. Both before and after their arrival in Europe, they are at increased risk of becoming victims of violence, exploitation and abuse (European Commission, 2025, 2017). According to a Europol situation report published in 2018, unaccompanied minors are at a higher risk of becoming victims of human trafficking and are more likely to be targeted by people who want to exploit them (Europol, 2018). For this reason, they need special and adequate protection (European Commission, 2017). This includes, among other things, minimizing possible security risks, such as human trafficking or “runaway behaviour to an unknown destination,” as formulated by the European Asylum Agency (EUAA; European Asylum Support Office, 2018:25–26).

In this context, the fact that unaccompanied minors (want to) continue their journey even after their arrival in an EU member state poses a particular challenge for EU Member States. Their absence from (normally open) facilities is usually noted as a consequence of a voluntary act; only in certain cases is the absence perceived as worrying and followed up accordingly (Missing Children Europe, 2021).

In recent years, the EU has taken a number of measures to protect migrant children. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child mentions that the risk of minors disappearing is higher when they travel alone (European Commission, 2021a). The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in 2024, provides for a number of measures to protect unaccompanied minors and prevent them from disappearing or becoming

1 In the EU acquis, an unaccompanied minor is defined as a third-country national or a stateless person under the age of 18 who enters the territory of the Member States unaccompanied by an adult who is responsible for him or her in accordance with the law or practice of the Member State concerned, and as long as he or she is not actually placed in the care of such a person (EMN, 2025b).

2 The number refers to applicants who are recorded as minors in the asylum procedure. Later deviations due to age assessments (see [Chapter 3.3.2](#)) are possible.

3 The Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum provides statistics on the discontinuation of asylum procedures for unaccompanied minors in accordance with Article 24 Asylum Act (FLG I No. I Nr. 100/2005, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 17/2025), according to which the Federal Office or the Federal Administrative Court are neither aware of nor otherwise easily able to ascertain their whereabouts.

victims of criminal networks.⁴ At the same time, EU Member States face certain challenges; for example, there is no consensus on how to define a “missing child” (EPRS, 2025).

Against this background, it is important to take a closer look at the situation of unaccompanied minors and to shed more light on the risks they face regarding child trafficking and other forms of violence, exploitation and abuse. This is necessary to develop a better understanding of how unaccompanied minors can be well protected from possible harm – also in the context of intended onward travel or “secondary migration”.

In the context of the strengthening and further development of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), Austria is striving to improve the protection and legal status of vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied minors and trafficked persons. For this reason, the present study aims to provide relevant actors in Austria and beyond with a comprehensive source of knowledge on unaccompanied minors who have applied for asylum in Austria and the risks of violence, exploitation and abuse to which they are potentially exposed. A special focus is placed on giving visibility to the voices and perspectives of unaccompanied minors.

The study was implemented as part of the project “Transfer of skills and knowledge to support the Austrian asylum and migration administration with a focus on vulnerable persons (KOMPASS)”, which was carried out by IOM Austria from 1 May 2023 to 31 March 2026 with co-financing by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) of the EU and the Federal Ministry of the Interior. The project focused on the transfer of skills and knowledge to support the Austrian asylum and migration administration with a focus on vulnerable persons.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

With the aim of contributing to an optimization of processes, structures and decisions in the context of asylum and migration in Austria, especially regarding unaccompanied minors, the present study endeavours to better understand the situation of unaccompanied minors in Austria and the potential risks to them of becoming victims of violence, exploitation and abuse (including child trafficking). Due to the particular risk in the case of minors who have gone missing, a focus is placed on the situation of minors who are or were registered in the Austrian asylum procedure, but whose current whereabouts are unknown. According to data from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), initial reception centres in particular are affected by this problem (FRA, 2022). For this reason, the study focuses on unaccompanied minors from third countries who have applied for asylum in Austria and are accommodated in federal reception facilities.

⁴ For example, the Reception Conditions Directive states that the early appointment of representatives is essential for “tackling situations of migrant children going missing in the Union” (Recital 42 of Regulation (EU) 2024/1346, OJ L 2024/1346); whereas the Eurodac Regulation justifies the collection and storage of biometric data inter alia with the need of “tracing missing children, including for law enforcement purposes” (Recital 44 of Regulation (EU) 2024/1358, OJ L 2024/1358).

The specific research objectives of the study are to shed light on the situation of unaccompanied minors in Austria and to determine the reasons for unexplained absences; to identify the risks of violence, exploitation and abuse that unaccompanied minors are exposed to in Austria and after leaving Austria, with a particular focus on child trafficking; to outline factors that may increase (risk factors) or reduce (protective factors) the risks of falling victim to these dangers; as well as to identify recommendations for the prevention and mitigation of the depicted risks for relevant actors in Austria and beyond.

The study results are intended to support relevant actors in providing more targeted care and protection to unaccompanied minors, thus helping to minimize the risks of child trafficking and other forms of violence, exploitation and abuse for this group. They should furthermore provide a basis for knowledge transfer formats, including future training courses on child trafficking and child protection, as well as information materials on the protection of unaccompanied minors.

1.3 VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

In the context of migration, some persons are more vulnerable or susceptible to risks of violence, exploitation and abuse due to various factors. Vulnerability is the limited ability to avoid, resist, cope with or recover from harm (IOM, 2019). The concept of vulnerability is a fundamental element of the international human rights framework. “Migrants in vulnerable situations” are defined as migrants who are unable to effectively enjoy their human rights, who are at increased risk of violations and abuse, and are therefore entitled to call on a duty bearer’s heightened duty of care (OHCHR, 2018).

Based on decades of experience in preventing and combating human trafficking as well as in supporting and protecting trafficked persons, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has developed a vulnerability model that – based on human rights and child rights principles – addresses the particular risks of violence, exploitation and abuse (IOM, 2019). According to the model, vulnerability is the result of the interaction of a variety of characteristics and conditions at different levels. The model includes not only vulnerability, but also resilience to violence, exploitation and abuse. It therefore considers both risk factors (which contribute to vulnerability) and protective factors (which improve the ability to prevent, cope with, or recover from harm), as well as the way in which both interact. The study employs this model to analyse which risk and protective factors at different levels can increase or decrease the vulnerability of unaccompanied minors in the Austrian asylum procedure to violence, exploitation and abuse, and to thereby deduce how specific measures addressing these factors can maximize the protection of minors.

In the context of the model, as in the present study, the terms “violence, exploitation and abuse” are understood as follows:

- Violence is defined as the deliberate use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death or psychological harm.
- Abuse is defined as an improper act by a person in a position of relative power that causes harm to a person with lesser power (including physical abuse, sexual abuse, abuse of a position of vulnerability, psychological abuse, etc.).
- Exploitation is defined as the unfair treatment of one person for the benefit of another.

According to the IOM model, the study assumes that resilience and vulnerability are determined by the presence, absence and interaction of risk and protective factors at different levels: at the level of the individual, the family or household, the community and at the structural level.⁵ Each factor is considered either a risk or a protective factor at each level, depending on the context.⁶

- Individual factors include an individual’s characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, personal history and experiences, mental and emotional health, and access to resources such as money, goods, or support, etc.
- Household and family factors are related to the family circumstances of individuals and their family members, the role and position of individuals within the family, and family histories and experiences. Examples of household and family factors include family size, household structure, socioeconomic status, migration history, employment, livelihood, education level, gender discrimination, and family dynamics.⁷
- Community-level factors such as the availability of education, health care and social services, social norms, and behaviours can also be protective or risk factors, and may affect different groups within the community differently. The economic, cultural and social structures of the community and the position within these structures influence the degree of vulnerability.⁸

5 The model is similar to the ecological model developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in *The Ecology of Human Development* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

6 For example, belonging to a particular ethnic group may be a protective factor in some contexts (if that group is dominant or privileged), but a risk factor in others (if that group is marginalized or oppressed). Other individual factors can by and large always be considered risk factors or protective factors. For example, literacy is almost always a protective factor, while illiteracy is almost always a risk factor.

7 Risk factors may include, for example, violence between family members or in single-parent households; protective factors include the presence of a supportive environment at home or a sufficient income.

8 Risk factors in the community include practices such as forced marriage, the exclusion of some members of the community from the full use of the community’s resources, or the presence of natural hazards such as landslides or floods.

- Structural factors include the political, economic, social and environmental conditions and institutions at the national, regional and international levels that influence the entire environment in which individuals, families and communities find themselves and shape their beliefs, decisions and behaviours; such as migration policies or human or children's rights. Structural factors tend to be relatively stable and have both immediate and longer-term effects.

According to the model, the study considers the vulnerability or resilience of migrants to violence, exploitation and abuse before, during or after migration as an effect of the interaction of risk and protective factors at different levels. This means that no single factor leads to a specific result. It also means that the presence of one or more risk factors does not necessarily mean that a migrant is at risk, because the protective factors can mitigate the risk factors. It is a general preponderance of risk factors, coupled with insufficient protective factors, that leads to vulnerability. Conversely, sufficient protective factors, if they compensate for the risk factors, can strengthen the resilience of migrants and enable them to avoid, resist, cope with or recover from violence, exploitation and abuse. The purpose is not to define strict categories of factors, but rather to enable a structured and meaningful investigation of how several factors overlap and thereby influence vulnerability and resilience.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

The study combined qualitative research methods and quantitative data evaluations to comprehensively examine the situation of unaccompanied minors in the Austrian asylum system and their risks of becoming victims of violence, exploitation and abuse (including child trafficking). Emphasis was placed on incorporating the experiences and perspectives of unaccompanied minors into the qualitative research of the study. This is crucial to understand their experiences and to ensure that, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),⁹ their right to participate in matters that affect them is respected.

Another focus of the research activities was on the risks of violence, exploitation and abuse after (voluntary or involuntary) departure from Austria, on the onward journey or after arrival in the destination country. To this end, based on the current data on migration routes of unaccompanied minors and following feedback from experts, two priority countries were selected that have been among the destination countries of unaccompanied minors leaving Austria in recent years: Belgium and France. The research team also travelled to these two countries to speak with (former) unaccompanied minors who had previously been in Austria about their experiences.¹⁰

The research was carried out between January and September 2025.

⁹ Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, A/RES/44/25, United Nations Treaty Series vol. 1577.

¹⁰ In other relevant countries such as Germany or the Netherlands, it was not possible to establish contact with (former) minors due to a lack of data (noted references to previous residence in Austria) and limited capacity on the part of the caretakers.

1.4.1 Desk research and analysis of quantitative data

In addition to a comprehensive literature review on the topic, publicly available data on unaccompanied minors was reviewed and processed. In addition, statistics on different areas of work were provided by several actors, which allow a deeper understanding of the existing challenges, including in the field of data collection and data exchange within Europe.

1.4.2 Expert interviews

To complement the information obtained through the secondary research, a total of 17 qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 experts from Austria from different fields of work:

- Zaneta Chlebinska, “House of Women”, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen;
- Andreas Diendorfer, Christine Okresek, and Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe;
- Alionis Dzhamalis and Nicole Fenz, psychologists, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen;
- Thomas Fröhlich, Hochschule Campus Vienna (University of Applied Sciences);
- Eva Kaufmann, LEFÖ Intervention Center for Trafficked Women (LEFÖ-IBF);
- Expert, MEN VIA – Support for men who are affected by human trafficking (MEN VIA);
- Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen;
- Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung (Garden of Encounters);
- Stefan Mayer, Criminal Intelligence Service Austria – Competence Center for Missing Persons;
- Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care;
- Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling;
- Helmut Sax, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights;
- Horst Schiller, Criminal Intelligence Service Austria – Department II/BK/8, Joint Operational Office;
- Katharina Schmidt-Dengler and Daniel Simon, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11);
- Susanne Stokreiter-Strau, Department of Youth and Social Affairs, Baden District Administration;
- Astrid Winkler, ECPAT Austria;
- Gerald Wohlmuth, Initial Reception Centre East, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum;
- Lisa Wolfsegger, asylkoordination austria.

In order to also gain European perspectives, additional interviews were conducted with experts from the focus countries Belgium and France as well as with other international experts:

- Emilie Bertho, Sophie Gautier, Marine Hebert, Diana Lescaillez, Militsa Petit, Child and Youth Welfare Service, Département Calvados (France);
- Sébastien Biaudelle, Esperanto Child Protection Centre (Belgium);
- Stéphane Boiteux, France Terre D'Asile (France);
- Emilie Coomans, Child Focus (Belgium);
- Expert, European Union Asylum Agency (EUAA);
- Frank Hoen, Amber Alert Europe // European Centre for Missing Children;
- Directorate of Justice Protection for Youth, Ministry of Justice France;
- Olivier Peyroux, Koutcha Child Protection Centre (France);
- Alyona Samar, Missing Children Europe;
- Hannah Stott, Safe to Grow (United Kingdom);
- Hanne Vandendriessche, Fedasil (Belgium);
- Arne Verscheure, Guardianship Service, Ministry of Justice Belgium.

1.4.3 Focus group discussions with unaccompanied minors in Austria

In June 2025, five focus group discussions with 26 unaccompanied minors were held on the premises of the federal reception facility in the city of Traiskirchen. Two groups were organized with a total of 13 Afghan boys, one group with five Somali boys and one group with five Syrian boys; another group included three girls from Somalia. All minors were over 14 years old.

At the time of the focus group discussions, the minors had been in Austria for a timespan ranging between one week and several months.

One focus group discussion with Afghan boys could not be finished because, after a medical incident, the research team decided not to continue the conversation due to the palpable concern of the other young people. The results that were collected up to the termination were incorporated into the study.

The focus group discussions, which lasted about one hour, were developed together with two experts from Hemayat, an Austrian center for interpreter-supported medical, psychological and psychotherapeutic care for survivors of torture and war, and included open questions about the minors' experiences and perspectives regarding the path to Austria, the situation in Austria, and their plans for the future.

The interpreter-assisted focus group discussions were moderated by an IOM staff member and accompanied by a second IOM staff member.

1.4.4 Interviews with minors and young adults in Belgium and France

In September 2025, interviews were held with minors and young adults in the focus countries of Belgium and France who had indicated that they had previously been in Austria as unaccompanied minors. The selection of the unaccompanied minors and the organization of the interviews were carried out with the support of IOM Belgium and IOM France and the local child protection systems.

In Belgium, three interviews were held with young Syrians: a 15-year-old had already been in Belgium for about eight months, an 18-year-old had arrived in Belgium more than four years previously, and another 18-year-old had arrived in Belgium eleven months before the time of the interview (all interviewees were male).

In France, four interviews were held with young Afghans: a 16-year-old had arrived in France 20 days earlier, another 16-year-old had been in France for two and a half months at the time of the interview; an 18-year-old had arrived in France about five years before, and a 20-year-old had already been in France for three years (all respondents were male).

Two of the respondents in Belgium had stayed in Austria for about a week and one of the respondents for two months before their onward journey. Of those surveyed in France, one person had spent around three weeks and another only a few days in Austria; the other two interviewees had travelled through Austria exclusively in transit in truck containers and therefore had no contact with Austrian authorities or accommodation structures. At the time of the interviews, some of the respondents' stay in Austria was already several years in the past, while for others it was less than a month prior to the interview.

The discussions were similar in structure to the focus group discussions with unaccompanied minors in Austria; they also included questions about experiences on the onward journey, after the stay or transit in Austria and in the destination. The interviews with minors were conducted in the presence of caretakers or persons of trust.

1.4.5 Ethical considerations and quality control mechanisms

The research work was supported by an IOM internal advisory board composed of experienced staff from the IOM Country Office for Austria, the IOM Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, and IOM Headquarters in the areas of data, research and protection of migrants.

In addition, an external advisory body was established, consisting of representatives of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, the Baden Child and Youth Welfare Service, the Crisis Centre Drehscheibe of the City of Vienna, UNHCR Austria, UNICEF Austria, asylkoordination austria, the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights and ECPAT Austria.

Both advisory bodies provided input and feedback on the study concept, the research method, the selection of the focus countries and the first results. The ultimate responsibility for the content of the study and its statements lies solely with the study authors.

A child safeguarding concept was drawn up for the study, which was reviewed by both advisory bodies. The decision to involve minors directly in the research activities related to this study was made carefully and with ethical considerations in mind. As stated in the *International Charter for Ethical Research Including Children* (Graham et al., 2013), it is important to involve minors directly in research in order to gain a deeper understanding of the subject of research and to ensure that their experiences and perspectives are reflected. This is not only important to ensure the correctness and relevance of the results: the direct participation of minors is also crucial for safeguarding their right to be part of decisions that affect them, as provided for in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 12 CRC).

The child safeguarding concept ensured that all research was guided by key principles of child safeguarding and that child safeguarding was considered in all research activities that directly affected minors. The concept outlined central guiding principles for child safeguarding and set out explicit measures to protect minors to be implemented in all research activities in which minors were directly involved. The research team and all other persons directly involved in research activities with minors, such as interpreters, were obliged to comply with the child safeguarding concept.

1.4.6 Methodological limitations

The focus group discussions and conversations with minors and young adults in Austria, Belgium and France were organized with the help of accommodation facilities, child and youth welfare agencies and IOM on site; participation in the discussions was voluntary and the participants were free to terminate the talks at any time. The aim was to incorporate the perspectives of unaccompanied minors and to understand their experiences, but not to collect statistically representative results.

The study provides some insights into the situation of unaccompanied minors in the selected priority countries. However, the study does not intend to provide a comprehensive description of the asylum, reception or child and youth welfare systems in these countries nor to provide a country comparison.

With regard to Austria, the study identifies essential structures and processes that shape the lives of minors. However, it does not claim to provide a comprehensive presentation of the realities of life of unaccompanied minors, as the focus was placed on the situation of unaccompanied minors in the basic care provided by the federal government. The situation of unaccompanied minors who are accommodated and cared for in the nine different systems of basic care at the provincial level is not examined in detail.

2. UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN EUROPE

The number of unaccompanied minors arriving in Europe or the European Union (EU) each year is not recorded precisely in statistical terms, as there is no comprehensive and uniform data available. This is due to the fact that most arrivals are irregular and correspondingly difficult to trace; moreover, the available data is difficult to compare. The number of asylum applications made by unaccompanied minors can be an indicator of trends, but does not necessarily provide an accurate picture of the actual number of unaccompanied minors in Europe or the EU, due to a backlog of registration and data disclosure in individual national asylum systems, or because the minors continue to move (UNHCR et al., 2025). Different national legal frameworks and protection mechanisms for migrant children can also mean that unaccompanied minors do not apply for asylum at all: in Italy, for example, most unaccompanied minors receive a residence permit for minors and are admitted to special reception facilities (IOM 2024b). In 2024, 8,752 arrivals of unaccompanied minors were recorded in Italy (UNHCR et al., 2025), but only 2,030 asylum applications were registered by unaccompanied minors (Eurostat, 2025b).

2.1 ARRIVALS IN EUROPE

In 2024, over 21,000 arrivals¹¹ of unaccompanied minors were registered by land and sea in Europe (UNHCR et al., 2025). This represents a significant decrease in registered arrivals compared to 2023 (35,510; UNHCR et al., 2024).

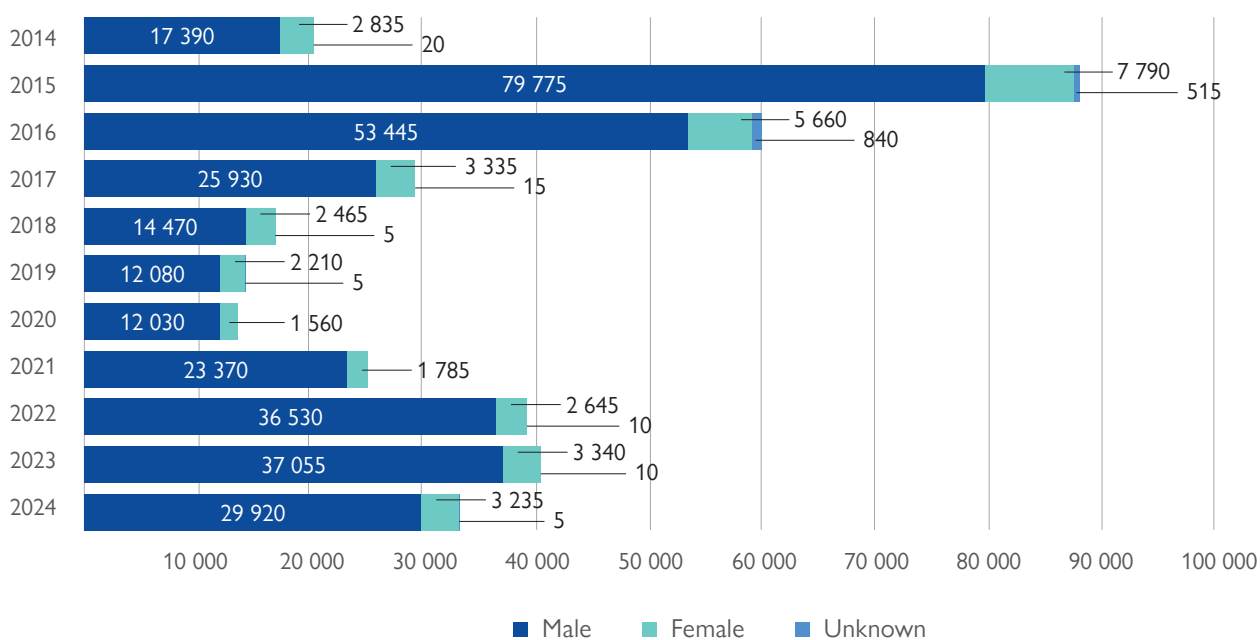
Based on registered arrivals, about 41 per cent of unaccompanied minors arrived in Italy and Malta in 2024 via the Central Mediterranean route (from Libya and Tunisia, partly from Algeria and Türkiye by sea); 33 per cent arrived in Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus via the Eastern Mediterranean route (from Türkiye, partly also from Lebanon and Libya by land and sea); and 26 per cent arrived via the Western Mediterranean route (from Algeria and Morocco to the Spanish mainland and the Balearic Islands of Spain by sea, as well as to the autonomous Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla by land) and the Western African Atlantic route (from Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal to the Canary Islands of Spain, by sea) in Spain (IOM, 2024b; UNHCR et al., 2025).

¹¹ The data refers to arrivals in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain via Mediterranean routes and the West African Atlantic route. Limitations of the data arise, for example, because not all migration routes to Europe are recorded and the migration takes place in mixed migration movements or largely irregularly and is therefore difficult to trace.

2.2 UNACCOMPANIED MINORS APPLYING FOR INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

From 2014 to 2024, 15.1 per cent of all asylum seekers in the EU under the age of 18 were unaccompanied (Eurostat, 2025b).¹² Figure 1 below shows the number of asylum applications by unaccompanied minors during this period.

Figure 1: EU 27: Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers by gender, 2014–2024



Source: Eurostat, n.d.a.

In 2024, unaccompanied minors submitted 33,160 applications for international protection in the EU. This corresponds to a decrease of about 20 per cent compared to the previous year (40,405 applications), in which a high since 2016 had been recorded. In Austria, the largest decrease (79%) was recorded in 2024 compared to the previous year (Eurostat, 2025a). According to the EUAA, the EU-wide decline was almost exclusively due to significantly fewer asylum applications from unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan and the Syrian Arab Republic. This decline was already evident in the countries along the Balkan routes, where fewer irregular border crossings were registered; this is attributed to regional efforts to actively curb irregular migration and combat smuggling networks (EUAA, 2025b).

More than three-quarters of all asylum applications by unaccompanied minors in 2024 were filed in Germany (approx. 13,000), Greece (approx. 4,700), the Netherlands (approx. 3,900), Bulgaria (approx. 2,600) and Italy (approx. 2,000; EUAA, 2025b).

¹² It should be noted that not all persons registered as minors have undergone a final verification of their age.

2.3 UNACCOMPANIED MINORS OUTSIDE THE ASYLUM SYSTEM

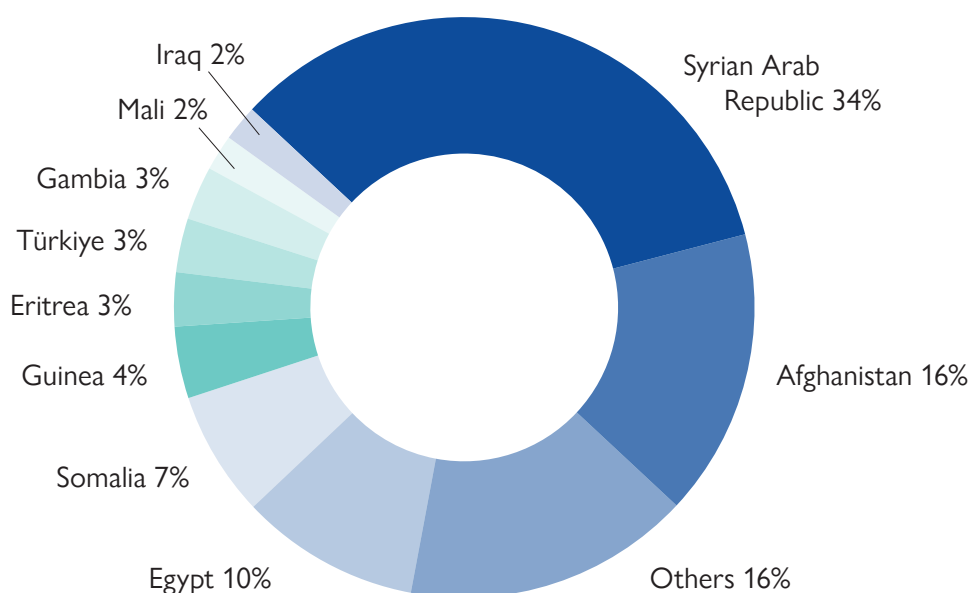
As mentioned, not all unaccompanied minors arriving in the EU apply for asylum; in some countries, they are primarily registered in the child protection system. Under child protection systems outside the asylum system, 18,625 unaccompanied minors were registered in Italy, 13,554 unaccompanied minors in France, 12,878 unaccompanied minors in Spain, 4,361 unaccompanied minors in Greece and 1,926 unaccompanied minors in Croatia (EMN, 2025a:36–37).

2.4 PROFILES OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS ARRIVING IN EUROPE

Almost two-thirds of the unaccompanied minors who applied for international protection in the EU, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway and Switzerland in 2024 came from three countries of origin: Syrian Arab Republic (approx. 12,000 applications), Afghanistan (approx. 6,300) and Egypt (approx. 3,400; EUAA, 2025b).

In the 27 Member States of the EU, Somalia, Guinea, Eritrea, Türkiye, the Gambia, Mali and Iraq were among the other top 10 countries of origin (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2: EU 27: Top 10 countries of origin of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in 2024



Note: The age specification corresponds to the information provided by the applicant at the time of application.
Source: Eurostat, n.d.a.

As in previous years, the majority of unaccompanied minors were male (nine out of ten) and between 16 and 17 years old (seven out of ten). Just over a fifth were between 14 and 15 years old, and less than a tenth were younger than 14 years (EUAA, 2025b).

Between July 2023 and November 2025, IOM conducted interviews with 409 (accompanied and unaccompanied) migrant children aged 15 to 17 years after arriving in Europe as part of the “Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)”.¹³ These interviews provide more detailed conclusions about the profile of minors.

In the interviews, 32 per cent of the minors surveyed stated that they had not completed any formal education; 22 per cent had completed the first secondary level, 41 per cent had a primary school education.

The reasons given for leaving their country of origin were economic reasons (39%), war or conflict (33%), violence against them (25%), insufficient access to utilities (19%) and slow environmental change (8%), with multiple answers being possible.

More than half of the respondents had been on the journey for more than three months, for 25 per cent the journey had already lasted more than a year; 65 per cent had traveled through three or more countries.

Sixty-one per cent indicated Italy as the destination country, Germany 15 per cent and Greece 13 per cent. France was indicated as the destination country by 2 per cent, and 1 per cent each named Belgium, the United Kingdom, Spain and the Netherlands as the destination countries. Three per cent stated “Europe” as their destination.

13 Both accompanied and unaccompanied minors were interviewed; 96 per cent were male. 27 per cent were nationals from Egypt, 18 per cent of Afghanistan, 12 per cent of the Gambia, 6 per cent of the Syrian Arab Republic, 5 per cent each were nationals of Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Pakistan; 3 per cent of Morocco, 2 per cent each of Iraq and Somalia. The interviews were conducted in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Italy, Kosovo [references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999)], North Macedonia and Montenegro (own data analysis of the IOM/DTM Flow Monitoring Surveys and other surveys at Flow Monitoring Points by the study authors, 03.07.2023–14.11.2025, CMR, EMR, ITA–WBR, WBR, age range 15–17). A report with DTM results was published in 2024, for further information see IOM, 2024a.

2.5 THE PROTECTION OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Unaccompanied minors are among the “most vulnerable groups” in the European migration system (EMN, 2025b). In recent years, the EU has adopted a wide range of policies and legal measures to ensure its protection and ensure that its rights are fully respected. These measures are based on fundamental principles of EU law, in particular Article 3 of the Treaty on EU (TEU)¹⁴ and Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU,¹⁵ which state that the child's best interests are to be regarded as a priority aspect. Although the EU is not a party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),¹⁶ the CRC serves as a key guide for the design of EU child protection acts and policies. Member States have primary responsibility for child protection systems; the EU supports and coordinates, such as via strategies, funding programmes and guidelines.

In 2017, the European Commission presented a communication that provided for a series of measures to protect children in migration. These included protection along migration routes, the rapid identification, registration and support of children, the provision of adequate reception conditions and access to educational opportunities, medical care and psychosocial support, as well as the prevention of exploitation and trafficking and the protection of missing children (European Commission, 2017). These policy efforts have been deepened with the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021, which highlighted the particular vulnerability of unaccompanied minors and stressed that they are more likely to be victims of abuse, violence or exploitation (European Commission, 2021a). A 2024 recommendation from the Commission addresses the development and strengthening of integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child and also provides for specific measures in the migration context (e.g. regarding the representation and guardianship of unaccompanied migrant children; European Commission, 2024).

Under the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), several legal instruments already existed before the latest reform in 2024 which contained specific provisions for unaccompanied minors. For example, the Reception Directive provides¹⁷ not only for a decent standard of living, access to basic health care, education and housing, but also age-appropriate accommodation, taking into account gender and other specific reception needs for unaccompanied minors. The Dublin III Regulation,¹⁸ which was still in force at the time of the study, gives priority to family reunification for unaccompanied children. If a minor lodges an asylum application in a Member State, his:her application must be examined in the Member State where a parent, responsible adult, sibling or relative who can care for him or her is legally resident, provided that this is in the best interests of the child; if necessary, the minor must be transferred to this country. Member States in which an unaccompanied minor has lodged an application for international protection are obliged

14 Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, OJ C 202, pp. 1–388.

15 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, OJ L 202, pp. 389–405.

16 Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, A/RES/44/25, United Nations Treaty Series vol. 1577.

17 Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection, OJ L 180, pp. 96–116.

18 Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (Dublin III Regulation), OJ L 180, pp. 31–59.

to identify the family members, siblings or relatives in other Member States (see also [Chapter 4.1.2](#)). The Asylum Procedures Directive¹⁹ provides for specific procedural safeguards, including the obligation for Member States to specifically designate a competent person to represent and assist unaccompanied minors in asylum procedures to ensure the best interests of the child and, if necessary, to exercise the child's legal capacity and legal capacity. The Qualification Directive²⁰ tightens the provisions on the tracing of family members of children who have been granted international protection.

With the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in 2024, the standards of responsibility and protection have been updated and partly codified:

- The Asylum and Migration Management Regulation²¹ replaces the Dublin III Regulation²² and establishes that the Member State in whose territory a family member, sibling or other relative who can care for the minor is legally resident is primarily responsible for unaccompanied minors; in the absence of such a reference person, the Member State in which the application was first registered is responsible – always under Priority of the child's best interests. In addition, the requirements for the representation and assistance of unaccompanied minors in all proceedings have been expanded.
- The Qualifications Regulation²³ strengthens the right to guardianship and specifies the duties of the guardian; in the case of internal protection alternatives, the availability of sustainable and appropriate care and custody arrangements must be examined in the best interests of the child.
- The Asylum Procedures Regulation²⁴ contains requirements for the representation of unaccompanied minors as well as age determinations and states that it is particularly important to ensure that minors are informed in a child-friendly manner.
- The Reception Regulation²⁵ provides for the appointment of a representative for unaccompanied minors within 15 working days to look after the minor's welfare, represent, support and act on their behalf. It

19 Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (Asylum Procedures Directive), OJ L 180, pp. 60–95.

20 Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast) (Qualification Directive), OJ L 337, pp. 9–26.

21 Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on asylum and migration management, amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1147 and repealing Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 OJ L 2024/1351.

22 Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast), OJ L 180, pp. 31–59.

23 Regulation (EU) 2024/1347 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted, amending Council Directive 2003/109/EC and repealing Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, OJ L L 2024/1347.

24 Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union and repealing Directive 2013/32/EU (Asylum Procedures Regulation), OJ L 2024/1348.

25 Directive (EU) 2024/1346 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection, OJ L 2024/1346.

regulates child-friendly accommodation, strengthens control over the work of representatives and limits detention to the most exceptional cases in the case of separate accommodation and child-friendly facilities.

- The Screening Regulation²⁶ stipulates that unaccompanied minors must be accompanied by a representative during the screening process and have access to an adequate standard of living and health care.
- The Eurodac Regulation²⁷, with explicit reference to the purpose of improving the protection of (unaccompanied) minors, allows biometric registration from the age of six, whereby minors must be accompanied by trained professionals and coercion is only permissible as a last resort. This registration is intended to help establish the identity of children and to assist Member States in determining “whether there are family members in another Member State or ties to another Member State, and to trace missing children, including for law enforcement purposes.”

In addition, the EU Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims was revised in 2024.²⁸ The Directive sees children as “one of the most vulnerable groups targeted by criminal organizations involved in trafficking in human beings” and introduced stronger tools for law enforcement and judicial authorities to investigate and prosecute new forms of exploitation (the exploitation of forced marriage, illegal adoption and surrogacy), as well as to prescribe national referral mechanisms, improve coordination with asylum authorities and oblige EU Member States to criminalize the knowingly using the services of trafficked persons. Article 16 of the Directive obliges Member States to support, care for and protect unaccompanied minors, taking into account their personal circumstances.

In addition to the legal framework, there are a number of standards, recommendations and measures to support EU Member States in providing the necessary protection and assistance to unaccompanied minors, such as: the “Practical Tools and Guides” of the European Asylum Agency EUAA (EUAA, 2024) and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2023), the European Guardianship Network (EGN),²⁹ the EU-wide hotline for missing children,³⁰ or relevant data collection (EMN, 2024a; EUAA, 2025b).

26 Regulation (EU) 2024/1356 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 introducing the screening of third-country nationals at the external borders and amending Regulations (EC) No 767/2008, (EU) 2017/2226, (EU) 2018/1240 and (EU) 2019/817 (Screening Regulation), OJ L 2024/1356.

27 Regulation (EU) 2024/1358 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on the establishment of ‘Eurodac’ for the comparison of biometric data in order to effectively apply Regulations (EU) 2024/1351 and (EU) 2024/1350 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Directive 2001/55/EC and to identify illegally staying third-country nationals and stateless persons and on requests for the comparison with Eurodac data by Member States’ law enforcement authorities and Europol for law enforcement purposes, amending Regulations (EU) 2018/1240 and (EU) 2019/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Regulation (EU) No 603/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council, OJ L 2024/1358.

28 Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, OJ L 2024/1712.

29 The EGN is a network of custody authorities and agencies, (local) authorities and international and non-governmental organizations that aims to promote guardianship and improve custody services for unaccompanied minors in the EU Member States by sharing good practices, expertise and other relevant information, as well as exchanging ideas and cooperation on common challenges and cross-border work (EGN, n.d.).

30 The hotline for missing children offers free help via the number 116000 if minors are missing or have run away. It is a pan-European number that has been reserved by the European Union since 2007 and regulated by EU law. The hotline is operated in 32 European countries by different organizations (Missing Children Europe, 2026). In Austria the number is run by *Rat auf Draht* (Rat auf Draht, 2026).

In parallel with developments at the EU level, measures have been strengthened in the Member States to improve the practical care and support of unaccompanied minors. This includes the further development of identification and registration procedures, the expansion of child-friendly forms of accommodation and the creation or improvement of national custody systems. Custody systems and approaches vary considerably across the EU. Many Member States have started to rely more on non-institutional forms of care, such as foster families or assisted living units, as these are considered more sustainable and child friendly. At the same time, legal and practical support for the transition to adulthood has been improved in several countries, as many unaccompanied minors reach the age of majority during their stay and face new challenges. However, there are still differences in the implementation of the protection of unaccompanied minors, in particular in the area of guardianship or custody, the quality of accommodation and transitional support for young adults (EMN, 2024a).

3. UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN AUSTRIA

The following chapter describes the legal and institutional framework that characterizes the stay of unaccompanied minors in Austria and largely determines how they are received, cared for and dealt with in the asylum procedure. This context is central to understanding the situation of unaccompanied minors in Austria and the risk and protective factors described further below.

3.1 GENERAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

3.1.1 Children's rights in Austria

In addition to the universally applicable human rights guarantees, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)³¹ is the central international human rights instrument for the protection of children. It defines children as anyone under the age of 18 and thus also unaccompanied minors. The Convention obliges States to respect, protect and promote the rights of children and includes civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, such as protection against economic exploitation, drugs, sexual abuse, child trafficking and any other form of exploitation and violence,³² as well as the right of refugee children to special protection.³³ The prohibition of discrimination,³⁴ the priority of the best interests of the child,³⁵ the right to life³⁶ and the right to participation³⁷ are the four basic principles of the CRC.

The CRC is supplemented by three optional protocols, of which the protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography is particularly relevant to this study.³⁸

In addition to the CRC, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also includes guarantees for children that are relevant to the study, such as the right to inclusion and the prohibition of discrimination.³⁹

Other significant elements of the child rights framework can be found in General Comment No. 6 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee, 2005) on the treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, and Joint General Comments Nos 3/22 and 4/23 on

31 Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, A/RES/44/25, United Nations Treaty Series vol. 1577.

32 Art. 32 ff CRC.

33 Art. 22 CRC.

34 Art. 2 CRC.

35 Art. 3 para. 1 CRC.

36 Art. 6 para. 1 CRC.

37 Art. 13 para. 1 CRC.

38 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, A/RES/54/263. The other two Optional Protocols are the Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (A/RES/54/263) and the Communications Protocol (A/RES/66/138), which allows individual complaints to be lodged with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The latter was signed by Austria but not ratified.

39 Art. 3, 4 and 7 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 24 January 2007, A/RES/61/106, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 2515.

children's rights in the context of international migration (Committee on Migrant Workers and Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2017).

At the European level, the instruments of the Council of Europe and the European Union (EU) in particular form the regional framework for the protection of children's rights:

The European Convention on Human Rights of the Council of Europe (ECHR),⁴⁰ which has constitutional status in Austria, forms the central instrument of protection, but contains only a few legal provisions specific to children.⁴¹ However, the CRC must be considered in the interpretation of all the provisions of the ECHR (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:41). In addition, the Council of Europe has developed complementary strategies, in particular the current Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2022-2027 (Council of Europe, 2022), which explicitly takes children in the context of migration into account. In parallel, the Council of Europe created an Action Plan on Protecting Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe in 2017 (Council of Europe, 2017), which aimed at protection from exploitation, access to education and child-friendly procedures, and the Action Plan for the Protection of Vulnerable Persons in the Migration and Asylum Context 2021-2025 also refers to children and, in some cases, explicitly unaccompanied minors (Council of Europe, 2021). In addition, in 2020, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted Resolution 2324 on "Missing refugee and migrant children in Europe" (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2020), which once again obliges the states to respect the best interests of the child as a primary consideration, but also to exclude detention and to appoint guardians at an early stage.

At the EU level, in addition to the Treaty on European Union,⁴² the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights ensures the protection and care that children need for their well-being and places the best interests of the child at the centre of government action.⁴³ In addition, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) regulates specific provisions for minors in its core instruments (see [Chapter 2.5](#)).

At the national level, Austria has ratified the CRC and partially constitutionally anchored it through the Federal Constitutional Act on the Rights of the Child.⁴⁴ This Act guarantees central principles, such as the primary consideration of the child's best interests,⁴⁵ special protection for children without parents,⁴⁶ the prohibition of child labour⁴⁷ as well as the right of every child to protection from economic and sexual exploitation and the right⁴⁸ to adequate compensation and rehabilitation for every child who is a victim of violence or exploitation.⁴⁹

40 European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), 4 November 1950, ETS No. 005.

41 Cf. Art. 5 para. 1 lit. D and Art. 6 ECHR.

42 In particular Art. 3 para. 3 sentence 2, Art. 3 para. 5 Treaty on European Union, OJ C 202, pp. 1–388.

43 Art. 24 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, OJ C 202, pp. 389–405.

44 Federal Constitutional Act on the Rights of the Child, FLG. I No. 4/2011, promulgated on 15 February 2011, in force since 16 February 2011.

45 Art. 1 Federal Constitutional Act on the Rights of the Child.

46 Art. 2 para. 2 Federal Constitutional Act on the Rights of the Child.

47 Art. 3 Federal Constitutional Act on the Rights of the Child.

48 Art. 5 Federal Constitutional Act on the Rights of the Child.

49 For a critical examination of the significance of the Federal Constitutional Act on the Rights of the Child in selected reference areas see the current analysis of Austrian and European case law by Czech et al., 2025.

3.1.2 Child protection and guardianship of unaccompanied minors

The Austrian child and youth welfare system aims to support children's rights to promote their development and upbringing, to protect children from all forms of violence and to strengthen the educational power of families. Since 2020, legislative competence for matters relating to child and youth welfare has been vested entirely with the provinces (Federal Chancellery, n.d.). Child and youth welfare is therefore regulated in laws of the nine Austrian provinces. Compliance with common standards is foreseen in an agreement between the federal government and the provinces.⁵⁰ The services of child and youth welfare are provided at the district level; the responsible authorities are district administrations or magistrates in cities with their own statute as child and youth welfare authorities (Federal Chancellery, n.d.)

The Federal Child and Youth Welfare Service Act 2013⁵¹ regulates certain matters that fall within the legislative competence of the federal government, such as the duty to report (Article 37). Accordingly, authorities, care and counselling facilities for minors and healthcare professionals are obliged to inform the child and youth welfare service of the suspicion of child endangerment in cases where there is a reasonable suspicion that unaccompanied minors are affected by violence, exploitation or abuse (Task Force for Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings, n.d.:11). The child and youth welfare service must apply for all court orders with regards to guardianship that are necessary to safeguard the best interests of the child. In the event of imminent danger, the child and youth welfare service can preliminarily take the necessary measures for care and upbringing even without a court order (Article 211 of the General Civil Code).⁵²

The legal basis for guardianship in Austria is the General Civil Code. Guardianship includes care and upbringing, legal representation and asset management (Articles 158 et seq. General Civil Code).

The General Civil Code generally provides that the child and youth welfare service of the province in which a minor is found or identified is automatically ("ex lege") responsible for guardianship if the parents are unknown or unreachable (Article 207 General Civil Code, "foundling paragraph").

However, as of the time of implementation of this study, the legal situation for unaccompanied minors who apply for asylum is different: According to the prevailing view, the provision of Article 207 of the General Civil Code is not applicable in such cases (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:83; Lukits, 2017). Therefore, in practice, the competent child and youth welfare service must first apply for the transfer of guardianship; and the court formally transfers guardianship to the child and youth welfare service. If an application for the transfer of guardianship is filed, an examination must first be carried out as to whether the parents are to be deprived of guardianship. In the case of unaccompanied minors, however, the parents are usually not available, which is why an absentee curator must first be appointed and only then is a person with guardianship appointed (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:113, 222). As described above,

50 Agreement between the Federal State and the Provinces on Child and Youth Welfare - Art. 15a Federal Constitutional Act, FLG. I No. 106/2019.

51 Federal Child and Youth Welfare Act 2013, FLG. I No. 69/201 in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 69/2019.

52 General Civil Code, collection of laws No. 946/1811, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 111/2025.

in the event of imminent danger (e.g. homelessness), the child and youth welfare can also take measures in the area of care and upbringing before the court transfers guardianship. Whether this option is used varies from province to province (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:114–115).

The application for the transfer of guardianship is usually only filed by the responsible child and youth welfare service if the unaccompanied minor is already accommodated in a facility at the provincial level. The specific procedures vary depending on age and province:

In most provinces, unaccompanied minors under the age of 14 are usually taken into the care of the locally competent child and youth welfare service immediately after identification, accommodated in a child and youth welfare facility and cared for there (see also [Chapter 3.3.1](#)). In some provinces, the responsible child and youth welfare service submits an application for the transfer of guardianship immediately after placement. Tyrol applies the above-mentioned Article 207 General Civil Code analogously and assumes that it is responsible as a child and youth welfare service from the time of the apprehension of an unaccompanied minor. In Lower Austria, on the other hand, unaccompanied minors under the age of 14 are initially accommodated in the federal reception facility in the municipality of Traiskirchen; normally the child and youth welfare service does not apply for guardianship of these minors. The locally responsible child and youth welfare service only becomes active in exceptional cases if the minors concerned are in a dangerous situation (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:114–115).

Unaccompanied minors aged 14 and up are usually accommodated in federal reception facilities after arrival in Austria (see [Chapter 3.3.1](#)) and remain without guardianship during the admission procedure, as no child and youth welfare service considers itself responsible at this time. In these cases, an application for the transfer of guardianship is usually only made after admission to the asylum procedure and assignment to the basic care of a province, which is normally the result of the admission to the asylum procedure (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:113–114; UNHCR Austria, 2019:5–7). In practice – as presented in [Chapter 3.2.3](#) – it can take on average several weeks or months before a guardian is appointed.

This lack of guardianship in the initial phase of residence means that unaccompanied minors aged 14 or older generally have no legal representation outside the asylum procedure. The Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services' legal counselling only represents unaccompanied minors in this context, not in other matters.⁵³ Decisions related to medical treatment that is not urgent, school attendance, education, everyday matters or voluntary return are often postponed during this time or made on an unclear legal basis (UNHCR Austria, 2019:6). Basic care and guardianship are seen as different areas of responsibility. In some cases, however, reception facilities or legal counsellors perform individual tasks that fall within the area of responsibility of persons with guardianship (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:113–114) – as a substitute within the framework of basic care and in coordination with the child and youth welfare service.⁵⁴

53 Art. 10 para. 3 Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum Procedures Act, FLG. I No. 87/2012, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 83/2022.

54 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, V/B/9, 29 January 2026.

3.1.3 Child trafficking

In the context of migration, child trafficking is a particularly relevant human rights violation, which is a criminal offence punishable by the courts under Austrian law (Working Group against Child Trafficking, 2024). International standards for combating trafficking in human beings are based on a variety of legal instruments at the international and regional level. For Austria, as an EU Member State and a State Party to the relevant international agreements, this results in a comprehensive framework of international and European law. The central legal bases include:

- the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)⁵⁵ including the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography;⁵⁶
- the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC)⁵⁷ and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol);⁵⁸
- ILO Conventions No. 138⁵⁹ on Minimum Age and No. 182⁶⁰ on the Prohibition of the Worst Forms of Child Labour;
- the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings⁶¹ and the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention);⁶²
- the European Convention on Human Rights of the Council of Europe (ECHR);⁶³
- and, at the EU level, in particular Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings (as amended by the revised Directive 2024/1712),⁶⁴ Directive 2004/81/EC on residence permits for victims of trafficking in human beings,⁶⁵ Directive 2011/93/EU on combating the sexual abuse and sexual

55 Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, A/RES/44/25, United Nations Treaty Series vol. 1577.

56 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, 6 March 2001, A/RES/54/263, United Nations Treaty Series vol. 2171.

57 UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), 15 November 2000, A/RES/55/25, United Nations Treaty Series vol. 2225.

58 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 15 November 2000, A/RES/55/25, United Nations Treaty Series vol. 2237.

59 ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), 26 June 1973, ILO NORMLEX Doc. No. C138.

60 ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182), 17 June 1999, ILO NORMLEX Doc. No. C182.

61 Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, 3 May 2005, Council of Europe Treaty Series No. 197.

62 Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, 25 October 2007, Council of Europe Treaty Series No. 201.

63 European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), 4 November 1950, ETS No. 005.

64 Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, in the version of Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, OJ L 2024/1712.

65 Council Directive 2004/81/EC of 29 April 2004 on the residence permit issued to third-country nationals who are victims of trafficking in human beings or who have been the subject of an action to facilitate illegal immigration, who cooperate with the competent authorities, OJ L 261, pp. 19–23.

exploitation of children,⁶⁶ Directive 2012/29/EU on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime⁶⁷ and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. In addition, there are European Union strategies, such as the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2021–2025 (European Commission, 2021b), the EU Strategy on Victims' Rights 2020–2025 (European Commission, 2020) and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2020–2024 (European Commission, 2021a).

These international obligations have been implemented through national legal provisions in Austria. The criminal offence of human trafficking is regulated in Article 104a of the Criminal Code.⁶⁸ A distinction is made between human trafficking of adults⁶⁹ and child trafficking. Accordingly, child trafficking is to be understood as the recruitment, accommodation or other reception, transport or offering or passing on of a minor to others with the intention of exploitation.⁷⁰ Exploitation includes sexual exploitation, exploitation through organ harvesting, labour exploitation, exploitation for begging and exploitation for the purpose of committing criminal acts.⁷¹ For the extension of the forms of exploitation by the EU Directive on Trafficking in Human Beings, see [Chapter 2.5](#).

Other relevant offences can be found in Article 217 of the Criminal Code (cross-border prostitution trade), Article 208a of the Criminal Code (initiation of sexual contact with minors), Article 215a of the Criminal Code (child pornography), Article 104 of the Criminal Code (slavery), Article 219 of the Criminal Code (pimping), Article 116 of the Aliens Police Act⁷² (exploitation of foreigners) and Article 28c of the Act Governing the Employment of Foreign Nationals⁷³ (illegal employment of minor aliens). The Code of Criminal Procedure contains special protection rights for victims of crime.⁷⁴ Victims of child trafficking are considered to be particularly vulnerable victims⁷⁵ and are entitled to child-friendly questioning, for example by same-sex investigators, gentle video interrogations, the involvement of a person of trust.⁷⁶

3.1.4 Legal framework for the asylum procedure

The Geneva Refugee Convention⁷⁷ and its Protocol⁷⁸ form the foundation of international refugee protection. The convention applies regardless of age, but according to UNHCR's interpretation, it requires child-sensitive application. The UNHCR Guidelines on General Principles and Procedures for the Treatment

66 Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, OJ L 335, pp. 1-14.

67 Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, OJ L 315, pp. 57-73.

68 Criminal Code, FLG. No. 60/1974, in the version of FLG. I No. 135/2023.

69 Art. 104a para. 1 Criminal Code.

70 Art. 104a para. 5 Criminal Code.

71 Art. 104a para. 3 Criminal Code.

72 Aliens Police Act 2005, FLG. I No. 100/2005, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 135/2023.

73 Act Governing the Employment of Foreign Nationals, FLG. No. 218/1975, in the version of FLG.. I No. 204/2023.

74 Articles 65 et seqq. Code of Criminal Procedure 1975, FLG. I No. 631/1975, in the version of federal law FLG. I. No. 135/2023.

75 Art. 66a Code of Criminal Procedure 1975.

76 Art. 65b Code of Criminal Procedure 1975.

77 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951, A/RES/429/5, United Nations Treaty Series vol. 189.

78 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, 31 January 1967, A/RES/2198/21, United Nations Treaty Series vol. 606.

of Asylum-Seeking Unaccompanied Minors require that the best interests of the child should be the guiding principle of all decisions.⁷⁹ In 2021, UNHCR supplemented these standards with new “Best Interest Procedure Guidelines”⁸⁰ that further elaborate procedures for determining the best interests of the child.

According to General Comment No. 6 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on the treatment of unaccompanied and separated children, the definition of refugee is to be interpreted in an age- and gender-sensitive manner.⁸¹ Accordingly, child trafficking, sexual abuse and other forms of exploitation, abuse and violence can constitute independent grounds for asylum if they are linked to one of the characteristics mentioned in the Convention (race, religion, nationality, social group, political opinion).⁸²

Austrian asylum and aliens law includes several sources of law, including the Asylum Act,⁸³ the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum Procedures Act,⁸⁴ the Aliens Police Act,⁸⁵ the Settlement and Residence Act⁸⁶ and the Basic Care Agreement between the federal government and the provinces⁸⁷ as well as the basic care acts of the federal government and of the provinces. These laws regulate access to international protection, procedural safeguards, accommodation and alternative forms of residence. Furthermore, provisions from the General Administrative Procedures Act⁸⁸ and, in appeal proceedings, the Administrative Courts Procedure Act and, subsequently,⁸⁹ the Supreme Administrative Court Act⁹⁰ and the Constitutional Court Act⁹¹ are relevant for the asylum procedure in Austria.

The legal representation of unaccompanied minors in the asylum procedure is regulated in Article 10 Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum Procedures Act. From the moment they arrive at the initial reception centre of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, the legal counselling of the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services takes over the legal representation for the admission procedure. This representation is limited exclusively to the asylum procedure and is only valid as long as the unaccompanied minor is residing in a facility of the federal basic care system. After admission to the procedure and assignment to a reception facility in one of the nine provinces, the legal representation for the asylum procedure is transferred to the locally responsible child and youth welfare.⁹² Guardianship is not subject to asylum or aliens law (see [Chapter 3.1.2](#)).

79 UNHCR Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in Dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum, Geneva, February 1997. Die Guidelines are legally non-binding.

80 UNHCR Guideline on the Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child, Geneva, May 2021.

81 General Comment No. 6: Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin, CRC/GC/2005/6, 1 September 2005, p. 21.

82 Art. 34-26 General Comment No. 6: Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin.

83 Asylum Act 2005, FLG. I No. 100/2005, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 67/2024.

84 Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum Procedures Act, FLG. I No. 87/2012, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 83/2022.

85 Aliens Police Act, FGL. I No. 100/2005, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 106/2022.

86 Settlement and Residence Act, FLG. I No. 100/2005, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 67/2024.

87 Agreement between the Federal State and the Provinces on Basic Care - Art. 15a Federal Constitutional Act, FLG No. 80/2004, in the version of FLG. I No. 3/2025.

88 General Administrative Procedures Act 1991, FLG. I No. 51/1991, in the version of FLG. I No. 157/2024.

89 Administrative Courts Procedure Act, FLG. I No. 33/2013, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 147/2024.

90 Supreme Administrative Court Act, FLG. I No. 10/1985, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 88/2024.

91 Constitutional Court Act, FLG. I No. 85/1953, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 88/2024.

92 For details on the accommodation system of unaccompanied minors in Austria see [Chapter 3.2.2](#) and [Chapter 3.2.3](#).

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which enters into application in June 2026, will lead to a comprehensive change in Austrian legal framework regarding asylum and immigration, which was still in the legislative process at the time the study was prepared (see also [Chapter 2.5](#)).

A detailed description of the asylum procedure can be found under [Chapter 3.2.1](#) due to its relevance to the situation of unaccompanied minors in Austria.

3.2 THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE IN AUSTRIA

3.2.1 Process of the asylum procedure

The asylum procedure in Austria begins with an application for international protection (“the asylum application”; Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:105; Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, n.d.:10; UNHCR Austria, 2021).

A number of special regulations apply to unaccompanied minors:

Unaccompanied minors aged 14 or older can apply for asylum on their own after their arrival in the territory, like adults (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:106). The application can be submitted to any police station or police officer. An identification procedure is carried out during the application. At this time, fingerprints are taken, stored in the Eurodac system and compared in the European database. This comparison is used to determine whether the person has already been registered in another EU Member State (Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, n.d.:10).

This is followed by an initial police interview, which is carried out with the support of an interpreter. Before the application and initial questioning, there is no possibility of legal advice for unaccompanied minors aged 14 or older. The initial questioning is therefore carried out exclusively in the presence of the interviewing police officers and the interpreters. The police officers are in constant exchange with the official of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, who makes a prognosis decision on the further course of the proceedings. These officials are trained in the best interests of the child, and in some cases also on the topic of human trafficking. One focus of the exchange is the possible special vulnerability of the applicant. If there is any doubt about the information about the person’s identity and, in particular, age, a procedure for the determination of age can be initiated.⁹³

From the moment they arrive at an initial reception facility, which in the case of unaccompanied minors aged 14 or older usually takes place immediately after the initial interview, the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services is responsible for them as legal representation in the first-instance proceedings before the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:106).

93 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 29 January 2026.

In the case of unaccompanied minors under the age of 14, the asylum application is usually submitted by the competent legal counsellor of the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services as the legal representative in the asylum procedure.⁹⁴ The initial police questioning must be carried out in the presence of a legal counsellor. In addition, an employee of the responsible child and youth welfare service regularly participates in the application process and initial interview (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:106). This initial police interview is only carried out at a single police station (Traiskirchen) via specific officers of this station.⁹⁵

The initial interview is primarily used to establish the identity and the travel route (Austrian Parliament, 2005:44) as well as the location of the parents or guardian.⁹⁶ The police officers also ask initial questions about the grounds for asylum. In the initial interview, one main focus is on migrant smuggling and criminal offences.⁹⁷ The law enforcement officers work closely with trained staff of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum.⁹⁸

Based on this interview, the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum makes a predictive decision as provided for in Articles 42 and 43 of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum Procedures Act, determining whether admission to the asylum procedure is likely or whether, according to the Dublin III Regulation, another EU Member State may be responsible.⁹⁹

The first-instance asylum procedure before the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum is divided into two phases: the admission procedure and the substantive procedure. In the admission procedure, the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum examines whether Austria or another EU Member State, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway or Switzerland, is responsible for conducting the asylum procedure. This responsibility is governed by Dublin III Regulation. For this purpose, the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum conducts an interview in which the travel route of the unaccompanied minor is determined. Legal counsellors are present at these appointments as legal representation; in the case of minors under the age of 14, representatives of the child and youth welfare service are sometimes also present (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:506; Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, n.d.:12–15).

If the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum determines that another state is responsible, this is done in the form of a decision ordering the transfer to the responsible country. If it is established that Austria is responsible, admission to the asylum procedure is granted and the substantive procedure begins (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:107). In practice, proceedings concerning unaccompanied minors are conducted in Austria. Transfers of unaccompanied minors to another Dublin Member State occur only in a small number of cases (see [Chapter 4.1.2](#)).

94 Cf. Art. 10 para. 3 in conjunction with Art. 49 Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum Procedures Act.

95 Written input: Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 29 January 2026.

96 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 29 January 2026.

97 On the relevance for the asylum procedure see Kainradl, 2022.

98 Written input: Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 29 January 2026.

99 Ibid.

If the unaccompanied minor has been admitted to the asylum procedure and an age determination (if requested) has confirmed minority, the minor will be assigned to a specific province and taken to a care facility in that province (if the minor is not already staying there, see [Chapter 3.3](#)). The respective regional directorate or branch office of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, in whose area of responsibility the unaccompanied minor is now accommodated, is responsible for carrying out the substantive procedure. In this phase, the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum checks whether the legal requirements for granting a residence status in Austria are met. For this purpose, an in-depth personal interview takes place with experienced officials of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum and interpreters (Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, n.d.:12–15).

The Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum issues an administrative decision on the asylum application. The Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum decide on several possible residence statuses in Austria and a comprehensive examination is carried out in each individual case. Asylum status¹⁰⁰ is based on the definition of refugee in the Geneva Refugee Convention and is granted if there is a well-founded fear of personal persecution for one of the reasons for persecution specified therein. If the legal requirements for granting asylum status are not met, the granting of subsidiary protection¹⁰¹ is examined. In this context, the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum examines whether removal would pose a real danger to life, limb or freedom (e.g. in the case of a life-threatening security threat or lack of access to vital services in the country of origin). If neither asylum nor subsidiary protection is granted, the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum examines whether a residence permit can be granted for humanitarian reasons¹⁰² or for special protection.¹⁰³ The latter mainly pertains to trafficked persons if criminal or civil proceedings have been initiated against perpetrators. This residence permit is valid for one year and can be renewed annually if the legal requirements are met. If the legal requirements for granting a status are not met, the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum examines and, if necessary, issues a return decision at the same time as the decision and decides on the admissibility of removal to the respective country of origin (Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, n.d.:16–19).

The type of residence status is also of great importance for the subsequent family reunification of parents, spouses, registered partners or minor siblings of unaccompanied minors to Austria. The family reunification procedure is regulated in Article 35 Asylum Act and is based on the EU Family Reunification Directive.¹⁰⁴ If an unaccompanied minor is granted asylum, an application for family reunification can be filed immediately after the legally binding status has been granted and is not subject to specific conditions. Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, on the other hand, are subject to a three-year waiting period and must meet certain requirements (such as proof of accommodation customary in the area, comprehensive health insurance coverage and sufficient financial resources). An application for family reunification with the parents is no longer possible for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection after reaching the age of majority; for persons entitled to asylum

100 Art. 3 Asylum Act.

101 Art. 8 Asylum Act.

102 Art. 55 Asylum Act in conjunction with Art. 8 ECHR.

103 Art. 57 Asylum Act.

104 Council Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003 on the right to family reunification, OJ L 251, pp. 12-18.

who come of age during the asylum procedure, family reunification is possible under certain conditions within the first three months after status is granted, in accordance with case law (Ammann and Stiller, 2025). Due to the waiting period, many unaccompanied minors with subsidiary protection cannot bring their families to Austria (Ammann and Stiller, 2025; Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:77–79). In 2025, family reunification of beneficiaries of international protection was paused. However, for reasons of the child's best interests, the application may still be processed (see Ammann and Stiller, 2025:12, 33).

If no residence status is granted and the unaccompanied minor concerned does not agree with the decision of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, the minor can lodge an appeal with the Federal Administrative Court. The Federal Administrative Court may schedule oral hearings in which unaccompanied minors can be questioned again about their grounds for asylum in the presence of their legal representation (Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, n.d.:20). The Federal Administrative Court can dismiss the appeal, uphold it or refer the proceedings back to the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum for a new decision.

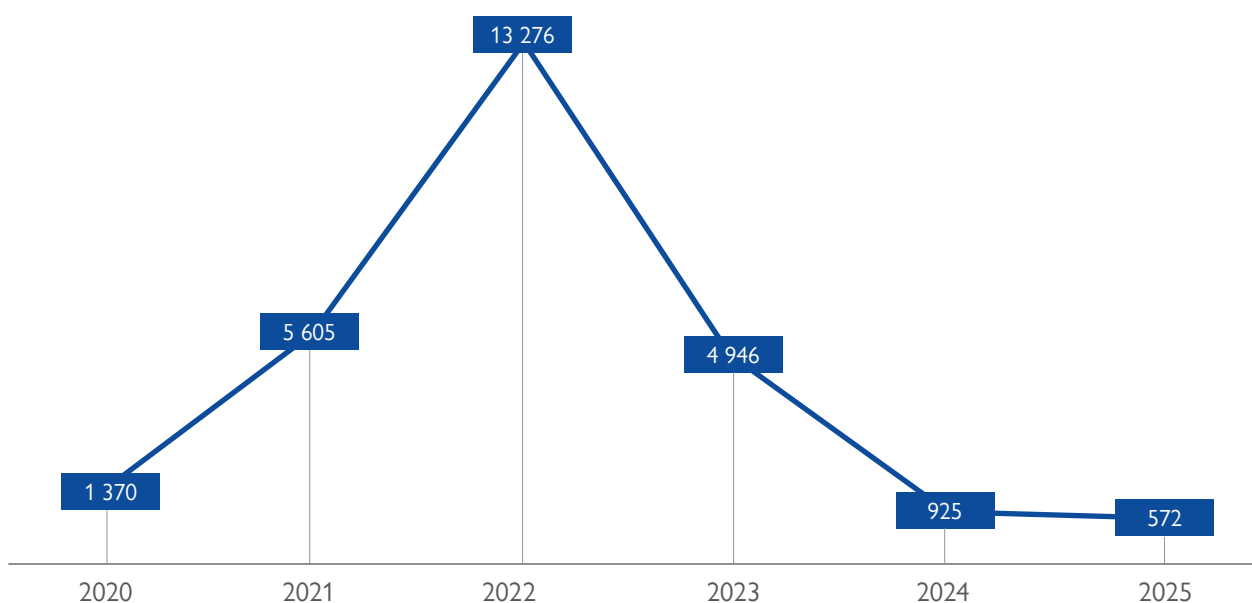
The unaccompanied minor may lodge a complaint against decisions of the Federal Administrative Court with the Constitutional Court and/or an appeal on a point of law with the Supreme Administrative Court. To appeal to the highest courts, a lawyer is mandatory. The legal representatives of the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services are not responsible for proceedings before the Constitutional Court or the Supreme Administrative Court. The filing of an appeal with the highest courts requires that a guardian has been appointed.¹⁰⁵ The Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum also has the option of filing a so-called administrative appeal against a decision of the Federal Administrative Court. As a rule, the highest courts do not decide on the merits of the case themselves, but refer the proceedings back to the Federal Administrative Court for a new decision or reject or dismiss the appeals (Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, n.d.:20).

3.2.2 Number of asylum applications of unaccompanied minors in Austria

The number of asylum applications by unaccompanied minors in Austria fluctuated significantly between 2020 and 2025 (see [Figure 3](#)). After 1,370 applications in 2020, the number rose to 5,605 in 2021 and peaked in 2022 with 13,276 applications. In the subsequent years, there was a significant decline, with 4,946 applications in 2023, 925 in 2024 and 572 applications in 2025 (Mol, 2021a, 2022, 2023a, 2024a, 2025a, 2026). These variations are in line with the trend in applications from unaccompanied minors in the EU (see [Chapter 2.1](#)) and the total number of asylum applications (minors and adults) in Austria during this period (Ammann, 2024).

¹⁰⁵ Written input: Lisa Wolfsegger, asylkoordination austria, 20 January 2026.

Figure 3: Number of asylum applications by unaccompanied minors in Austria, 2020–2025



Source: Mol 2021a, 2022, 2023a, 2024a, 2025a, 2026.

Throughout the period 2020–2025, unaccompanied minors were predominantly male applicants, with a consistently higher proportion of over 95 per cent; unaccompanied girls submitted only about 2 to 4 per cent of all applications. The vast majority of unaccompanied minors were aged 14 years or older, while unaccompanied minors under the age of 14 accounted for only about 5 to 10 per cent in all years (Mol, 2021a, 2022, 2023a, 2024a, 2025a, 2026).

Between 2020 and 2023, most unaccompanied minors came from Afghanistan, followed by the Syrian Arab Republic. In 2020, around 56 per cent of applicants were from Afghanistan and 28 per cent from the Syrian Arab Republic; in 2021, the figures were 60 per cent and 26 per cent, respectively. Applications from Afghan minor nationals reached the peak in 2022 with 9,371 applications (71%), while those from the Syrian Arab Republic recorded 1,864 applications (14%). In 2023, the number of applications from Afghan unaccompanied minors fell to 2,601 (53%), while minors from the Syrian Arab Republic accounted for the second largest group of applicants with 1,365 (28%). In 2024, there was a shift for the first time: the Syrian Arab Republic became the most significant country of origin with 464 applications (50%), replacing Afghanistan with only 264 applications (29%). Over the past few years, unaccompanied minors from Egypt, Somalia and Morocco have also lodged asylum claims in Austria, but in considerably smaller numbers (Mol, 2021a, 2022, 2023a, 2024a). In 2025, most applications were again made by Afghan unaccompanied minors (292 applications; 51%), followed by the Syrian Arab Republic (76 applications; 13%), Egypt (66 applications, 12%), Somalia (44 applications, 8%) and Türkiye (22 applications, 4%; Mol, 2026).

3.2.3 Age determination

Many of the relevant statistics concerning unaccompanied minor asylum seekers refer to the age declared by the applicants themselves. However, in practice, there are at times doubts on the part of the competent authorities about this information. If the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum doubts the stated age of an unaccompanied minor, an age determination procedure is initiated (Art. 2 para. 1 subpara. 25 Asylum Act in conjunction with Art. 13 para. 3 Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum Procedures Act). An attempt is first made to clarify the age based on existing documents or other evidence. If these are not present or not credible, the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum can order a medical examination, which is carried out gradually: After the initiation of an age determination procedure by the official of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum who is responsible for the prognosis decision (who raises doubts about the minority), the procedure is reviewed by the Coordination and Control Office of the Initial Reception Centre East. If doubts about the minority remain, the procedure is assigned to a team, where a team leader re-checks whether there are any doubts about the minority. If this is the case, the procedure is assigned to an official who summons the unaccompanied minor concerned for questioning with the assistance of a legal counsellor. If there are still doubts about the minority, a carpal X-ray, and – if there are still doubts – a multifactorial diagnosis of age, consisting of physical, dental and radiological examinations, are undertaken.¹⁰⁶ Psychosocial and developmental factors are taken into account in this procedure during the interrogation by the respective official and team leader.¹⁰⁷ If doubts remain after the conclusion of the investigations, the person concerned must be presumed to be a minor (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:119–121). Otherwise, after assessment, the age of majority will be determined by a commissioned expert and subsequently also by the respective official and the proceedings will be continued as an adult.¹⁰⁸

Age determination is of great importance, as the protection mechanisms for minors no longer apply if the age has been determined to be 18 years or older (i.e. accommodation in accommodation for adults, possibly the responsibility of another Member State under the Dublin III Regulation). The age determination is considered a procedural order (Art. 39 para. 2 General Administrative Procedures Act), which cannot be challenged independently (Supreme Administrative Court, 2016); an appeal is only possible against a substantive decision of the authority (administrative decision; Art. 63 para. 2 General Administrative Procedures Act).

Between 2021 and August 2025, a total of 3,336 carpal X-rays and 1,715 multifactorial examinations were carried out to determine age.¹⁰⁹ In 2022, the age was determined to be 18 years or above in 49.3 per cent of the multifactorial age examinations carried out; the share was 56.2 per cent in 2023, 51.9 per cent in 2024 and 63.3 per cent in the first half of 2025 (Mol, 2023d, 2024f, 2025f, 2025g).

The number of age assessment procedures initiated in the statistics of the Federal Ministry of the Interior (Mol) is significantly higher than the number of examinations actually carried out (Mol, 2023d, 2024f, 2025f, 2025g).

¹⁰⁶ Written input: Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 29 January 2026.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

The main reason given by the Mol for this is that persons who are registered as minors, but whose outward appearance indicates that they are of legal age, tend to withdraw from the asylum procedure by continuing their journey before the age determination procedure has been carried out. According to the Mol, the number of unaccompanied minors affected are not statistically recorded. In some cases, documents or statements by the applicants showing the actual age are also submitted before the examinations are carried out, so that a further age determination procedure is no longer necessary.¹¹⁰

3.3 RECEPTION OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS

3.3.1 The basic care system

Based on the relevant provisions of European law,¹¹¹ the basic care system in Austria is designed to cover the basic needs of persons in need of assistance who have applied for international protection or are considered to be in need of protection for other reasons.¹¹² The Agreement between the federal government and the provinces on basic care, which has been in force since 2004, forms the legal basis for the Austrian basic care system based on partnership. Both the federal government and the provinces are responsible for implementation.¹¹³ Basic care includes accommodation, food, medical care, clothing, information, advice and pocket money.¹¹⁴

In addition to the Basic Care Agreement, the Federal Basic Care Act¹¹⁵ and the respective provincial basic care laws of the provinces are particularly relevant at the national level. These provisions regulate responsibilities, types of benefits and organizational structures of the basic care in Austria.

The Federal Child and Youth Service Act¹¹⁶ and the respective child and youth welfare laws of the individual provinces are also relevant to the reception of minors.

The accommodation of unaccompanied minors who apply for asylum in Austria takes place at various levels, either in institutions of the federal basic care system, the provincial basic care system or in facilities of the respective responsible child and youth welfare service at the provincial level. The placement practice is based on the age of the unaccompanied minors who apply. However, there are sometimes major differences in the practical procedure among the individual provinces.¹¹⁷

110 Ibid.

111 These can be found in particular in the Reception Directive (Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast) n, OJ L 180, pp. 96-116). In the framework of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum the Directive (EU) 2024/1346 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection, OJ L 2024/1346 will be applied as of June 2026.

112 See Art. 1 and Art. 2 of the Agreement between the Federal State and the Provinces on Basic Care - Art. 15a Federal Constitutional Act.

113 See Art. 3-5 of the Agreement between the Federal State and the Provinces on Basic Care - Art. 15a Federal Constitutional Act.

114 Art. 6 para. 1 of the Agreement between the Federal State and the Provinces on Basic Care - Art. 15a Federal Constitutional Act

115 Federal Basic Care Act 2005, FLG. I No. 405/1991, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 100/2005.

116 Federal Child and Youth Welfare Act, FLG. I No. 69/1991, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 32/2018.

117 These distinctions in the accommodation of unaccompanied minors subsequently have a significant influence on the guardianship for individual unaccompanied minors (see [Chapter 3.1.3](#)).

After lodging their asylum application, unaccompanied minors aged 14 and older are initially cared for in federal basic care facilities run by the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:110).

For these minors, it is generally envisaged that they will be transferred to provincial basic care facilities after the asylum admission procedure has been concluded (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:87). Relevant funding guidelines of the provincial basic care services define the standards for the accommodation of unaccompanied minors, which are based on the child and youth welfare laws of the provinces and are subject to the supervision of child and youth welfare.¹¹⁸ However, as shown below, there may be considerable delays in some cases in the transfer to the provincial basic care (see [Chapter 3.3.3](#)).¹¹⁹

Unaccompanied minors under the age of 14, on the other hand, are generally accommodated directly in facilities of the respective responsible child and youth welfare service in a district of the province in which they are apprehended.¹²⁰ From the very beginning, the general benefit provisions of the child and youth welfare, which prescribe various quality standards, daily rates and supervision ratios, apply to them (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:111–112).

The Commission on the Best Interests of the Child noted that Lower Austria, and to some extent Burgenland, assume that the federal government is also responsible for unaccompanied minors under the age of 14 and thus primarily accommodate these minors in the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:111–112). According to information from the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, this is only the case if there are no places available in the facilities of the child and youth welfare service.¹²¹ Occasionally, unaccompanied minors under the age of 14 who have been apprehended by the police in Vienna are brought to the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen.¹²² The decision as to whether the minors are admitted there lies with the federal reception facility.¹²³

Since the majority of unaccompanied minors in Austria who apply for asylum are minors aged 14 or older (see [Chapter 3.2.2](#)), most of them are initially accommodated in federal reception facilities specially designed for the reception of unaccompanied minors. Most of the procedures in federal reception facilities are discontinued shortly after the submission of the asylum application due to the fact that the applicant's whereabouts are unknown (Bassermann and Spiegelfeld, 2018:91–92; Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:114, 192-193; GRETA, 2025:5, 15; Wolfsegger, 2025:37). For this reason, the focus of the following sections is on the situation of unaccompanied minors in the federal basic care system.

118 Written input: Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 13 February 2026.

119 The Agreement between the Federal State and the Provinces on Basic Care - Art. 15a Federal Constitutional Act stipulates that the distribution of foreigners from federal basic care to basic care in the provinces is to be based on a fixed quota. However, there is no mechanism in place if a province does not fulfil its quota (Wolfsegger, 2025:69, 74).

120 If unaccompanied minors are, however, accompanied by a caregiver (e.g. aunt, adult sibling, grandmother), they will be accommodated together in basic federal accommodation (Written input: Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 29 January 2026).

121 Written input: Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 29 January 2026.

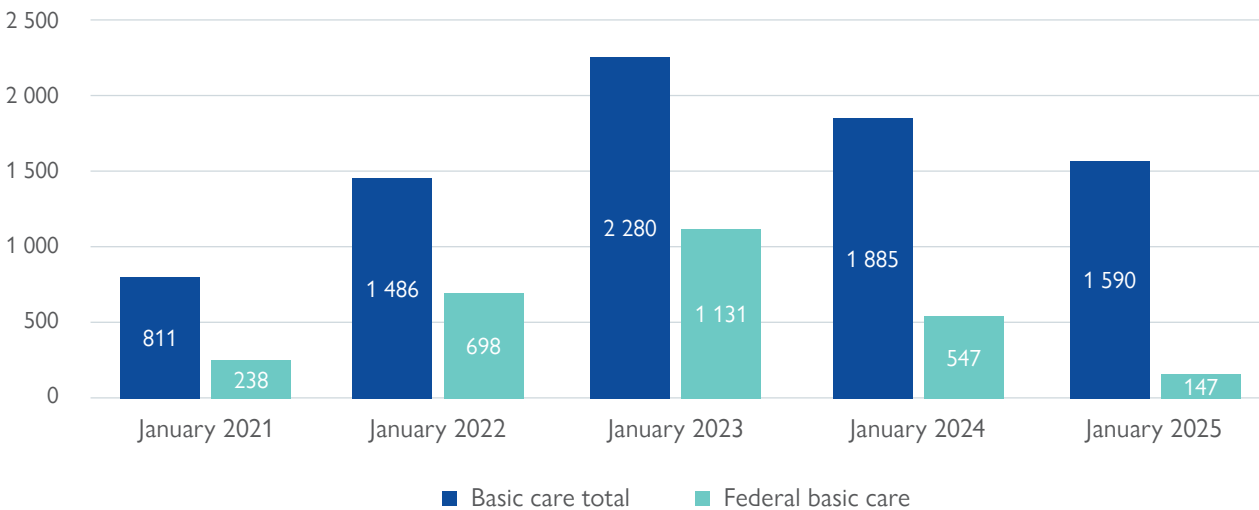
122 Written input: Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 13 February 2026.

123 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 29 January 2026.

3.3.2 Statistics on unaccompanied minors in basic care

The number of all unaccompanied minors in the Austrian basic care system has fluctuated significantly in recent years (see Figure 4). In January 2021, there were around 811 unaccompanied minors in basic care (federal basic care and provincial basic care) throughout Austria – at the federal and provincial level combined. By January 2023, this number had risen continuously to a peak of 2,280, before declining again in the following years: 1,885 in January 2024, 1,590 in January 2025 and 1,415 in July 2025. Despite the general declines, the number of unaccompanied minors in basic care remained above the level of 2021 and 2022.¹²⁴

Figure 4: Unaccompanied minors in basic care in total and in federal basic care, January 2021 to January 2025



Note: In addition to asylum seekers, the basic care system also accommodates other "foreigners in need of help and protection" (persons entitled to asylum during the first four months after status is granted, displaced persons from Ukraine, persons without a right of residence, etc. see Art. 2 Basic Care Agreement).
Source: Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

With the exception of displaced persons from Ukraine, the countries of origin of unaccompanied minors in basic care correspond to those of the asylum application statistics (see Chapter 3.2.2). While in 2021 unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan (428 in January, 385 in July) still represented the largest nationality group in the Austrian basic care system, since then the largest group has been composed of unaccompanied minors from the Syrian Arab Republic. As of July 2025, almost half of unaccompanied minors in basic care were from the Syrian Arab Republic (622 or around 44%), followed by displaced persons from Ukraine (490 or around 35%) and unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan (166 or around 12%) and Somalia (57 or around 4%).¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

With regard to the age and gender of unaccompanied minors in the Austrian basic care system, it should be noted that the majority are usually boys over the age of 14. In July 2025, 1,130, or around 80 per cent, of all unaccompanied minors in basic care were male, 977 of whom were 14 years or older and only 153 were under the age of 14. In addition, a total of 285 unaccompanied girls were in basic care, which represents a share of around 20 per cent of all unaccompanied minors. 184 of the girls were 14 years old or older, 101 were under the age of 14. The proportion of unaccompanied minors under the age of 14 is thus significantly higher for girls (a good 35%) than for boys (around 13.5%). Unaccompanied minors who do not identify with a binary gender are extremely rare. In July 2021, one person from Afghanistan was registered as non-binary in the basic care system, in January 2022 one from Afghanistan and one from the Syrian Arab Republic, in July 2022 again one from Afghanistan and, most recently, in January and July 2025 one Syrian person each. They were all over 14 years old.¹²⁶

As can be seen in [Figure 4](#), the ratio of unaccompanied minors accommodated in federal basic care has changed significantly in recent years compared to the total basic care overall. In January 2021, there were 238 unaccompanied minors in federal facilities, which corresponded to around 29 per cent of the total number of unaccompanied minors in basic care. By January 2022, both the absolute number and the proportion had risen noticeably: 698 unaccompanied minors were in federal care, which corresponded to a share of about 47 per cent. The peak was reached in January 2023, when 1,131 unaccompanied minors were accommodated in federal basic care, accounting for about half of all unaccompanied minors in basic care. From this point on, a significant decline can be recorded. As early as January 2024, the number fell to 547, which corresponded to around 29 per cent of the total number. In January 2025, there were only 147 unaccompanied minors in federal institutions (around 9%) and in July 2025, the number was 57, or about 4 per cent.¹²⁷ These fluctuations correspond to the trends in the number of asylum applications (see [Chapter 3.2.2](#)) and indicate a correlation, such as a backlog in the transfer to the basic provision of asylum applications in times of higher numbers of applications.

In the period from January 2021 to September 2025, a total of 69 unaccompanied minors aged 14 or older and five unaccompanied minors under the age of 14 with special care needs were accommodated as part of the federal basic care.¹²⁸ Special care centres are intended for people who have increased care needs, for example in the presence of physical limitations or medical needs.¹²⁹ The registration of people who openly identify as LGBTIQ+ has been possible since 2023 as part of the federal basic care. The decisive factor for recording in the system is the self-identification of the person concerned. Since 2023, a total of eleven unaccompanied minors who identify themselves as LGBTIQ+ have been recorded.¹³⁰

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid.

128 Ibid.

129 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

130 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

3.3.3 Basic care of the federal government: Federal reception facilities

At the beginning of 2025, a total of ten federal reception facilities of the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services were operational throughout Austria as part of the federal basic care system. Unaccompanied minors were only accommodated in the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen in Lower Austria and the federal reception facility in Finkenstein in Carinthia.¹³¹ The majority of the unaccompanied minors (103 minors) were in Traiskirchen at the time, the remaining part in Finkenstein (44 minors). In total, the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen had a total capacity of 1,810 places (for adults and minors), the federal reception facility in Finkenstein had a total of 80 places (MoI, 2025c:23, 26–27). At the federal level, these available capacities¹³² are not reserved for specific target groups, such as unaccompanied minors. Rather, the generally available places are occupied according to demand in accordance with the target groups in need of support. According to the MoI, if necessary, measures are taken quickly to provide needs-based accommodation and care for unaccompanied minors. However, there is no provision for a specific reserve capacity specifically for unaccompanied minors (for accommodation in the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen see also [Chapter 3.3.4](#)).¹³³

In the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen, unaccompanied boys over the age of 14 are accommodated on their own floor in four-, six- or eight-bed rooms. When allocating rooms, attention is paid to the origin and language of the minors. Unaccompanied boys under the age of 14 and all unaccompanied minor girls are accommodated together with women travelling alone and women accompanied by minor children, in the so-called “House of Women” (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:110–112). No unaccompanied minors under the age of 14 are accommodated in the federal reception facility in Finkenstein.¹³⁴

As of 19 March 2025, a total of 23.55 full-time equivalents of care staff were working in the areas where unaccompanied minors are accommodated in the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen, with staff from other teams being called in if necessary. In the federal reception facility in Finkenstein, a total of 14.62 full-time equivalents were available. In principle, federal reception facilities foresee a care ratio of at least 1:15 (MoI, 2025c, 2025e). The care ratio is calculated from the number of care staff (full-time equivalent) in the federal reception facilities in relation to the total occupancy at that location on the cut-off date. In practice, this minimum requirement is clearly exceeded by the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, according to the MoI.¹³⁵ Due to the generally lower number of beds in the federal reception facility in Finkenstein, the care there is usually even more close-knit. In addition to the caretaking staff, the federal

131 This one has been closed in the meantime (Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 29 January 2026).

132 As of November 2024, in addition to the federal basic care capacities, almost 1,400 basic care places in the provincial basic care system were occupied. However, the capacities generally available for unaccompanied minors in the provincial basic care system are not clearly defined. (Written input: Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 29 January 2026). In the provinces, there are approximately 30 basic care facilities that specialize in accommodating minors. It is intended that the allocation of unaccompanied minors from federal basic care to provincial basic care facilities is carried out on the basis of an established quota. However, there is no legal authority to enforce compliance if a province does not meet its quota (Wolfsegger, 2025:69, 73-74).

133 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

134 Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

135 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 29 January 2026.

reception facility in Traiskirchen also has medical personnel and two psychologists on staff, who are available to the unaccompanied minors, as to all other residents, if necessary.¹³⁶

So-called “*Remunerant:innen-Eltern*” (“remunerated parents”) support the care of unaccompanied minors under the age of 14 in Traiskirchen. These are adult asylum-seekers who are also accommodated in the federal reception facility. They support unaccompanied minors in everyday life, for example when attending school or making trips within the facility. The selection is made by the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services in coordination with the child and youth welfare service of the Baden District Administration. The “remunerated parents” do not have guardianship and do not assume formal responsibility for the unaccompanied minors (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:112–113). According to the Mol, the “remunerated parents” also inform unaccompanied minors about possible dangers when continuing their journey. As of March 19, 2025, three women housed in the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen were working as “remunerated parents” (Mol, 2025c).

As noted above, the system of basic care generally foresees that during the asylum admission procedure, applicants are accommodated in facilities of the federal basic care system; upon admission to the substantive asylum process, they should be transferred to facilities of the provincial basic care system as soon as possible. In practice, however, this is not always the case:

For example, on 1 January 2025, more than half (80 out of a total of 147) of the unaccompanied minors accommodated in federal reception facilities had already been admitted to the procedure (Mol, 2025c:23), which was due to delays in transfer to the basic care of the provinces caused by an overload of capacities in the provinces.¹³⁷

The average length of stay of unaccompanied minors in the federal basic care system until they are transferred to the provincial basic care has changed significantly in recent years. While unaccompanied minors over the age of 14 spent an average of around 75 days in federal care in 2021, the length of stay rose to 132 days in 2022 and peaked in 2023 at an average of 165 days. In 2024, it remained at a similar level of 157 days. A similar development can also be seen among unaccompanied minors under the age of 14. Their average length of stay increased from 39 days in 2021 to 107 days in 2022, 121 days in 2023 and finally 181 days in 2024.¹³⁸

The average length of stay of unaccompanied minors in a federal reception facility, regardless of whether they were ultimately transferred to the basic care of the provinces, was around 37 days in 2024. However, the longest stay of an unaccompanied minor in federal basic care was significantly longer at 365 days in 2024. A total of 583 unaccompanied minors were transferred from the federal basic care to the provincial basic care in 2024 (Mol, 2025c:24–25).

136 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

137 Written input: Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 29 January 2026.

138 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

For the duration of the stay of unaccompanied minors in federal reception facilities, the age assessment procedure (see [Chapter 3.2.3](#)) may also be significant. As a rule, admission to the substantive asylum procedure and thus the transfer to the provincial basic care system only takes place after the conclusion of an age determination process, if applicable (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:120). The age assessment procedure takes sometimes several months (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:120; Wolfsegger, 2025:67). An expert interviewed by the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum estimates the duration to be about two months, with the duration also depending on the cooperation of the persons concerned.¹³⁹ The Mol does not keep statistics on how long it takes on average from the application for asylum to the initiation or result of an age assessment procedure.¹⁴⁰

3.3.4 Life for unaccompanied minors at the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen

As soon as an unaccompanied minor arrives at the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen, the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum's Initial Reception Centre East first registers them and then assigns the procedure to the official in charge. Basic personal data is collected or data that has already been collected in the initial police interview is supplemented.¹⁴¹ Following this admission phase, unaccompanied minors are assigned by the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services to one of the two accommodation areas – the floor for unaccompanied boys or the “House of Women” (see [Chapter 3.3.3](#)) – within the facility.¹⁴² In addition, an initial medical examination, further clarifications as necessary, as well as psychological counselling sessions are carried out by the psychologists working on site in order to record the general state of health of the unaccompanied minor concerned and, if necessary, to identify acute needs and to initiate immediate supportive measures.¹⁴³ Shortly after arrival, the unaccompanied minors are also informed about the further procedure, the structures in the federal reception facility, their rights and the next steps. The federal reception facility strives to facilitate this initial transfer of information orally and in child-friendly language, often with the help of interpreters.¹⁴⁴

Subsequently, the concept of primary caretaking is applied to unaccompanied minors in federal reception facilities. At the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen, at least two primary caretakers are foreseen for each room, so that a contact person is always present during the day. When selecting the primary caretakers, attention is paid to the language and origin of the unaccompanied minors (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:110). Caretaking staff is present on the floor at all times, including at night. The primary caretakers also have the task of actively seeking dialogue with the unaccompanied minors for whom they are

139 Interview with Gerald Wohlmuth, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 26 August 2025.

140 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

141 Interview with Gerald Wohlmuth, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 26 August 2025.

142 Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

143 Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025. Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

144 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025; Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

responsible.¹⁴⁵ The tasks of the primary caretakers are limited to care. Primary caretakers must meet the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services' requirements for caregivers who work with children; there are no additional special qualification requirements.¹⁴⁶

No federal reception facility has a school within the site, only rooms defined for these purposes are available (Mol, 2025c). At the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen, unaccompanied minors up to the age of 15, who are required to attend school, go to so-called bridging classes outside the facility, while minors who are not of school age can take part in German courses offered regularly at the facility (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:111; Wolfsegger, 2025:172–176). In the federal reception facility in Finkenstein, unaccompanied minors with a longer stay have the possibility to attend a local school. For the others, learning programmes are foreseen in the mornings.¹⁴⁷ In federal reception facilities, there are additional pedagogical daily offers such as basic rule courses, German courses, literacy courses. In addition, attempts are being made to convey socio-pedagogical aspects through games (Mol, 2025c:52–53).

In addition, there are leisure activities in federal reception facilities, which include sports activities such as volleyball, billiards and football, as well as occasional excursions (Mol, 2025c:53). The federal reception facility in Traiskirchen also has a fitness room and a basketball court. Finally, efforts are also made to enter into cooperation with external organizations that plan leisure activities with unaccompanied minors, for example as part of the initiative “Garten der Begegnung”.¹⁴⁸ There is also cooperation with the Sport Union, the SOS Children's Villages, the Red Noses as well as the Children's Adventure Lab (KALO) Traiskirchen and other organizations, with the offer of these external organizations complementing the existing offer of the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen. Corresponding activities are always carried out jointly with the internal staff of the federal reception facility.¹⁴⁹ However, it is challenging that the stay in the federal reception facility is not intended to be long-term, and it is thus difficult to refer minors to longer-term offers, such as one-year basic education offers.¹⁵⁰

In 2024, a regulation of the Mol¹⁵¹ came into force that specifies the conditions under which asylum seekers – including unaccompanied minors over the age of 14 – can be called upon to carry out charitable aid activities and expanded the areas of application. Possible areas of application include landscape maintenance, winter service, nursing homes, homeless facilities, libraries or the volunteer fire brigade (Mol, n.d.). Asylum seekers can also take on supporting activities in federal reception facilities. A recognition contribution of 1.60 euros per hour is granted for the work and those who do community service receive 40 instead of 20 euros pocket money (Streit, 2025:33; Wolfsegger, 2025:176–179).¹⁵²

145 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025; Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025.

146 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

147 Ibid.

148 The *Garten der Begegnung* (“Garden of Encounters”) is an open place for encounters close to the federal reception facility Traiskirchen, where civil society, residents of the facility and local communities come together. It provides space for encounters, integration, education, organic farming, sport, culture and communal dining, with the aim of promoting exchange, participation and dignity for all (Garten der Begegnung, 2026).

149 Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025.

150 Written input: Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 13 February 2026.

151 Regulation of the Federal Minister of the Interior on the recruitment of asylum seekers and certain other foreign nationals for charitable aid activities, FLG. II No. 201/2024.

152 Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025.

4. UNEXPLAINED ABSENCES: BETWEEN SECONDARY MIGRATION AND GOING MISSING

Minors who have been in the care of competent authorities in Austria and whose whereabouts are unknown could be affected by child trafficking and other forms of violence, exploitation and abuse in three different scenarios (see [Figure 5](#)):

- Scenario 1: The absence is related to violence, exploitation and abuse in Austria; the unaccompanied minor is still in Austria outside the protection of the Austrian system.
- Scenario 2: The minor has traveled involuntarily – for example organized by child traffickers – or voluntarily, and is subjected to violence, exploitation and abuse on the way to the intended destination.
- Scenario 3: The minor is subjected to violence, exploitation and abuse in the country of destination.

Figure 5: Possible scenarios of harm



Of course it is not assumed that every absence of unaccompanied minors is connected to violence, exploitation or abuse. In this context, it is especially important to examine more closely the fact that many unaccompanied minors do not intend to stay in Austria in order to allow for better assessment of potential risks of violence, exploitation, and abuse, including child trafficking.

This chapter therefore presents the available information on unaccompanied minors who are registered in federal reception facilities, but whose stay there is discontinued, whether unplanned or for reasons that are not yet clear. In addition to the statistical data available here, the steps taken by the relevant actors to determine the background of the absences or possible harm are also shown. Finally, it sheds light on what formal and informal information is generally available about the whereabouts of minors. The description of the risks of violence, exploitation and abuse, including child trafficking, to which unaccompanied minors may be exposed can be found in [Chapter 5](#).

4.1 AUSTRIA AS A TRANSIT COUNTRY

For many unaccompanied minors who enter Austrian territory and apply for asylum, Austria is not the destination country. Rather, the stay is often only a stopover on the way to other European countries. In this context, authorities emphasize that no influence can be exerted on the individual decisions of minors to abandon the asylum procedure and leave Austria (GRETA, 2025:15; Mol, 2023c:2, 2024c:2).

Secondary migration movements, i.e. the onward migration of asylum seekers within the European Union (EU) after an initial registration or reception, pose a challenge for the EU Member States. While asylum seekers in the EU may have legitimate reasons to seek asylum in an EU Member State that is not responsible for examining their asylum application, one goal of the Common European Asylum System is to limit secondary migration movements of asylum seekers between EU Member States (EPRS, 2024). Unaccompanied minors also regularly travel to those countries where family networks, better reception conditions or perceived future opportunities are assumed to exist (EMN, 2020). However, due to their particular vulnerability, these secondary migration movements are also fraught with risk, and the tension between the “agency” (understood as the ability to act under structural conditions) of minors and their vulnerability (Zachariadou, 2024) poses challenges for care systems in many European countries (Missing Children Europe, 2016).

Numerous experts surveyed confirmed that Austria is regularly not perceived as a destination country for unaccompanied minors.¹⁵³ This picture also coincides with the statements of the minors and young adults in Belgium and France who had previously stayed in Austria. For six out of seven of the respondents, Austria was not the destination country.

In the focus group discussions at the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen, some unaccompanied minors also stated that they planned to travel to other EU Member States. However, the majority planned to stay in Austria. Enquiries a few weeks after the focus group discussions were carried out revealed that three Afghan boys and one Syrian boy were no longer present in the federal reception facility for unexplained

¹⁵³ Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025; Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025; Interview with Susanne Stokreiter-Strau, Baden District Administration, 26 March 2025; Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025; Interview with Lisa Wolfsegger, asylkoordination austria, 24 March 2025; Interview with Helmut Sax, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights, 4 April 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025; Interview Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview Alionis Dzhamalis, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 2 April 2025.

reasons. These unexplained absences only partly pertained to individuals who had previously announced their onward journey.¹⁵⁴

The most common destination countries are Germany, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Sweden (GRETA, 2025:15) Interview partners also mentioned other European countries such as Belgium,¹⁵⁵ Ireland,¹⁵⁶ Italy,¹⁵⁷ Norway¹⁵⁸ and Spain.¹⁵⁹

4.1.1 Reasons for onward travel from Austria

Various reasons were identified for unaccompanied minors to leave Austria and continue their journey:

Family ties and social networks: Many unaccompanied minors travel on to join relatives or acquaintances in other EU Member States.¹⁶⁰ Three of the seven minors or young adults interviewed in Belgium and France also stated that they had planned to travel on to relatives or acquaintances from the beginning.¹⁶¹

Assumptions about better prospects: Some minors travel on in the hope of having better chances of obtaining asylum status and faster family reunification¹⁶² in other EU countries.¹⁶³ Several interviews in Belgium and France confirm this perception: minors reported that they expected faster procedures or better opportunities in these countries.¹⁶⁴ A young Afghan described that his family had heard through contacts in France that it was easier to obtain status there.¹⁶⁵ Others stated that they had heard of difficult or lengthy proceedings in Austria.¹⁶⁶

154 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

155 Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025; Interview with Lisa Wolfsegger, asylkoordination austria, 24 March 2025.

156 Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025.

157 Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025; Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

158 Interview with Katharina Schmidt-Dengler, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025; Interview with Susanne Stokreiter-Strau, Baden District Administration, 26 March 2025.

159 Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025; Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025; Interview with Susanne Stokreiter-Strau, Baden District Administration, 26 March 2025.

160 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025; Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025; Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Susanne Stokreiter-Strau, Baden District Administration, 26 March 2025.

161 Interview with Syrian young adult, 18 years, 15 September 2025; Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025; Interview with Syrian minor, 13 years, 17 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

162 In Austria, unaccompanied minors with subsidiary protection status can only bring their parents and siblings to join them after a waiting period of three years; this period does not apply to those with asylum status (Art. 35 Asylum Act).

163 Interview with Daniel Simon, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025; Interview with Katharina Schmidt-Dengler, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025; Interview with Lisa Wolfsegger, asylkoordination austria, 24 March 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025; Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025.

164 Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Syrian young adult, 18 years, 15 September 2025; Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025.

165 Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025.

166 Interview with Afghan young adult, 18 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

According to an expert, the assumption that there are better job opportunities or social welfare structures in other countries can also be a motive for unaccompanied minors to continue their journey.¹⁶⁷

However, the actual experiences did not always coincide with expectations: The two Syrian minors in Belgium reported that it was now difficult to obtain a residence status there as well.¹⁶⁸ A Syrian boy interviewed in Belgium even expressed his intention to return to Türkiye because he saw no prospects in Belgium.¹⁶⁹

Fear of negative asylum decisions in Austria and subsequent removals is also a reason for an intention to continue their journey (Ammann, 2021; Bassermann and Spiegelfeld, 2018:92; Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:195–196 and responses of the provinces). For example, an interview with the management of the French child protection institution Koutcha revealed that numerous unaccompanied minors travel to France after their asylum procedures in other EU Member States, such as Austria, have received a negative decision.¹⁷⁰ In the focus groups, Afghan participants explicitly expressed the fear of being rejected at the border because their fingerprints had been taken in Bulgaria:



*We are afraid
that they will send us back.¹⁷¹*

Here, too, it can be seen that the perceptions of minors are not necessarily linked to practice, at least as long as they are minors. Removals of unaccompanied minors are subject to certain criteria¹⁷² and are rarely performed in practice. In 2023, not a single unaccompanied minor was deported (MoI, 2024b:53), and in 2024 a total of two Turkish unaccompanied boys were removed (MoI, 2025d:62).

Long duration of proceedings and lack of prospects: Experts interviewed identified long asylum procedures and a stay in federal care that was, in the context of these long procedures, perceived by minors as having no prospects, as further reasons for continuing the journey (Ammann, 2021; Bassermann and Spiegelfeld, 2018; FRA, 2022; Koppenberg, 2014; Wolfsegger, 2025:38–39).¹⁷³ Two experts described that, especially for older minors, waiting without regular school attendance, training opportunities and clear time orientation is stressful. A lack of daily structures, few leisure activities and limited opportunities for meaningful everyday life increase dissatisfaction and the desire to continue the journey (Wolfsegger, 2025:39).¹⁷⁴ An international expert pointed out in general that inadequate accommodation could contribute to the onward

167 Interview with Gerald Wohlmuth, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 26 August 2025.

168 Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025; Interview with Syrian minor, 13 years, 17 September 2025.

169 Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025.

170 Interview Olivier Peyroux, Koutcha, 26. September 2025.

171 Interview focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

172 For example, it is examined whether the removal could constitute a violation of Articles 2, 3 and 8 of the ECHR. The welfare of the child must also be taken into account in the context of the Article 8 ECHR examination. Furthermore, the removal of unaccompanied minors is only permissible if they can be handed over to a suitable reception facility in the destination country (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:189).

173 Interview with Lisa Wolfsegger, asylkoordination austria, 24 March 2025.

174 Ibid; Interview with Helmut Sax, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights, 4 April 2025.

journey.¹⁷⁵ A Syrian boy interviewed in Belgium explicitly stated that he had travelled on from Austria only because his brother, who had already been here, had to wait a very long time for a decision.¹⁷⁶

The Commission on the Best Interests of the Child also criticized the fact that decisions in the asylum procedure are often only made after reaching the age of majority (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:166–167), which could lead older minors to leave the country. In this context, uncertainties regarding age determination procedures or concern about incorrect or undesirable results play a role (Bassermann and Spiegelfeld, 2018:92).¹⁷⁷ For consequences of determining the age of majority see [Chapter 3.2.3](#) (see also Bassermann and Spiegelfeld, 2018:92; Mol, 2024b).

4.1.2 Safe onward travel under the Dublin III Regulation

Unaccompanied minors whose parents, siblings or other relatives who are responsible for them are in another EU Member State can be brought to them legally and with state support. The basis for this is the Dublin III Regulation:¹⁷⁸ it regulates the criteria and procedures for determining which Member State is responsible for examining an application for international protection.

Article 8 of the Dublin III Regulation forms the central legal basis for the examination of responsibility in asylum procedures of unaccompanied minors. Accordingly, the asylum procedure for unaccompanied minors is carried out in the Member State where they are staying or have lodged their application, provided that there are no family members in another Member State.¹⁷⁹ If parents or siblings are legally residing in another Member State, that Member State is responsible.¹⁸⁰ If other relatives, such as uncles or aunts, who can care for the unaccompanied minor (to be determined on the basis of a case-by-case assessment) are legally residing in another Member State, that State may also become responsible.¹⁸¹ In all cases, the best interests of the child of the unaccompanied minor concerned must be given priority when deciding on responsibility.

The subordinate Articles 9 and 10 et seq. of the Dublin III Regulation are used if family members are in another EU Member State and the unaccompanied minor has already been admitted to the asylum procedure in Austria or has a protection status. Finally, Austria can invoke the so-called sovereignty clause and declare itself responsible for asylum procedures, even if it is not deemed under the Dublin III Regulation.¹⁸²

Once responsibility for the asylum procedure of an unaccompanied minor has been established, a transfer to the responsible country must be organized. This form of transfer is currently the only official and regular

175 Interview with European Union Agency for Asylum, 19 August 2025.

176 Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025.

177 Interview with European Union Agency for Asylum, 19 August 2025.

178 Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast), OJ L 180, pp. 31-59.

179 Art. 8 para. 4 Dublin III Regulation.

180 Art. 8 para. 1 Dublin III Regulation.

181 Art. 8 para. 2 Dublin III Regulation.

182 Art. 17 para. 1 Dublin III Regulation; Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

possibility for family reunification for unaccompanied minors who wish to join relatives in other EU Member States, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland or Liechtenstein.

In so-called Dublin-Out procedures, Austria checks whether another state is responsible for conducting the asylum procedure of an unaccompanied minor, while in Dublin-In procedures, other Member States check whether Austria is responsible (see also [Chapter 4.3.1](#)).

The data for Dublin-Out procedures (see [Table 1](#)) make it clear that this possibility is hardly used in practice and that transfers of unaccompanied minors under the Dublin III Regulation are extremely rare: in 2022, only seven Dublin-Out transfers of unaccompanied minors to other Member States were recorded; the minors came from Afghanistan, South Africa and the Syrian Arab Republic. In 2023, two transfers were made, both concerning Syrian minors, and in 2024, a total of six transfers took place, including three Syrian, two Zimbabwean and one Somali minors. The destination countries of these transfers were Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland and Sweden. Most of the unaccompanied minors concerned were male, but female minors were also transferred. The majority of the transferred minors were aged 14 or older (Mol, 2023b:15, 2024b:13, 2025d:21–22).

Table 1: Dublin-Out transfers of unaccompanied minors from Austria to other EU Member States, 2022–2024

Year	Number of Dublin-Out transfers	Gender	Age	Nationality	Target country
2024	6	3 male 3 female	4 aged 14 and up 2 under the age of 14	3 Syrian Arab Republic 2 Zimbabwe 1 Somalia	1 Germany 1 France 1 Croatia 3 Ireland
2023	2	2 female	1 aged 14 and up 1 under the age of 14	2 Syrian Arab Republic	2 Croatia
2022	7	7 male	4 aged 14 and up 3 under the age of 14	5 Syrian Arab Republic 1 Afghanistan 1 South Africa	3 Germany 1 Ireland 2 Sweden 1 Hungary

Source: Mol, 2023b:15, 2024c:14, 2025d:21–22.

Note: The data is published in the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum's detailed statistics and has been available since 2022.

The number of Dublin-Out transfers of unaccompanied minors differs from the number of positive responses from other EU Member States in response to requests by the Austrian authorities to admit the case. In 2023, for example, admission requests from Austria were answered positively in 27 cases and in 14 cases in 2024, while the number of transfers actually carried out was lower (Moi, 2024b:10, 2025d:19). This difference is due to the fact that a transfer cannot always be implemented despite the receiving country's consent. Reasons for this can include voluntary independent departures, health-related non-transportability, (criminal) detention measures or temporary suspensions of transfers by the receiving Member States – as is currently the case of Italy. In addition, the deadlines for carrying out a Dublin-Out transfer are extended to up to 18 months in the case of withdrawal from proceedings and up to 12 months in the case of detention, which may lead to time shifts between the consent and actual transfer. Appeal proceedings can also lead to delays in implementation and thus to discrepancies in the statistics.¹⁸³

One of the main challenges of family reunification according to Art. 8–10 of the Dublin III Regulation is compliance with the prescribed deadlines, as there is little time available for family tracing and the collection of relevant information. If the case is not quickly submitted to the relevant Dublin Unit of a Member State, there may not be enough time to clarify all relevant aspects.¹⁸⁴ If the deadlines are not met, responsibility shifts; and long procedures can lead to applicants to decide not to wait for decision outcomes (EUAA, 2023:19). In Austria, too, there are some doubts as to whether information is assessed quickly enough or forwarded to the responsible Dublin Unit of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum.¹⁸⁵

An expert from the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum confirmed that such procedures are rarely carried out, mainly because there are generally very few actual cases, but also because they are perceived by applicants as too complex or lengthy and applicants often continue their journey on their own. The necessary clarifications of the destination country, including the necessary consents of the local child and youth welfare services as well as the DNA analysis required in some countries, can be administratively cumbersome.¹⁸⁶

4.1.3 Irregular onward travel and experiences of unaccompanied minors

In view of the challenges described and the lack of practicable, quickly available regular alternatives, the vast majority of unaccompanied minors who do not want to stay in Austria continue their journey on their own.

Interviews with minors and young adults in Belgium and France showed that onward travel takes place by different means of transport. Two Afghan respondents travelled on to France by train via Switzerland.¹⁸⁷ Two Syrian minors traveled by train via Germany to Belgium,¹⁸⁸ with one of them first

183 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

184 However, before the first-instance decision on the application is issued, there is also the possibility of submitting a request under Art. 17 para. 2 of the Dublin III Regulation to another Member State for the applicant to be admitted on humanitarian grounds.

185 Interview with Katharina Schmidt-Dengler, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025.

186 Interview with Gerald Wohlmuth, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 26 August 2025.

187 Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

188 Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025; Interview with Syrian minor, 13 years, 17 September 2025.

crossing the Austrian–German border on foot together with a group of fellow travelers.¹⁸⁹ Two other Afghan respondents undertook their journey in truck containers from Romania and Serbia to France without stopping in Austria at all.¹⁹⁰ One of these two was first transported in a container to Germany and then continued his journey by bus to France.¹⁹¹ Finally, a Syrian teenager reported that he had been taken from Austria by a driver unknown to him in a car via Germany directly to Belgium.¹⁹² The onward journeys were partly undertaken in small groups, partly alone.

Transportation in truck containers was described as particularly dangerous. The two Afghan interviewees who travelled through Austria in this way described journeys that lasted several days without food, without knowledge of the destination and under extreme temperature conditions in containers. The drivers did not know that people were trapped inside the container. In addition, there were only adult Afghan men in the container, who were unknown to the minors, another risk aspect that increased their vulnerability.¹⁹³

Most of the respondents who organized their own departure from Austria described the onward journey to other EU Member States as comparatively easy after the often strenuous and dangerous travel experiences before their arrival in Austria.¹⁹⁴ Challenges such as ticket controls and the risk of getting lost were presented as manageable.¹⁹⁵

At the same time, the stories show that onward travel can also be associated with other considerable risks:

A recurring challenge was the lack of safe accommodation. Two respondents reported that they had to sleep outdoors for several nights during the onward journey because there was no place to stay.¹⁹⁶ One of the Afghan interviewees stated that he had also spent a night on the streets in Austria after he had declared that he did not want to apply for asylum during a police arrest near the Swiss border.¹⁹⁷ An Afghan youth described his situation during the onward journey as follows:

Actually, it's [meant: the onward journey] a big deal. It's not as easy as you think. You spend the nights outside and have no one. We didn't sleep for two days. It was a pretty unpleasant situation.¹⁹⁸

189 Interview with Syrian minor, 13 years, 17 September 2025.

190 Interview with Afghan young adult, 18 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

191 Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

192 Interview with Syrian young adult, 18 years, 15 September 2025.

193 Interview with Afghan young adult, 18 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

194 Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025; Interview with Syrian minor, 13 years, 17 September 2025; Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Syrian young adult, 18 years, 15 September 2025.

195 Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025.

196 Ibid; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

197 Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

198 Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025.

Another risk on the onward journey concerns the lack of medical care. This is demonstrated by the case of an Afghan participant in a focus group discussion in Traiskirchen, who suffered from recurrent epileptic seizures. After an epileptic seizure in the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen, he was treated in the hospital in Baden. There he was prescribed medication, which he was to pick up the following day. That same evening, however, he traveled on, presumably to relatives in Germany, without taking the prescribed medication with him.¹⁹⁹

Border controls were repeatedly experienced as challenging.²⁰⁰ A Syrian minor reported that he had been pushed back at the Austrian–German border on his first attempt and described racist behaviour by German border police officers in this context.²⁰¹ An Afghan respondent stated that when crossing the border with Switzerland, only the adult members of his travel group were detained, while minors like himself had to have their fingerprints taken but were allowed to continue their journey.²⁰²

4.2 UNEXPLAINED ABSENCES: NOTIFICATIONS, REPORTS AND MISSING PERSONS SEARCHES

If unaccompanied minors who are accommodated in a federal or provincial care facility are absent in an unplanned manner or without prior coordination, the procedure differs depending on the responsibility for basic care and the age of the minors (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:193). The procedures also differ depending on whether or not there is a suspicion of a risk of violence, exploitation or abuse, as described below.

4.2.1 Absence and deregistration from federal reception facilities

In federal reception facilities, the presence of all registered unaccompanied minors is checked daily. If it is determined that a minor is absent without having given notice, a standardized procedure is carried out, which prescribes reports to certain actors (police, child and youth welfare service) as well as deregistration from basic care:

When an uncoordinated absence – i.e. an absence about which the caretakers were not informed in advance (such as announced visits to relatives in geographical proximity)²⁰³ – becomes known, the unaccompanied minor is usually deregistered from the federal basic care after 24 hours. If the person concerned returns, he or she will be readmitted without any significant administrative effort. The deregistration is relevant insofar as it ends all responsibility of the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services.²⁰⁴

199 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025; Written input: Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 3 June 2025.

200 Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Syrian young adult, 18 years, 15 September 2025; Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025.

201 Interview with Syrian young adult, 18 years, 15 September 2025.

202 Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025.

203 Plans to continue travelling indicated by unaccompanied minors are not included here.

204 Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

Between January 2021 and September 2025, a total of 20,806 unaccompanied minors were deregistered from federal reception facilities due to unexplained absences, of whom 20,236 were aged 14 or older and 570 were under the age of 14 (see Table 2). By far the largest group were unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan, followed by the Syrian Arab Republic, while cases of minors from Egypt and Pakistan were significantly lower. The proportion of minors under the age of 14 was noticeably above average among Syrians.²⁰⁵ One explanation for this could be the demographic composition of the group of Syrian unaccompanied minors: asylum statistics show that in the period 2021–2025, around 11 per cent of Syrian unaccompanied minor asylum seekers were under the age of 14; this is reflected in the number of deregistrations, which concerned around 11 per cent of unaccompanied Syrians under the age of 14. In comparison, around 1 per cent of unaccompanied Afghan minors who applied for asylum in 2021–2025 were under 14 years old; among the deregistrations of unaccompanied Afghan minors, around 1 per cent were also under the age of 14.

Table 2: Deregistration of unaccompanied minors from federal reception facilities, January 2021 to September 2025

Country	Unaccompanied minors aged 14 and up	Unaccompanied minors under the age of 14	Total
Afghanistan	14 788	183	14 971
Syrian Arab Republic	2 510	316	2 826
Egypt	670	3	673
Pakistan	625	0	625
Türkiye	343	19	362
Morocco	262	0	262
Tunisia	218	3	221
Bangladesh	212	0	212
India	200	0	200
Somalia	106	22	128
Other countries	302	24	326
Total	20 236	570	20 806

Source: Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

205 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

A total of 798 unaccompanied minors aged 14 or older and 22 unaccompanied minors under the age of 14, who had previously been deregistered due to unexpected absence, were later readmitted to a federal reception facility.²⁰⁶ The majority of those affected thus remained deregistered.

With regard to the above statistics, it should be noted that deregistrations and readmissions can be repeated several times in the case of individual unaccompanied minors. Hence, double counting of absences cannot be ruled out in the statistics. This is the case, for example, if unaccompanied minors are absent from the federal reception facility Traiskirchen to spend time in Vienna and return to the federal reception facility after a few days.²⁰⁷

4.2.2 Notifications of absence and missing persons reports

Unexpected absences of unaccompanied minors are reported by the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services to the child and youth welfare service and the police. In addition, a so-called incident report is transmitted to the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum.²⁰⁸

In the case of unaccompanied minors under the age of 14 as well as unaccompanied girls, the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services additionally makes a missing persons report to the police (via the form “Missing persons report – minor person from federal reception facility” (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:193).²⁰⁹

For unaccompanied boys aged 14 or older, the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services only makes a missing persons report to the police if the specific case shows indications of possible harm. Whether such indications exist is determined by talking to caretakers and roommates. The head of the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen described that in these cases, the Agency first checks whether the minor may have gone to relatives or acquaintances. If there are indications of a continuation of the journey, usually no report is made.²¹⁰ An indication of threat of harm can be recognized during the initial questioning by the police or by officials of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum.²¹¹

In 2024, a total of 58 missing persons reports regarding unaccompanied minors were submitted by federal reception facilities, of which 44 concerned minors aged 14 or older and 14 minors under the age of 14, or nine female and 49 male unaccompanied minors (Mol, 2025c).

206 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

207 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025; Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

208 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

209 Ibid; Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025; Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025.

210 Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

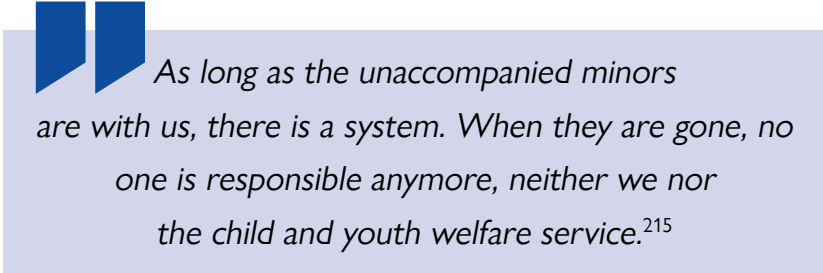
211 Written input: Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 29 January 2026.

In the event of a notification of the absence of unaccompanied minors aged 14 or older, for whom there are no concrete indications of endangerment and therefore no missing persons reports, the police and child and youth welfare service usually do not take any further steps to determine the whereabouts of the minors.

The Baden District Administration (as child and youth welfare service) only takes action in the case of unaccompanied minors under the age of 14, as well as in individual cases in which there are concrete indications of harm, regardless of age. Accordingly, in the opinion of the district administration, the notifications of absent minors do not give rise to a legal obligation to initiate further measures.²¹²

A search by the police (search for persons in accordance with Article 24 of the Security Police Act)²¹³ only takes place in certain cases, including if it is feared that the missing person has been the victim of a violent crime (Art. 24 para. 1 subpara. 2 Security Police Act) or if a minor is missing and (even if there is no situation of harm) there is a request from the parents or guardian to determine their whereabouts (Art. 24 para. 1 subpara. 4 Security Police Act in conjunction with Art. 162 para. 1 General Civil Code). If there is no concrete suspicion of endangerment, there is no search for unaccompanied minors.

The Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services does not conduct any further investigations into the actual whereabouts of the minors.²¹⁴ An expert from the Federal Basic Care summarized the resulting protection gap as follows:



As long as the unaccompanied minors are with us, there is a system. When they are gone, no one is responsible anymore, neither we nor the child and youth welfare service.²¹⁵

4.2.3 (Cross-border) search for missing minors

If a missing persons report has been made, the police are responsible for instigating the appropriate investigations. The responsibility of the police for the search for missing persons is based on Article 24 para. 1 Security Police Act. This provision also applies to unaccompanied minors. After receipt of a missing persons report, an alert is issued in the national Electronic Criminal Police Information System if the case cannot be solved within a very short time. However, such exceptions are rare, which is why the number of reports is almost identical to that of the stored searches and thus provides a reliable basis for statistical analysis.

212 Interview with Susanne Stokreiter-Strau, Baden District Administration, 26 March 2025.

213 Security Police Act, FLG. I No. 566/1991, in the version of federal law FLG. I No. 122/2024.

214 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

215 Ibid.

Analyses are carried out directly in the central search database and are subject to ongoing adjustments, for example through new reports, deletions or revocations, but have remained largely stable overall for a long time.²¹⁶

According to the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, a separate registration of unaccompanied minors in the Electronic Criminal Police Information System is currently not possible. The presentation of the following figures therefore refers to the data on minors in general.²¹⁷

Since 2020, as of 22 October 2025, a total of 53,315 searches for missing minors have been recorded, including 14,922 foreign minors (EU and third-country nationals), 6,192 of whom were girls. Of these cases, 52,401 searches were revoked, which means that the minors concerned were found again. According to the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, it is currently not possible to undertake a more precise analysis of how many of the children who were missing or found were unaccompanied minors or to what extent criminal acts, violence, exploitation or abuse played a role.²¹⁸

As of 22 October 2025, according to the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, a total of 916 minors were registered as missing in the Electronic Criminal Police Information System. Of these, 790 were foreign nationals, including 47 EU citizens (including 31 girls) and 743 third-country nationals (including 109 girls). This means that the figures on that date were slightly above the average since 2020, when 884 missing minors were registered in the Electronic Criminal Police Information System, including 777 foreign nationals: 44 EU citizens (28 girls) and 733 third-country nationals (102 girls).

Registration in the Electronic Criminal Police Information System automatically triggers a Europe-wide alert in the Schengen Information System (SIS), which makes the search immediately visible in all Schengen states.²¹⁹ Additional routine queries are carried out, such as whether the person being searched for has been registered in custody, in the hospital or in connection with an accident. The notice remains active until the person has been found or reaches the fictitious age of 100 years. Once the person has been found, the alert is immediately recalled.²²⁰

The scope of the investigations depends on the individual case: If there are indications of the possible whereabouts or relevant contacts, these are specifically checked. If appropriate information is missing, the investigations are limited to the routine queries mentioned above.²²¹ A standardized catalogue of criteria for risk assessment, as recommended by Amber Alert Europe, for example, does not currently exist in Austria.²²²

216 Written input: Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, 23 October 2025.

217 Ibid.

218 Ibid.

219 As national alerts are automatically registered in the SIS, the numbers match those in the Electronic Criminal Police Information System (Written input: Federal Intelligence Service Austria, 23 October 2025).

220 Interview with Stefan Mayer, Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, 16 July 2025.

221 Ibid.

222 Interview with Frank Hoen, Amber Alert Europe, 31 July 2025.

A risk assessment, in particular taking into account the vulnerability of the missing person and the facts of the case, is carried out separately in each individual case and then also entails the necessary measures.²²³

It is not possible to compare fingerprints via the Eurodac system for search purposes for missing persons, as such a comparison is only permissible in asylum and immigration law proceedings. Eurodac data may therefore not be used for the general search for missing persons.²²⁴

The determination of whether an unaccompanied minor who has been registered as missing in Austria has been registered in the asylum procedure in another EU Member State therefore requires that he or she has already applied for asylum in Austria, has been registered in the Eurodac system by means of fingerprints and subsequently applies for asylum again in another country connected to Eurodac. In such cases, the missing person status appears in the SIS, and the foreign authorities immediately inform the police station in Austria responsible for the missing person alert. If necessary, the notice in Austria is removed after appropriate review.²²⁵

According to the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, one problem in this context is that fingerprinting is currently only permitted for minors over the age of 14. Persons who state that they are younger than 14 years of age when applying for asylum are therefore not registered in the Eurodac system.²²⁶ It is often not possible to verify a person's actual age – for example, due to missing documents – which is why the age indicated by the applicant must be relied upon. For these reasons, according to the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, no Eurodac hits can be achieved in the vast majority of cases when applying for asylum in another EU Member State at a later date.²²⁷ In this regard, it should be noted that the majority of unaccompanied minors who apply for asylum are 14 years of age or older and fingerprints must be registered in the Eurodac system. However, as described in [Chapter 4.2.2](#), they are only searched for in exceptional cases. In the future, the Eurodac Regulation will allow the biometric registration of asylum seekers from the age of six.

There is currently no systematic statistical recording of the frequency of cases in which Austrian police stations are informed about the asylum applications of missing unaccompanied minors in other EU Member States; a conclusion would only be possible on the basis of a complex, individual case analysis.²²⁸

According to the Mol, there are also no statistics on how many unaccompanied minors in Austria have their fingerprints recorded in the Eurodac system, nor on how many unaccompanied minors registered in the Eurodac system in Austria have Eurodac hits recorded in other EU Member States.²²⁹

223 Interview with Stefan Mayer, Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, 16 July 2025.

224 Ibid.

225 Ibid.

226 In future, registration in the Eurodac system will be mandatory from the age of 6 years, see Eurodac Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2024/1358, OJ L. 2024/1358).

227 Interview with Stefan Mayer, Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, 16 July 2025.

228 Ibid.

229 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

Trafficking in children: The Joint Operational Office for Combating Smuggling and Human Trafficking of the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria is responsible for investigations and international coordination in child trafficking cases. There is also a specialized unit in each provincial police authority that specializes in human trafficking, among other things (GRETA, 2025:39). The Unit for Sexual Offences and Child Pornography on the Internet at the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria serves as a central point of contact for national and international cooperation with authorities, NGOs and internet service providers (Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, 2025b:27).

4.2.4 Discontinuation of asylum proceedings

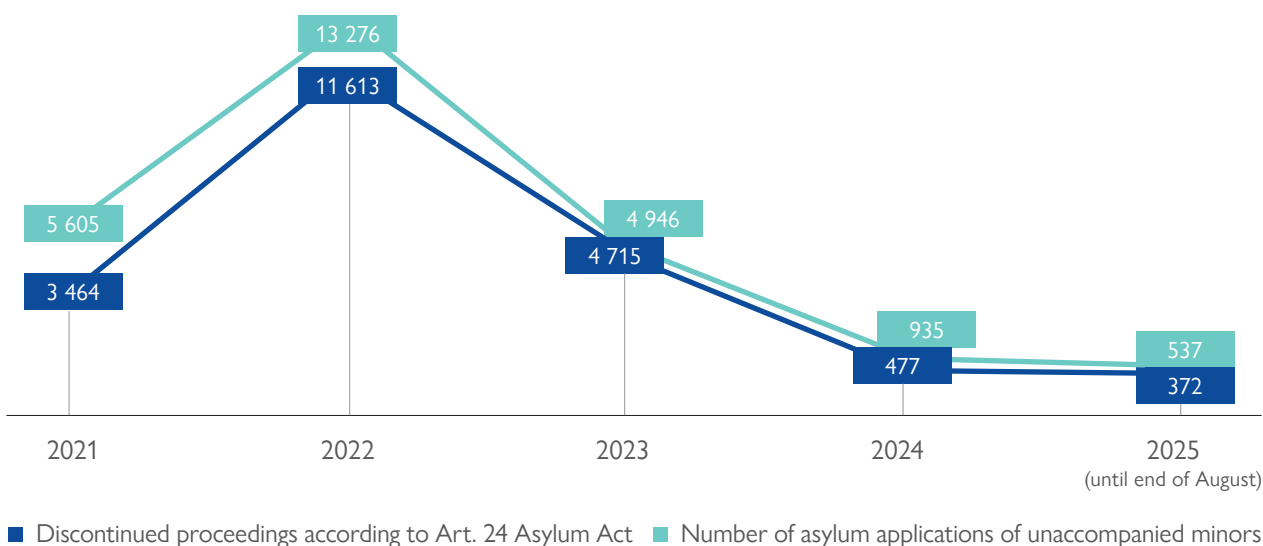
According to Article 24 para. 1 Asylum Act, an asylum procedure must be discontinued if an asylum seeker withdraws from the procedure. The asylum procedures of unaccompanied minors are not exempt here. A “withdrawal” occurs if the whereabouts of an unaccompanied minor are neither known nor easily ascertainable by the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum or the Federal Administrative Court, if they leave Austria voluntarily, or if they do not appear for appointments on the dates set in the admission procedure despite being requested to do so by the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum. A substantive decision on the asylum application could in principle be made even if no interview has been carried out, provided that the facts relevant to the decision have been established. In practice, however, this rarely happens. Rather, in the absence of unaccompanied minors, the proceedings are usually discontinued. This is also shown by the available statistics:

Reflecting the fluctuating number of asylum applications by unaccompanied minors, there were significant differences between 2021 and August 2025 in terms of the number of asylum applications of unaccompanied minors that were discontinued by the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum in accordance with Article 24 Asylum Act, excluding voluntary departure pursuant to Article 24 para. 2a Asylum Act (see [Figure 6](#)). While a total of 3,464 proceedings were discontinued in 2021, the number jumped to 11,613 in 2022, which was the highest figure in the entire observation period. In the following years, the numbers fell significantly again: 4,715 proceedings were discontinued in 2023, 477 in 2024 and 372 by the end of August 2025.²³⁰

With regard to the nationalities of unaccompanied minors whose proceedings were closed in the period 2022–2025, it can be observed that the majority were Afghan or Syrian nationals, which also corresponds to the most represented countries of origin in asylum applications (see [Chapter 3.2.2](#)). However, Somali nationals are not among the most common nationalities when it comes to discontinuation of proceedings – unlike asylum applications. (MoI, 2023d, 2024f, 2025f, 2025g) This could be an indicator that Somali unaccompanied minors are less likely to travel onward. This was, however, not addressed in the expert interviews.

230 Ibid.

Figure 6: Asylum applications of unaccompanied minors and discontinuation of proceedings pursuant to Article 24 of the Asylum Act regarding asylum procedures for unaccompanied minors in Austria, 2021 to August 2025



Source: Mol, 2021a, 2022, 2023a, 2024a, 2025a, 2025b; Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

Note: Statistics on the discontinuation of proceedings have been published in the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum detailed statistics since 2022.

The figures on the discontinuation of proceedings show that a significant proportion of the asylum procedures of unaccompanied minors are discontinued due to unknown whereabouts in accordance with Article 24 Asylum Act. However, some limitations must be noted when interpreting the statistics:

First, the discontinuation of proceedings cannot be directly compared with the number of asylum applications, since the data refers to the date of discontinuation, whereas the number of applications refers to the date on which the application for asylum was lodged, which may have already taken place in another year (Mol, 2021b:4). However, since the whereabouts of many unaccompanied minors are already unknown shortly after the application has been submitted, this temporal divergence is probably of little importance (Bassermann and Spiegelfeld, 2018:91–92; Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:114, 192-193; GRETA, 2025:5, 15; Wolfsegger, 2025:37).

However, it should be noted that the identity and actual age of the persons registered as unaccompanied minors in the Austrian asylum system are not always clearly established at the time of the discontinuation of the proceedings. Hence, statistics on the discontinuation of proceedings may include persons who were initially registered as unaccompanied minors but later turn out to be adults. In addition, many proceedings are discontinued before the age assessment is completed, as the persons concerned are already absent.²³¹

²³¹ Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

At the same time, an expert reported that some female unaccompanied minors pretend to be adults under pressure from human traffickers. These girls also do not appear in the statistics of the discontinuation of proceedings as unaccompanied minors.²³² The Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum is not aware of any such cases.²³³

Furthermore, the statistics do not include unaccompanied minors whose whereabouts are unknown after the conclusion of the procedure, i.e. minors who have been granted a residence permit (Wolfsegger, 2025:37).²³⁴

4.3 KNOWLEDGE OF THE WHEREABOUTS OF THE MINORS

4.3.1 Dublin-In requests

Official data is not systematically collected on where unaccompanied minors go after they leave the federal reception facilities or whether they arrive safely in other countries. One indicator used by officials is data on Dublin-In consultations and requests for information that other EU Member States send to the competent authorities in Austria with regard to persons who were previously registered as unaccompanied minors in Austria.

In order to clarify Austria's responsibility for asylum procedures under the Dublin III Regulation, as described in [Chapter 4.1.2](#), consultations are initiated by the Member State in which the person concerned resides. In addition, it is possible for states to make requests for information, for instance if a state only needs further information about the status of the proceedings or personal data. In both cases, however, this usually means that there are indications, whether in the Eurodac system (see [Chapter 2.5](#)) or other information channels, that the person concerned already applied for asylum in Austria in the past or resided here.

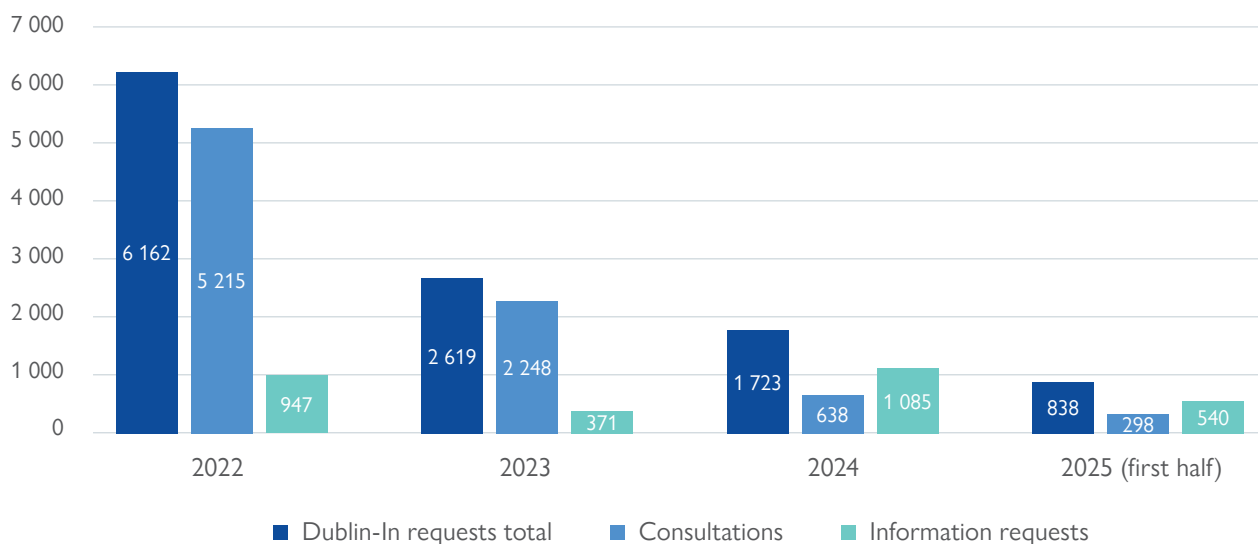
In 2022, a total of 6,162 Dublin-In requests (5,215 consultations and 947 requests for information) from other Member States were submitted to Austria regarding persons who were registered as unaccompanied minors in Austria at the time of their asylum application, 2,619 in 2023 (2,248 consultations and 371 requests for information), 1,723 in 2024 (638 consultations and 1,085 requests for information) and 838 in the first half of 2025 (298 consultations and 540 requests for information). A large proportion of Dublin-In requests were consistently submitted by France and Germany between 2022 and mid 2025, as well as regularly by Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Applicants were most often from Afghanistan and the Syrian Arab Republic, and much less often from other countries, such as Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, Somalia or Türkiye (Mol, 2023d, 2024f, 2025g).

232 Interview with Eva Kaufmann, LEFÖ-IBF, 24 March 2025.

233 Written input: Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 29 January 2026.

234 Interview with Gerald Wohlmuth, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 26 August 2025.

Figure 7: Dublin-In requests from other Member States to Austria concerning unaccompanied minors (at the time of asylum application), 2022 to June 2025



Source: MoI, 2023d, 2024f, 2025f, 2025g.

Note: The data is published in the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum detailed statistics and has been available since 2022.

When examining MoI statistics on Dublin-In consultations, it is important to note that these usually only involve persons who are adults when the consultation procedure is initiated. In proceedings concerning persons who are still minors, Austria would in principle not have responsibility for conducting the asylum proceedings on the basis of the applicable responsibility provisions of the Dublin III Regulation, unless one of the above-described competences of Austria under Article 8 para. 1 to 3 of the Dublin III Regulation exists. It is also important to note that the statistics include double counting, as requests for information may well be followed by consultations on the same person (MoI 2025g:23).

While the available figures show that many unaccompanied minors are moving on to other EU Member States, they give an incomplete picture. On the one hand, the practice of the Member States as to when and whether consultations are initiated at all or requests for information are submitted differs considerably.²³⁵ On the other hand, it is not known how many of the requests for consultation or information were actually addressed to Austria on a justified basis and whether the persons concerned had actually previously resided in Austria. Finally, the figures for Dublin consultations and requests for information differ significantly from the number of unaccompanied minors whose asylum procedures have been discontinued due to unknown whereabouts (see [Chapter 4.2.3](#)).

235 Interview with Gerald Wohlmuth, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 26 August 2025.

4.3.2 Informal knowledge of the whereabouts of unaccompanied minors

At the same time, professionals unanimously reported that facilities often informally know where the minors have gone. This applies to both federal reception facilities²³⁶ and facilities of the provinces.²³⁷

Many minors announce their departure or report back from abroad later. It is not uncommon for contact to continue via social media between minors who have travelled on and roommates or via telephone with former caretakers.²³⁸ In this way, institutions often find out to which countries or to which contacts the minors have travelled.²³⁹

Occasionally, family members or caregivers abroad also provide information about minors' whereabouts, as do foreign authorities, especially in Germany.²⁴⁰ In addition, missing minors are often transferred back to Austrian facilities in the course of forcible returns at the Austrian-German border.²⁴¹

The interviewed experts indicate that although informal knowledge about missing minors is often present, it is not systematically documented and there is no structured exchange of information between the actors involved. As a result, there is no complete recording of the whereabouts of unaccompanied minors after their departure from Austria.

236 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025; Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025.

237 Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Christine Okresek, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Susanne Stokreiter-Strau, Baden District Administration, 26 March 2025; Interview with Katharina Schmidt-Dengler, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025; Interview with Daniel Simon, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025.

238 Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025; Interview with Katharina Schmidt-Dengler, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025; Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Andreas Diendorfer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Susanne Stokreiter-Strau, Baden District Administration, 26 March 2025.

239 Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025; Interview with Susanne Stokreiter-Strau, Baden District Administration, 26 March 2025; Interview with Christine Okresek, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

240 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025; Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

241 Interview with Syrian young adult, 18 years, 15 September 2025; Interview with Andreas Diendorfer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Katharina Schmidt-Dengler, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025.

5. VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: EXPERIENCES OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS

It is not possible to determine exactly how great the risks for unaccompanied minors to become victims of violence, abuse and exploitation actually are, as many crimes and victims remain undetected. However, this chapter gives an impression of the dangers to which unaccompanied minors are exposed during their journey and after arrival in the country of destination.

The realities of life of unaccompanied minors in their countries of origin form the starting point of an ongoing chain of risks, challenges and burdens. Many minors are already confronted with violence, lack of prospects, discrimination and/or family instability before they leave the country. These factors can significantly shape their migration decisions and experiences.

For many minors, the risks persist throughout the entire migration route, with consequences even after arrival in Austria or after reaching the destination country. According to a study by the University of Ghent, 85 per cent of 229 unaccompanied minors surveyed in Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium had experienced physical violence (Derluyn et al., 2022:16). The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children therefore used the term “continuum of violence” in this context (United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, 2019).

5.1 VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: PRIOR EXPERIENCES

5.1.1 In the country of origin

Violence, war and political instability characterize everyday life in many countries of origin from which unaccompanied minors come to Europe. Armed conflicts, personal persecution and political uncertainty are among the most common causes for young migrants to leave their countries of origin (IOM, 2024b:12–13). Unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan, Somalia and the Syrian Arab Republic who are staying in Austria also repeatedly report that fleeing armed conflicts and finding a place of safety and peace were decisive factors for leaving their countries of origin.²⁴² According to the Global Peace Index, these three countries of origin were among the least peaceful countries in the world, with Somalia in 153rd place, the Syrian Arab Republic in 156th place, and Afghanistan in 160th place out of a total of 163 countries (Austria ranks third, Yemen last; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024:9).

Discrimination and social exclusion on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation can in some cases further increase migratory pressure (IOM, 2024b:13). For example, some minors are denied education

242 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025; Interview with focus group 3, 17 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

or social participation because of their ethnic origin, clan affiliation or religious affiliation.²⁴³ Gender-specific risks also play an important role in migration decisions. Girls and young women often flee from gender-based discrimination, domestic violence, forced marriage or female genital mutilation (Save the Children, 2020:6).²⁴⁴ According to the United Nations' Children Fund (UNICEF), the prevalence of female genital mutilation among girls in Somalia is 99 per cent; 45 per cent of girls are married at the age of 18. In the Syrian Arab Republic, 13 per cent and in Afghanistan 29 per cent of girls are affected by child marriage (UNICEF, 2025b:77ff.)²⁴⁵

5.1.2 On the move

Many unaccompanied minors are exposed to recurrent forms of violence, exploitation and abuse on their migration routes. A study of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) of young migrants aged 14 to 24 shows that more than two-thirds of respondents experienced violence, exploitation or abuse during their travels. The risk of being affected by at least one form of abuse, violence or exploitation is particularly high for minors and is over 80 per cent. The most dangerous routes are the Central Mediterranean route, which is relevant for travel to Austria, and the Western Balkan route (IOM, 2024b:22–23).

In interviews conducted by IOM as part of the “Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)” between July 2023 and November 2025 with (accompanied and unaccompanied) migrant children aged 15 to 17 after arriving in Europe,²⁴⁶ 34 per cent of 308 minors said they had experienced physical violence while traveling (40% of them in Libya, followed by Tunisia with 30%, Algeria with 19%, Greece with 7% and Türkiye with 5%); 16 per cent had been detained against their will at least once (59% of them in Libya). Twenty-three per cent said they had worked without being paid, 11 per cent had been forced to work. 3.6 per cent of the minors had been forced to continue their journey; 22 out of 304 minors were deceived about their trip.

Unaccompanied minors are sometimes forced to pay large sums of money during their travels, or they are pressured by threats and violence. In some cases, there are kidnappings and ransom demands against relatives. This dependency puts minors in situations where they have no control over their whereabouts or safety (Derluyn et al., 2022:14-15, 20; IOM, 2024b:25).²⁴⁷

243 Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

244 Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

245 According to the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, these circumstances are rarely cited as reasons for fleeing. Predominantly, economic reasons are mentioned (Written input: Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 29 January 2026).

246 Both accompanied and unaccompanied minors were interviewed; see [footnote 13](#) for profile details. The interviews were conducted in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Italy, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo [references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999)] and Montenegro (own data analysis of the IOM/DTM Flow Monitoring Surveys and other surveys at Flow Monitoring Points by the study authors, 03.07.2023–14.11.2025. CMR, EMR, ITA–WBR, WBR, age range 15–17).

247 Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025; Interview with Eva Kaufmann, LEFÖ-IBF, 24 March 2025.

An Afghan boy reported:



Smugglers show beautiful pictures and don't honestly say how difficult it will be. [...] The thieves hold you and extort money, up to 10,000 euros. If you can't give them that or organize it, you'll be killed.²⁴⁸

In transit countries such as Egypt, Libya, Sudan or Türkiye, abuse occurs regularly, which is often associated with physical and psychological violence as well as dependencies on smugglers or human traffickers (Derluyn et al., 2022:15-16, 32-33; IOM, 2024b:24–25).

Experts in Austria report that many girls experience sexualized violence or forced prostitution during their journey.²⁴⁹ But boys are also affected: According to the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), North African and Afghan criminal networks exploit young Afghan, Algerian, Moroccan or Tunisian boys and force them into prostitution or sexual violence on their migration route to the EU. Social media is often used to broadcast exploitation and extort money from families (European Commission, 2025).

In addition, unaccompanied minors reported that they had to work in transit countries to finance their onward journey, for example in Iran,²⁵⁰ in Libya,²⁵¹ or in Türkiye.²⁵² This increases the risk of exploitation: unpaid or forced labour occurs particularly in Libya, Algeria, Tunisia and Türkiye, often in the construction, agriculture or cleaning sectors (IOM, 2024b:24–25).

Reports from Libya make it clear that minors are sometimes forced into employment or imprisonment for months (Derluyn et al., 2022:9–10).²⁵³ In a focus group discussion, a Somali boy described that he had been arrested in a Libyan city, imprisoned and sold to a man for whom he had to work under slave-like conditions for six months.²⁵⁴

Many minors experience repeated arrests, repatriations or detention during their travels. According to a study, almost one fifth (19%) of the young migrants surveyed said they had been held against their will during the journey. This was reported particularly frequently in Libya, where more than half of the young migrants described stays under conditions similar to detention (IOM, 2024b:25).²⁵⁵ However, stories of unaccompanied

248 Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

249 Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025; Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

250 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025.

251 Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

252 Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

253 Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

254 Ibid.

255 Ibid.

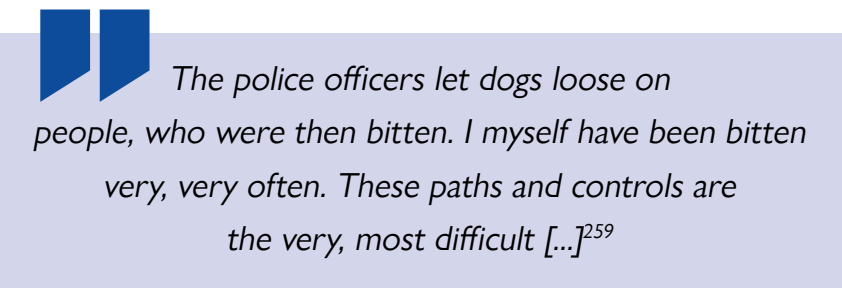
minors about detention or detention-like situations not only concerned countries outside Europe, but also within the EU, such as Bulgaria and Hungary in connection with repeated deportations.²⁵⁶ In Greece, too, unaccompanied minors are detained against their will for shorter periods of time (Derluyn et al., 2022:20).

Physical, psychological and sexualized assaults particularly occur in transit areas and border areas, but also in reception centres. The violence comes from both state security forces and non-state actors, such as smugglers (Derluyn et al., 2022; IOM, 2024b). Common forms include beatings, kicks, the use of dogs, torture, sexual assault and the coercion to give fingerprints. Such incidents have been documented both in North African transit countries and at the EU's external borders, such as Bulgaria, Greece and Italy (Bundesfachverband Minderjährigkeit und Flucht e.V, 2025:116; Derluyn et al., 2022:15).

The patterns described in international studies coincide with the statements of the unaccompanied minors surveyed in Austria. Border crossings were repeatedly described as particularly dangerous in the focus group discussions. The interviewees reported violent attacks, the use of weapons and dogs, pushbacks by the border police as well as extreme fear and coldness when waiting at borders. Particularly harsh actions were described from Bulgaria and Türkiye.²⁵⁷

The experts interviewed as part of the study also confirmed that unaccompanied minors regularly report massive experiences of violence on their trips to Austria.²⁵⁸

An Afghan boy commented on his experiences in Bulgaria and Türkiye in a focus group discussion:



*The police officers let dogs loose on people, who were then bitten. I myself have been bitten very, very often. These paths and controls are the very, most difficult [...]*²⁵⁹

256 Ibid; Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025.

257 Ibid.

258 Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025; Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025; Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Astrid Winkler, ECPAT Austria, 9 April 2025; Interview with Lisa Wolfsegger, asylkoordination austria, 24 March 2025.

259 Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

A Syrian boy reported the following about a two-month detention in Bulgaria:



They treated us badly physically, like tortured us, beat us. I was hit in the face so hard that my braces were destroyed. They also forced me to give my fingerprints.²⁶⁰

In addition to being directly affected by violence, unaccompanied minors also witness violent attacks against others, as reported in the focus groups. The minors described sometimes drastic experiences with seriously injured people on the Iranian–Turkish border. An Afghan participant reported that he had found his entire travel group dead respectively murdered at two o'clock in the morning.²⁶¹

The fact that many of the unaccompanied minors are exposed to violence, exploitation and abuse on their way to Austria is also reflected in the data of Austrian victim protection organizations for trafficked persons, such as MEN VIA, which records various forms of exploitation of minor boys prior to their arrival in Austria. Since 2020, the organization has cared for six minor boys who were already affected by exploitation before their arrival in Austria. The exploitation often had taken place years prior to when MEN VIA took over the care of the minors. The age of the minors at the time of exploitation ranged from six to 16 years. The countries of origin and the places of exploitation of the affected boys differed to some extent. While the countries of origin concerned only third countries, exploitation also took place in the EU (Italy; see [Table 3](#)). Victims were identified mainly by reception facilities at both federal and provincial level.²⁶²

²⁶⁰ Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025.

²⁶¹ Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

²⁶² Written input: MEN VIA, 9 October 2025.

Table 3: Boys and men cared for by MEN VIA, 2020–2024

Age in counselling	Age at beginning of exploitation	Origin	Form of exploitation	Time of exploitation	Place of exploitation	Identification	Recording year MEN VIA
17	12	Congo ²⁶³	Sexual exploitation	2015–2018	Congo ²⁶⁴ and other countries	Reception facility	2020
21	16	Benin	Sexual exploitation Criminal acts	2015–2019	Benin, Libya	Counselling centre	2020
18	16	Nigeria	Labour exploitation	2018–2019	Libya	Child and youth welfare service	2021
20	16	Côte d'Ivoire	Criminal offences	2017	Italy	Reception facility	2021
20	15	Gambia	Criminal offences	2018–2019	Ukraine	Child and Youth Advocate	2023
18	6	Benin	Labour exploitation	2012–2023	Algeria	Reception facility	2024

Source: Written input: MEN VIA, 9 October 2025.

263 The records from MEN VIA do not indicate whether this concerns the Democratic Republic of the Congo or the Republic of the Congo.

264 The records from MEN VIA do not indicate whether this concerns the Democratic Republic of the Congo or the Republic of the Congo.

The continued vulnerability of unaccompanied minors along the migration route is particularly evident in a child trafficking case that was uncovered and prosecuted in Belgium. Specifically, it involved the sexual exploitation of unaccompanied Afghan boys, who are transported over a longer period of time from Türkiye via several European countries to Belgium and systematically exploited in the transit countries as well as in Belgium. A total of 113 minor victims and 22 perpetrators were identified. The exploitation included elements of the so-called “bacha bazi” practice, in which boys are forced to dance and perform sexual acts. It is particularly alarming that some of the acts of exploitation continued even after the minors were already accommodated in state reception facilities in Belgium. The perpetrators used social media, especially TikTok, as a central tool for communicating, controlling and blackmailing the minors (Van der Merwe, 2022; vrt news, 2024).²⁶⁵

There is no known connection between this case and Austria; however, against the background of the typical travel routes of unaccompanied minors from Türkiye to Belgium, it cannot be ruled out that at least some of the minors concerned may have also travelled through Austria and were not identified as victims of child trafficking.

5.2 VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: RISKS IN AUSTRIA

Even after arriving in Austria, unaccompanied minors are not immune to the dangers of violence, exploitation and abuse.

However, the available data on the actual dangers of violence, exploitation and abuse in Austria is very poor: There is no explicit data on unaccompanied minors and their experiences of violence, exploitation and abuse. However, existing data on various forms of violence, exploitation and abuse, and in particular child trafficking, provide information on possible risks to which unaccompanied minors may be exposed.

5.2.1 Forms of violence, exploitation and abuse

Violence against minors is generally not uncommon in Austria. According to a representative survey by the NGO “die Möwe”, more than a quarter of the Austrian population has experienced physical violence in childhood from the age of 14; 17 per cent have experienced psychological violence (die Möwe, 2025). In a prevalence study on gender-based violence against women, 7 per cent of the women surveyed between the ages of 18 and 74 reported experiencing sexual violence in childhood (Statistics Austria, 2022:45).

The statistics of the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria²⁶⁶ do not show any details on the age, gender (with the exception of the murder statistics) and citizenship of the victims. However, child abuse on the internet²⁶⁷ is specifically reported under “internet crime” – and with 1,889 crimes reported in 2024, a decrease of 15.9 per cent compared to the previous year (Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, 2025b:26f).

²⁶⁵ Interview with Emilie Coomans, Child Focus, 12 August 2025.

²⁶⁶ Intentional offences against life and limb, personal freedom, sexual integrity and self-determination, including dangerous threats or blackmailing.

²⁶⁷ This includes the production, offering, procurement, transfer, display or other provision of access to pornographic depictions of minors, as well as the possession of and deliberate access to such content on the internet.

Because Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in the U.S. and Canada are required by law to report depictions of minors that contain sexual abuse, reports of suspected cases, such as on social media platforms or cloud services, are made to the U.S. National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), a specialized NGO. The NCMEC then forwards suspicious activity reports to the competent authorities of the respective country. In 2024, 18,276 reports were made to Austria; a total of 396 suspects were identified and eight victims identified throughout Austria (Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, 2025b:27f).

According to a study conducted in Austria as part of the initiative Saferinternet.at in 2024, 38 per cent of young people between the ages of 11 and 18 have already been confronted with forms of sexual harassment online at least once (Institut für Jugendkulturforschung und Kulturvermittlung, 2025).

In 2024, a total of five notifications were made by the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services on the suspicion of endangerment of the child's welfare pursuant to Article 37 Federal Child and Youth Welfare Act; in addition, a total of 14 reports were made to the competent authority due to "imminent danger" (Mol, 2025d:36). The competent authorities do not send feedback on such notifications to the Agency (due to lack of competence). As this data is not recorded, it is unclear how many of the reports contain criminally relevant matters.²⁶⁸

Sexual abuse and exploitation are a key risk. Experts described cases in which unaccompanied girls and boys in or outside reception facilities come into contact with adult men who seek closeness or demand sexual.²⁶⁹ For example, there was a report of a man who repeatedly appeared in front of the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen, approached unaccompanied minors.²⁷⁰

In addition, an expert reported a significant number of predominantly Afghan boys who were engaged in irregular sex work in Vienna. According to his estimates, around a quarter of them could be unaccompanied minors. Contact is increasingly being established via social media and dating platforms, often brokered by older men from the Afghan community ("cousins") who organize meetings and exercise control. Language barriers, a lack of stable networks and the fact that many do not (or no longer) live in facilities.²⁷¹ Cases of commercial exploitation of Afghan male minors have been reported in various Austrian provinces (Forin and Healy, 2018:46).

Another suspected case concerns an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan, whom an Austrian man tried to persuade to engage in sexual acts. The incident was recognized in time, but shows the risks of male adolescents.²⁷²

268 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, V/B/9, 29 January 2026.

269 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025; Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

270 Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

271 Interview with Thomas Fröhlich, Hochschule Campus Vienna, 12 August 2025.

272 Interview with MEN VIA, 26 March 2025.

Repeated references have been made to cases of exploitation of male Afghan minors in the context of the culturally coded practice of “bacha bazi” (Forin and Healy, 2018:46).²⁷³ As part of the study, a case was reported of a minor housed in a shared apartment who regularly met older men. The reception team felt overwhelmed by the situation, as it was unclear how this behaviour was to be classified legally and professionally.²⁷⁴

In addition to sexual exploitation, exploitation in the drug scene is coming into focus as another risk area. Experts from federal reception facilities reported that minors with a pre-existing substance dependency arrive in Austria, particularly from North African countries.²⁷⁵ One expert estimates that about a quarter of the minors she cares for have sometimes consumed drugs.²⁷⁶ Drugs can be used specifically to create dependence and exert control over victims.²⁷⁷

Isolated cases were described in which unaccompanied minors have been drawn into drug trafficking, especially 16 to 18-year-olds, who are particularly susceptible to such offers due to financial hardship, lack of prospects and family pressure to send money home.²⁷⁸ A representative of the authorities also pointed out that older unaccompanied minors in particular are affected by drug-related crimes; he presumed that in many cases they are actually adults.²⁷⁹

Another expert expressed his suspicion that criminal networks are deliberately contacting them to recruit minors for messenger services or criminal activities, even though there is no reliable evidence of this so far.²⁸⁰

In Styria, an Afghan unaccompanied minor was massively pressured by the African criminal network “Black Axe” to sell cocaine to work off an alleged debt of 20,000 euros. Despite intensive care and application of the non-punishment principle, according to which trafficked persons cannot be held responsible for illegal acts they were forced to do as part of their exploitation, the minor left his reception facility. He was later apprehended on his way to Italy and returned to his reception facility, but he disappeared again the following day.²⁸¹

Against this background, an expert highlights that unaccompanied minors involved in drug-related crime should not be prematurely regarded as perpetrators, but as potential victims of child trafficking.²⁸²

273 Ibid; Interview with Thomas Fröhlich, Hochschule Campus Vienna, 12 August 2025; Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

274 Interview with Thomas Fröhlich, Hochschule Campus Vienna, 12 August 2025.

275 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025; Interview with Alionis Dzhmalis, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 2 April 2025; Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025.

276 Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025.

277 Interview with Eva Kaufmann, LEFÖ-IBF, 24 March 2025.

278 Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025.

279 Interview with Gerald Wohlmuth, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 26 August 2025.

280 Interview with MEN VIA, 26 March 2025.

281 Ibid.

282 Interview with Helmut Sax, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights, 4 April 2025.

Finally, there are also indications of risks of other forms of exploitation in connection with forced criminality. One case from 2025 involved four to five unaccompanied boys from Belarus who were arrested in Austria for theft. Investigations pointed to a transnational group of perpetrators who brought the minors to Austria via Germany and pressured them to commit crimes here. Contact and dependency were built up through false promises of jobs and earnings as well as through the use of violence and exploitation of a dependency due to illness.²⁸³

Experts also pointed to suspicions of labour exploitation in the construction, catering and household sectors, such as Afghan minors on construction sites or Syrian minors in community-run shops. Remuneration is often very low and employment is not protected under labour law; at the same time, such activities often initially present themselves as mutually beneficial, which makes it difficult to leave the situation.²⁸⁴ However, systematic exploitation could not be proven in the course of the study: The Central Labour Inspectorate and the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria reported that they had not yet found any such cases.²⁸⁵ Overall, these are mainly suspicions from practitioners (which have not been confirmed by the authorities), but they make it clear that the instrumentalization and criminalization of unaccompanied minors pose a possible danger and pose considerable challenges for both child protection and law enforcement.

5.2.2 Child trafficking

In the case of many of the above-mentioned forms of exploitation, it cannot be ruled out that they are also forms of child trafficking. All of the above-mentioned forms of exploitation could be child trafficking if it is proven that minors were recruited, transported, transported, accommodated or received for the purpose of exploitation. Although there are hardly any separate statistics on child trafficking cases of unaccompanied minors in Austria, existing data, such as statistics from the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria and case documentation from victim support institutions, provide important information on the extent, frequency and pattern of potential risks.

Statistics of the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria

In its statistics, the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria lists cases of Article 104a Criminal Code (human trafficking) in which minors were trafficked, regardless of whether they are accompanied or unaccompanied minors. Between 2020 and 2024, several cases of trafficked minors were registered in Austria: Of the total of 32 trafficked minors identified, 25 were girls and seven boys. The majority of the minors were between the ages of 14 and 17. Four were Austrian nationals, 12 came from EU Member States (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia) and 16 from third countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,²⁸⁶ Nigeria, Republic of

²⁸³ Interview with MEN VIA, 26 March 2025.

²⁸⁴ Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025; Interview with Andreas Diendorfer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Christine Okresek, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

²⁸⁵ Interview with Horst Schiller, Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, 16 July 2025.

²⁸⁶ References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

Moldova, Serbia, Somalia, Syrian Arab Republic, Türkiye).²⁸⁷ Even though the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria does not keep separate statistics on unaccompanied minors in the asylum procedure, the demographic characteristics of the available figures on victims of child trafficking show that there are only a few countries of origin among the identified victims of child trafficking, which are also frequently represented in asylum applications.

Over time, a change in the most common forms of exploitation can be observed: While the majority of victims of child trafficking were sexually exploited in the years 2020 to 2022, the documented case in 2023 concerned exploitation through begging. Finally, in 2024, labour exploitation was the most common form of exploitation.²⁸⁸

The statistics refer to identified victims of child trafficking (not reports to the police or suspected cases). The Criminal Intelligence Service Austria does not keep records of whether the minors concerned were registered as missing in the Electronic Criminal Police Information System or Schengen Information System at the time of the report or in what kind of facility they were accommodated.²⁸⁹

Case management statistics of national victim protection organizations

In Austria, there are currently two nationwide protection facilities for trafficked persons. While LEFÖ-IBF is open to female adults and girls aged 15 and over, as well as trans women (LEFÖ-IBF, n.d.; Working Group against Child Trafficking, 2024:12), MEN VIA's responsibility is limited to adult men, including trans men, with the exception of support in court proceedings to minor boys. For many years, international monitoring bodies (GRETA, 2025) and national experts have advocated for a nationwide protection facility for trafficked children, which is also foreseen in the National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking 2024-2027 (Austrian Federal Government, 2024:29), but does not currently exist. Only the Drehscheibe of the City of Vienna as part of the child and youth welfare service (MA 11) acts as a crisis centre with specific knowledge on carrying for trafficked children and with responsibility for unaccompanied minors in Vienna (City of Vienna, n.d.; Working Group against Child Trafficking, 2024). There are currently no comparable facilities in other provinces. However, there is good cooperation between the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services and the Drehscheibe regarding transfers from the federal basic care system.

In recent years, the victim protection organization LEFÖ-IBF has cared for several girls who have been trafficked. In 2020 and 2022, there were eight girls each, and in 2023 and 2024 seven girls each. In the vast majority of these cases, the girls concerned had been sexually exploited.²⁹⁰ Whether the girls were asylum seekers is not clear from the data provided.

287 Written input: Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, 23 October 2025.

288 Ibid.

289 Ibid.

290 Written input: LEFÖ-IBF, 3 September 2025.

It should be noted that the above figures do not represent police-registered reports or investigation cases, but the number of cases that were supported, i.e. girls who were actively supported by the facility during a given year. Since girls are usually cared for by LEFÖ-IBF for several years, individual persons can be counted several times in the statistics. The figures therefore reflect the annual volume of support work rather than the number of individual girls affected. In addition, it must be noted that some girls pretend to be adults at the request of their perpetrators and therefore do not appear in these case management statistics: A victim protection expert from LEFÖ-IBF described cases in which girls, for example from Nigeria, pretended to be adults on the instructions of their perpetrators in order to be accommodated in less closely supervised settings and to be brought from there to irregular sex work in bars or apartments in various provinces. In one documented case, three sisters who had been abducted to Europe as minors were brought to Austria after an initial phase of exploitation in Italy, where they were further exploited in sex work. A perpetrator who had previously abused women and girls, including unaccompanied minors, was convicted in Austria.²⁹¹

Other suspected cases involve unaccompanied girls from Nigeria, Cameroon and other African countries, who were believed to be working off debts for travel through sexual services; regular contact with much older men and visible irregularities when leaving the facility reinforced this suspicion, without the girls being willing to speak openly about their experiences.²⁹²

The available figures of LEFÖ-IBF are naturally higher than the figures of the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria and represent a broader picture of the actual phenomenon. The reason for this is that the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria only records reported and officially confirmed cases, i.e. trafficked persons who have been formally identified in the course of an investigation. As a result, cases that are not reported to the police, or where there is no Austrian jurisdiction because the offences were committed outside the territory, or where insufficient evidence is available at the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria are not included in the statistics.²⁹³

291 Interview with Eva Kaufmann, LEFÖ-IBF, 24 March 2025.

292 Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Christine Okresek, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

293 Written input: LEFÖ-IBF, 3 September 2025.

Case study Favour (Nigeria) – A story of continued sexual exploitation²⁹⁴

Favour grew up in great poverty in Nigeria. She had been working since childhood and therefore hardly attended school. At the age of 15, she accepted the offer of an acquaintance to travel to Europe, with the promise of getting job as a childcare worker and an education. Documents were organized for the trip, and she was urged to change her age so as to be allowed to travel alone. In Italy, upon the instructions of the contact person, she applied for asylum and claimed to be an adult. Shortly afterward, she was picked up from the reception facility, handed over to a “madam”, and after a few days was forced into prostitution.

With the help of a client, she managed to escape to Austria, where she continued to use the date of birth she had indicated in Italy for fear of punishment and deportation. The financial pressure of her sick mother intensified her predicament; a man in Vienna instrumentalized her, demanded intimate photos, promised legal help and connected her against her will with other men for sexual exploitation. When a return to Italy seemed imminent in the Dublin procedure, Favour explained her situation to her legal counsellor; the victim protection organization LEFÖ-IBF was contacted. As part of an age assessment, it was determined that Favour was a minor, and she was admitted to Austria for the substantive examination of her asylum application.

Favour testified to the criminal police. The investigations revealed that the man had exploited other women, but especially girls, in Austria, and had in some cases abused them himself; he was convicted. Favour was granted asylum and was able to start a self-determined life.

The case exemplifies how a lack of identification of minors and dependencies can lead to continued exploitation. At the same time, it makes it clear that early awareness raising and cooperation between legal counsellors, authorities and victim support organizations are crucial to protect trafficked persons and prosecute perpetrators.

As part of the MEN Men's Health Centre, the victim protection organization MEN VIA has Austria-wide responsibility for the protection, care and counselling of men aged 18 and older who have been trafficked. In the past, however, minors have also been cared for by MEN VIA in exceptional cases (MEN VIA, n.d.; Working Group against Child Trafficking, 2024:12).

From 2020 to 2024, MEN VIA supported a total of seven people who were exploited in Austria as minors. At the time of exploitation, the minors were between 13 and 17 years old. With one exception, all of the boys were over the age of 14. The duration of exploitation varied. In some cases, an exploitation period of several months, or even years, was documented. The exploitation took place in various provinces in Austria,

²⁹⁴ Written input: LEFÖ-IBF, 3 September 2025.

specifically in Vienna, Tyrol, Upper Austria, Lower Austria and Styria. In one case, the boy was exploited in several provinces.

All the trafficked boys came from third countries, including Afghanistan, Belarus, Brazil, Nigeria and Serbia. The most common form of exploitation was exploitation to commit criminal acts (Belarus, Nigeria, Serbia). In two cases, boys were sexually exploited (Afghanistan, Serbia), once in combination with criminal acts. A boy from Brazil was exploited for his labour from the age of sixteen to twenty. A (statistically unidentifiable) number of these cases were in asylum or immigration proceedings.²⁹⁵

Almost all the trafficked boys were identified by care facilities, both at federal and provincial level, for example at the federal level by the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services and at the provincial level by Caritas, Diakonie, SOS Children's Villages or the Women's Shelter Tyrol.²⁹⁶

Reported suspected cases of child trafficking involving unaccompanied minors in federal reception facilities

Since 2024, the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services' internal case management system has made it possible to record and evaluate suspected cases of child trafficking. Since then, five suspected cases have been documented, two of them involving girls from Nigeria and Somalia, three involving boys from Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, as well as a non-binary minor from Armenia.²⁹⁷

In this context, it is important to note that the Agency only documents indications of a possible cases to initiate appropriate protective measures in the reception context and to ensure a referral to the victim protection organizations MEN VIA or LEFÖ-IBF. It is not possible to draw any conclusions about actual cases of child trafficking from the available figures, as this is subject to clarification by the victim protection organizations, the child and youth welfare services and, where relevant, in the context of asylum or criminal proceedings (Task Force for Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings, n.d.). In addition, it is unclear whether these are unaccompanied minors and whether the acts of exploitation took place in or outside Austria.²⁹⁸

Data gaps regarding child trafficking

Reliable data is indispensable for effective protective measures. However, the available data on child trafficking in Austria is fragmented, as different actors collect different, only partially comparable data. In addition, child trafficking happens in secret, so experts assume there is a high number of unidentified cases (Working Group against Child Trafficking, 2024:13–14).²⁹⁹ Accordingly, the current National Action Plan to Combat

295 Written input: MEN VIA, 9 October 2025.

296 Ibid.

297 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

298 Ibid.

299 In this context, the major child trafficking case documented in Belgium (see [Chapter 5.1.2](#)), in which more than one hundred Afghan boys were sexually exploited along the route from Türkiye to Belgium, is also relevant. Even though Austria is not explicitly mentioned in the proceedings, given the usual routes, it cannot be ruled out that some affected individuals may have passed through Austrian territory without being identified as victims.

Human Trafficking recognizes a need to improve the current data situation in Austria (Federal Government Austria, 2024:35–37).

Most recently, the Council of Europe’s Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) critically noted in its current report that there is no comprehensive and harmonized data collection system for recording child trafficking in Austria and that data continues to be collected separately by different government agencies and NGOs, with different criteria and at different procedural stages. Despite initial steps – such as participation in an EU-wide data system since 2021 – there are still deviations due to divergent recording times, role distributions between the police and the judiciary, and possible multiple counts (GRETA, 2025:44-45, 160-162).

The European Commission also noted that Austria reports a very low number of trafficked children compared to other EU Member States (European Commission, 2025:7). In addition, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Austria must further improve its data collection in order to make all forms of child trafficking and sexual exploitation of children visible (CRC Committee, 2020:10).

Overall, this results in a fragmented, inconsistent and only partially meaningful data picture, which makes it difficult to assess the actual risk as well as to develop targeted protective measures. Improvement requires the harmonization of data collection, a common national data system and the binding involvement of all relevant actors (including the child and youth welfare services in the provinces) in order to ensure reliable monitoring in the future (GRETA, 2025:44, 162).

5.3 VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: RISKS AFTER THE ONWARD JOURNEY

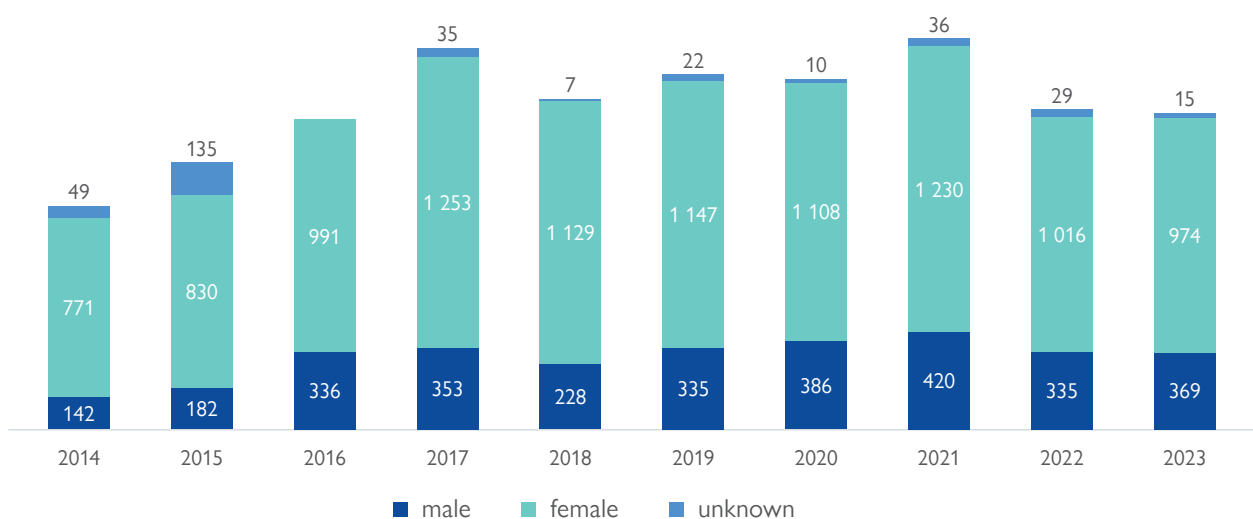
The fact that many unaccompanied minors do not (want to) stay in Austria, but rather intend to continue their journey to other European countries, is relevant from an Austrian protection perspective, because the minors are exposed to further or continued risks of violence, exploitation and abuse during their onward journey and/or in the subsequent transit or destination countries.

The results of a survey from Germany show that young refugees experience violence again even after arriving in Europe: 47 per cent of the professionals surveyed stated that at least half of the young people in reception facilities continue to experience violence³⁰⁰ after their arrival in Germany (Bundesfachverband Minderjährigkeit und Flucht e.V., 2025:67).

The increased vulnerability of unaccompanied minors is also reflected in the high number of trafficked children in the EU. The number of trafficked children has been relatively stable in recent years, fluctuating between 1,400 and 1,600 victims per year. The highest proportion of minor victims was recorded in 2021; in that year, about 24 per cent of all known trafficked persons were minors (Eurostat, 2025c:21).

300 Forms of physical or psychological abuse, as well as structural and everyday discrimination, were counted as violence.

Figure 8: EU 27: Trafficked children, 2014–2023



Source: Eurostat, n.d.b.

In Western and Southern Europe, from 2019 to 2022, there was a 40 per cent increase in trafficked boys whose profile (age and nationality) is similar to that of unaccompanied minors (UNODC, 2024).

At the same time, it should be noted that e.g. between 2021 and 2022, 81 per cent of identified child victims were EU citizens, 88 per cent of whom were exploited in their own Member State. In view of the increased vulnerability of unaccompanied minors, this could be an indication that the problem of lack of identification is particularly pronounced in this specific group.

According to the European Commission’s fifth report on the progress made in the EU in the fight against trafficking in human beings, the recent downward trend in the number of registered child victims of trafficking may be linked to the increase in online sexual exploitation, where many victims go undetected. The report also points out that in some Member States, child victims are not registered as trafficked persons so as to provide them with more comprehensive support available to children. Therefore, according to the Commission, the actual number of child victims of exploitation is unknown and may be underestimated (European Commission, 2025).

Without claiming to be exhaustive, the risks identified on the basis of the evaluation of the expert interviews are shown below, with a focus on Belgium and France, which are important destination countries for many of the minors in Austria.

5.3.1 Risks in Belgium

In Belgium, 13 minors were reported as victims of human trafficking from third countries in 2023 (two of whom were girls, eleven of whom were boys). However, only one year later in 2024, a major human trafficking case that involved 113 Afghan boys who were sexually exploited and 22 perpetrators who were convicted in Belgium revealed the extent to which deceptively low numbers may not actually reflect reality (see [Chapter 5.1.2](#)). It is particularly alarming that the acts of exploitation continued while the minors concerned had already been placed in state reception facilities in Belgium. One part of the criminal network was located in Antwerp, while another part was in Türkiye and in France (Van der Merwe, 2022; vrt news, 2024).³⁰¹

In addition to cases of sexual exploitation, cases of forced criminality and drug trafficking were also reported in Belgium, particularly among Algerian and Moroccan minors. Such minors often deliberately avoid institutional support and do not apply for asylum due to a lack of perspectives for receiving asylum or otherwise regularizing their status – sometimes under the influence or pressure of human traffickers or exploiters.³⁰² But Afghan boys are also affected here, according to the Federal Police of Belgium (EMN, 2024b; The Brussels Times, 2024). The Federal Police reported that Belgium is increasingly acting as a transit country for human trafficking, including cases of exploitation of minors in prostitution, forced labour and forced criminality (Federal Police Belgium, 2025:27). UNODC also points to documented cases of forced criminality by unaccompanied minors in Belgium (UNODC, 2024:45).

Many of these minors live on the streets and are involved in criminal networks, such as cocaine dealers. The minors often remain outside state registration and are therefore considered particularly at risk (Federal Police Belgium, 2025:8; Townsend, 2024).

301 Interview with Emilie Coomans, Child Focus, 12 August 2025.

302 Written input: IOM Belgium, 2 February 2026.

Infobox 1: Unaccompanied minors in Belgium

In 2025, 1,673 unaccompanied minors applied for international protection in Belgium (a decrease of 28.7% compared to 2024); of these, 13.9 per cent were girls. After an age assessment by the guardianship service, 702 of them were classified as adults. Around 36 per cent of the minors came from Eritrea, 18 per cent came from Afghanistan and 8 per cent came from Guinea (Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons, 2025).

The accommodation of unaccompanied minors in Belgium is carried out under a federal reception system run by the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) and is intended to ensure access to care and protection regardless of the asylum application. The system is structured in phases (observation/orientation, collective accommodation, transitional/autonomy structures) and is supported by quality standards and cooperation between federal authorities, communities and civil society actors. The accommodation of asylum seekers is a federal competence, but there is cooperation with the municipal level, which is responsible for youth affairs (Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2025).³⁰³

In practice, gaps in protection are particularly evident in transitions: the initial phase takes place in centres in the Brussels area; a formal appointment of a guardian often takes place only after assignment to second-phase institutions spread across the country. The allocation is based on an assessment of the best interests of the child and the vulnerability of the unaccompanied minor, which is carried out by Fedasil during the stay at the first phase centre and takes into account young age (under 14 years of age), networks and medical problems. If there is a suspicion of human trafficking or exploitation, a referral to a specialized facility should be made. This means that central decisions and trust-building sometimes take place at an early, particularly sensitive phase without permanently appointed guardianship.³⁰⁴ In addition, the relocation to other parts of the country requires representatives to organize contacts and personal visits, sometimes over longer distances.³⁰⁵ In the area of age determination, there are areas of tension in terms of human rights and child protection: Although the status of a minor applies in principle until the final clarification, the procedure has been repeatedly criticized, in particular because those affected were neither sufficiently informed nor legally represented (ECtHR, 2025; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2025).³⁰⁶

303 Interview with Hanne Vandendriessche, Fedasil, 16 September 2025.

304 Interview with Arne Verscheure, Guardianship Service Belgium, 16 September 2025; Interview with Hanne Vandendriessche, Fedasil, 16 September 2025.

305 Ibid.

306 Interview with Hanne Vandendriessche, Fedasil, 16 September 2025.

5.3.2 Risks in France

In France, too, there are risks of violence, exploitation and abuse, particularly for unaccompanied minors due to gaps in protection in access to the child protection system, problems of age verification, delays in legal representation, and precarious situations at borders and in informal camps.

Specific risks are reported in connection with violence at borders. For example, one interviewed expert reported on police violence on the Italian–French border,³⁰⁷ and there were also similar incidents concerning the French borders with Italy and Spain (ECRE, 2023; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2023).

In 2024, 490 trafficked children were registered in France (Ministry of the Interior France, 2025:12). Of the 419 trafficked children who were supported by French NGOs in 2024, 86 were considered unaccompanied minors. Half of the unaccompanied minors were victims of exploitation through criminal or punishable acts (43%) 22 per cent of them were victims of sexual exploitation, while 29 per cent were victims of labour exploitation (at work and at home; Miprof, 2025).

An expert from the Koutcha child protection facility reported that minors who are institutionally housed are repeatedly pushed into sexual exploitation and exploitation in the drug scene, including many girls. The cases observed involved French minors; they suggest that accommodation structures do not consistently guarantee complete protection. In addition, unaccompanied minors, especially from the Maghreb states, have been repeatedly used to commit criminal acts such as pickpocketing.³⁰⁸ In this context, the following is considered relevant: in the *Trocadero* case, a court of first instance recognized forced criminality as a form of exploitation in the context of trafficking in human beings: Seven Algerian perpetrators were found to have led 17 unaccompanied minors into drug addiction and then forced them to commit crimes (Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme, 2024; European Commission, 2025:8). This led to an increasing awareness that minors in forced criminality should not be seen as perpetrators, but as victims (République Française, n.d.).

For many minors, France is not the final destination; they are trying to travel on to the United Kingdom. In this context, the risks in the context of onward travel across the English Channel and the waiting time in northern France are very relevant. In 2024, around 37,000 people crossed the English Channel in small boats; about 14 per cent were minors (The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 2025). Media reports from October 2025 point to an increase in Channel crossings; Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Syrian Arab Republic and Sudan are mentioned as the main nationalities (BBC, 2025b). In addition, it is reported that there are more minors from Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan among them, while the number of Kurdish and Afghan minors has recently decreased. (BBC, 2025a) According to an expert interviewed from the United Kingdom, many minors from Iran also risk the journey.³⁰⁹ A report from the NGO Project Play describes an

307 Interview with Hannah Stott, Safe to Grow, 10 September 2025.

308 Interview with Olivier Peyroux, Koutcha, 26 September 2025.

309 Interview with Hannah Stott, Safe to Grow, 10 September 2025.

increase in violence and deaths among minors at the border between France and the United Kingdom for 2024; at least 15 minors were killed. Unaccompanied minors are victims of violent police actions in informal camps, including evictions with tear gas and rubber bullets. At the same time, living conditions are precarious (lack of medical care, inadequate nutrition, unhygienic conditions). It is also reported that increased border surveillance and violent interception operations (e.g. stabbing boats) further increase the risk; Minors report fear of the police, the water and the separation of families. It is criticized that the policies of France and the United Kingdom rely on deterrence instead of protection and thus systematically violate children's rights (Project Play, 2024). According to an expert interviewed, crossings are organized almost exclusively from France; mostly by smuggling networks³¹⁰ that demand large sums, even if these amounts are said to have fallen recently. The boats are overcrowded; there were regular deaths by drowning. Minors also reported failure to provide assistance when fellow passengers fell overboard; many are in extremely poor condition after the crossing. Some also tried to get to the United Kingdom via trucks or ferries.³¹¹

Infobox 2: Unaccompanied minors in France

In 2024, 13,554 unaccompanied minors were registered in the French child protection system (Ministry of Justice France, 2025).³¹² In contrast to Austria, the asylum system for unaccompanied minors plays only a subordinate role in France.

For people who declare that they are unaccompanied and below the age of 18, the departmental council of the place where the person is located provides temporary emergency accommodation.³¹³ This initial accommodation takes place in specialized reception centres. In the Calvados département, for example, unaccompanied minors are accommodated in the emergency reception centre Missy (capacity approx. 65 seats). The average length of stay there is around six months (Conseil Départemental du Calvados, 2025).³¹⁴

After a rest period and the determination of any health needs, it is checked whether the person is indeed a minor and unaccompanied.

If the judicial authority finds that both are true, the unaccompanied minor is assigned to a département by a court decision within the framework of a nationally coordinated distribution mechanism. The basis is a distribution key applied throughout the country (Ministry of Justice France, 2025:18–22). There they are cared for as part of the Aide Sociale à l'Enfance (ASE). The département in which the accommodation takes place provides the minor concerned, like all other minors cared for by child and youth welfare services, with a wide range of multidisciplinary care: accommodation, socio-educational

310 Interview with Hannah Stott, Safe to Grow, 10 September 2025.

311 Ibid.

312 This represents a decline of almost 30 per cent compared to 2023 and the lowest number since 2021.

313 Interview with Emilie Bertho, 2025; Interview with Ministry of Justice France, 2025.

314 Interview with Emilie Bertho, Département Calvados, 19 September 2025.

support, access to health care, administrative and legal support, support for schooling and professional integration. This sustainable care is mainly provided in smaller residential units or semi-autonomous forms of housing, which are provided by partner organizations of the départements (e.g., France Terre d'Asile, DAMNA, Les Apprentis d'Auteuil). Accommodation in foster families is provided for very young minors, however the available capacities are limited (Conseil Départemental du Calvados, 2025).³¹⁵

Unaccompanied minors who have been admitted to the child protection system at the latest at the age of 16 can obtain a temporary residence permit upon entering adulthood. If they were between 16 and 18 years old when they were admitted, they can apply for a residence permit (on the basis of a derogation) if they have completed qualifying training for at least six months (République Française, 2025).

A key structural risk factor is that many unaccompanied minors are classified as adults as part of flawed age assessment procedures and thus do not have access to support services from the French child and youth welfare system. According to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, this means that affected minors live on the streets or in makeshift camps without shelter, food, water, sanitation, medical care or education while appeals are ongoing. In this context, according to the UN Committee, France systematically fails to prioritize the best interests of the child, to apply multidisciplinary assessment procedures and to provide specialized legal representation and sufficient legal advice. The Committee also criticizes that radiological bone examinations continue to be used as the preferred method, even though they are considered to be unreliable and error prone. The report highlights that unaccompanied minors living on the streets, in hotels or unofficial camps without adequate supervision by child and youth welfare services are at increased risk of sexual exploitation, child trafficking, drugs and criminal activities (CRC Committee, 2025:4-6, 15).

A particularly sensitive risk area concerns deprivation of liberty in waiting areas at external borders and airports. Unaccompanied minors can be detained there if entry or identity is unclear. Although this is only legally permissible in exceptional cases, the exception is often applied in practice, for example in the case of minors with incomplete or false papers. An ad hoc representation could also be appointed in these waiting areas; however, delays reportedly occur regularly. Human rights organizations report that asylum procedures in waiting centres are carried out more quickly, which means that minors have little time to present reasons for protection. In addition, it is reported that even if vulnerability is identified (e.g. traumatized or pregnant minors), no discharge takes place; the conditions are considered to be insufficiently child-friendly in some cases, with limited access to legal advice, medical care and care (Anafé, 2020; Forum Réfugiés, 2025a). The UN Committee also emphasizes that the regular deprivation of liberty in waiting areas can have long-term negative consequences for the mental health of the minors concerned (CRC Committee, 2025:15).

315 Ibid.

Only a small proportion of unaccompanied minors registered in the child protection system also apply for asylum in France. Between 2020 and 2024, their share was only around five to just under 8 per cent (Ministry of Justice France, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025; OFPRA, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025), in 2024, 1,027 unaccompanied minors applied for international protection (a decrease of almost 24% compared to 2023); 74 per cent of them were male. The most important countries of origin included Afghanistan (42%), Sudan (8.7%), Côte d'Ivoire (8.7%), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (7.7%) and Guinea (7.1%).

According to the UN Committee, the reasons for this are a lack of knowledge about the asylum system, a lack of legal support and insufficient access to psychological care (CRC Committee, 2025:8). In addition, hurdles and delays in appointing legal representation have a direct impact on the possibility of applying for asylum: In principle, unaccompanied minors can only apply for asylum with the competent asylum authority (OFPRA) if they have been assigned legal representation. For minors whose age assessment has not yet been completed, the immediate appointment of an ad hoc representation would be provided, but in practice too few such representations are appointed. This is, in part, due to the fact that the result of the age determination procedure is regularly awaited before the appointment. This leads to delays and can lead to serious gaps in child protection (CRC Committee, 2025:8; Forum Réfugiés, 2025b).

6. RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Based on the International Organization for Migration (IOM) vulnerability model described in [Chapter 1.3](#), the following section analyses the risk and protective factors that significantly influence the vulnerability and resilience of unaccompanied minors. The model assumes that vulnerability and resilience arise from the interplay of factors at four levels: at the level of the individual, the household/family, the community and at the structural level.

The chapter follows this structure and presents the risk-increasing factors identified in existing literature and the empirical results of the study. It then describes the protective factors that can strengthen the capacities of unaccompanied minors to avoid, cope with or recover from child trafficking and other forms of violence, exploitation and abuse. The aim is to make the relevant influencing factors visible in the Austrian context and to show how they can mutually reinforce or weaken each other.

The section does not claim to be exhaustive, but concentrates on the risk and protective factors that have emerged as particularly relevant from the research activities carried out in the context of the study.

6.1 RISK AND PROTECTION FACTORS: INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

One of the most obvious risk factors for unaccompanied minors is their young age and the fact that they are separated from parents or guardians and are therefore on their own. Depending on their actual age, young people are generally more dependent, physically less strong, tend to be less well informed than adults, and less able to claim their rights (IOM, 2019:101), which increases their vulnerability.

Another relevant risk factor is the fact that very few of them use regular migration channels, and therefore, for various reasons (which in principle apply to all irregular migrants regardless of age), they do not have access to protection mechanisms – either because they are not made available to them or because they do not want to access them in order to avoid contact with the authorities. The minors' citizenship is rarely a protective factor.

The minors' migration status is usually linked to another risk factor: the lack of language skills in Austria and other countries through which the minors travel. Of the minors surveyed, none spoke German and very few spoke English; they therefore depended on the information of smugglers and other migrants (who may have had insufficient information at their disposal). This increases dependencies on these people and thus sometimes also the risks of violence, exploitation and abuse. Many unaccompanied minors have limited knowledge of the asylum system, their rights or risks in the reception context when they arrive

(see [Chapter 6.1.1](#)). In addition, they often mistrust authorities and formal structures; hence, many children only accept official information after repeated personal contact.³¹⁶

In general, a higher level of education is considered an individual protective factor that enables minors to critically examine their situation, plan accordingly and better cope with challenges. Better education also helps minors to be better aware of their rights and how to claim them (IOM, 2019:103). The achievement of a higher level of education for unaccompanied minors is influenced by their age and their migration history (e.g. displacement-related interruptions in education).

In addition, gender-specific aspects shape the vulnerability of unaccompanied minors significantly (UNICEF, 2021; UNODC, 2024). Female and non-binary migrants tend to be associated with a heightened risk of violence, exploitation and abuse (IOM, 2019:103). In the Austrian context, experts also reported different concrete risks for unaccompanied girls and boys (for sexual exploitation and violence, see [Chapter 5.2.1](#)). LGBTIQ+ minors are considered particularly vulnerable.³¹⁷ They can experience discrimination and hostility.³¹⁸ In this context, one expert interviewed pointed out that membership of the LGBTIQ+ community is regularly only disclosed over time and after longer care.³¹⁹

A number of risk factors are related to the physical and psychological situation of minors. In this context, previous experiences of violence, exploitation and abuse play a special role, as they significantly increase the risk of becoming a victim again. In connection with the journey to Europe, it is difficult to protect oneself at the individual level, according to statements made by unaccompanied minors in the focus group discussions.³²⁰

Psychological stress such as witnessing deaths, injuries or illnesses can also have negative psychological effects and reduce resilience at the individual level (IOM, 2019:102).³²¹ The fact that a large number of unaccompanied minors were already affected by violence, exploitation or abuse on their way to Austria and/or witnessed it (see [Chapter 5.1](#)) thus increases their vulnerability extraordinarily. The consequences of the experiences on the way to Austria can be seen in psychological stress and trauma consequences. An Afghan boy described in a focus group discussion that the journey to Austria had been “very traumatic and psychologically stressful”.³²² According to experts, many unaccompanied minors show signs of psychological distress or traumatization after arriving in Austria. These include sleep disorders, anxiety, concentration and learning difficulties, social isolation, aggressiveness or auto-aggressive behaviour such as cutting, and depressive symptoms.³²³

316 Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025; Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025.

317 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

318 Ibid; Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

319 Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025.

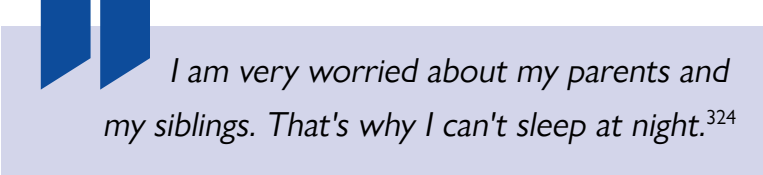
320 Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

321 Interview with Astrid Winkler, ECPAT Austria, 9 April 2025.

322 Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

323 Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Alionis Dzhmalis, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 2 April 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025.

In addition to psychological stress, there are also worries about family members who remain in the country of origin or in transit countries. A Somali boy summed up this concern in the focus group discussion in Traiskirchen with the words:

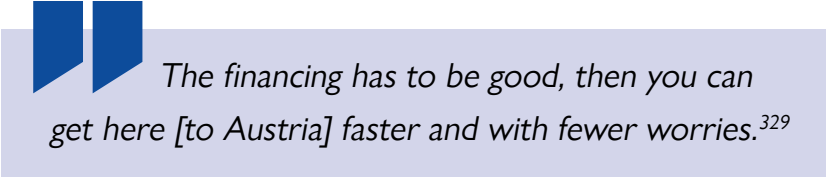


*I am very worried about my parents and my siblings. That's why I can't sleep at night.*³²⁴

At the same time, various individual strategies are sometimes used by unaccompanied minors to try to minimize existing risks. There are reports of girls who chose to wear male clothing at times on the route to better protect themselves from sexualized violence. The conscious choice of routes and groups that they consider to be comparatively safe can also serve as protection (Save the Children, 2020:22).

Several experts emphasized that many unaccompanied minors have significant mental health resources despite difficult starting conditions.³²⁵ Unaccompanied minors show astonishing adaptability and perseverance. According to an expert, for example, most of the unaccompanied minors manage to enter school, training or everyday life in Austria.³²⁶ This individual resilience can thus act as a significant protective factor in dealing with existing stresses. Clear objectives to improve one's own situation can also play a stabilizing role. One specialist emphasized that many of the children had clear ideas about what they wanted.³²⁷

Another individual risk factor concerns the financial situation of the minors. A stable financial situation increases resilience to risks of violence, exploitation and abuse; insufficient financial resources increase vulnerability (IOM, 2019:103). Several minors and one young adult interviewed described that good financing of the trip could help to avoid or shorten dangerous situations.³²⁸ A Somali boy summed it up as follows:



*The financing has to be good, then you can get here [to Austria] faster and with fewer worries.*³²⁹

Conversely, debts resulting from financing the journey represent a significant risk for some unaccompanied minors.³³⁰ In view of rising costs in the smuggling sector, this problem has recently worsened, according to

324 Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

325 Interview with Eva Kaufmann, LEFÖ-IBF, 24 March 2025; Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Christine Okresek, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025.

326 Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

327 Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025.

328 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025; Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

329 Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025.

330 Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025.

an expert.³³¹ It is feared that the financial pressure can lead to minors trying to find income opportunities shortly after their arrival, possibly even outside the legal framework.³³²

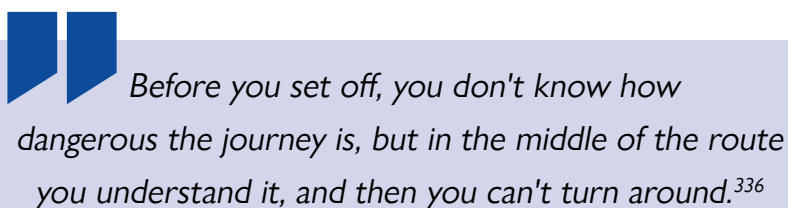
6.1.1 Information behaviour and decision-making of unaccompanied minors

Lack of knowledge makes it difficult for migrants to correctly assess their perspectives and to know or demand their rights, thus increasing their vulnerability (IOM, 2019:102f). The results of the research activities carried out within the framework of this study show that the information behaviour and decision-making of unaccompanied minors vary widely and depend to a large extent on the situational circumstances of the individual case. It has repeatedly become clear that most minors have only very limited level of knowledge when they leave the country, during their journey and when they arrive in Austria, and rely mainly on informal sources of information. Decisions are often based on circumstances, peers and contacts in family and community networks.

Misinformation about the duration, cost and safety of the trip appears to be widespread. For example, many of the respondents only became aware of how dangerous and arduous the journey would be when they were already en route.³³³ According to a child protection expert, these ideas are based on unsubstantiated narratives from various sources, such as family members, communities, the social environment, and information shared via social media.³³⁴

However, since minors often have no opportunity to verify informal information and must make quick decisions on a regular basis, they often rely on situational trust.³³⁵

A boy from Afghanistan living in the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen summed up the problem as follows:



*Before you set off, you don't know how dangerous the journey is, but in the middle of the route you understand it, and then you can't turn around.*³³⁶

331 Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

332 Interview with Helmut Sax, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights, 4 April 2025; Interview with Andreas Diendorfer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025.

333 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025; Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025; Interview with focus group 3, 17 June 2025; Interview with Afghan young adult, 18 years, 24 September 2025.

334 Interview with Astrid Winkler, ECPAT Austria, 9 April 2025.

335 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

336 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025.

With regard to the situation in Austria, too, knowledge and expectations are usually diffuse before arrival. Several minors stated that they knew little or nothing about Austria before they arrived in the country.³³⁷ Some heard about Austria for the first time in other EU countries before they decided to continue their journey. For example, Somali minors reported that they had first learned about Austria from community members in shelters in Italy.³³⁸ Only in isolated cases was there already prior knowledge, mostly from relatives or acquaintances who were already in Austria.³³⁹ Similarly limited knowledge of the situation in the target countries existed among those who were later interviewed in France and Belgium.³⁴⁰

Although information materials are made available to unaccompanied minors, several experts highlighted a pronounced information deficit in the early phase of the stay, due to unclear communication, language barriers and the lack of child-friendly explanations.³⁴¹ Minors therefore sometimes rely on informal reports such as in which countries residence status is easy to obtain or procedures are faster. According to experts, information deficits can lead to misjudgments about legal proceedings being passed on and used by the children as a basis for decision-making.³⁴²

Minors interviewed for this study also perceived the information situation in the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen as insufficient in the initial phase. Several minors reported that the first few days were characterized by confusion and a lack of orientation.³⁴³ At the same time, local caretaking staff are perceived as an important low-threshold source of information,³⁴⁴ and peers also continue to play a relevant role as information brokers.³⁴⁵ Although information about accommodation, services and obligations is generally provided, in the case of high numbers of applications, it is difficult to provide timely and comprehensive information.³⁴⁶

In addition to personal interviews, written information material is available at the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen. The brochure “Your asylum procedure in Austria”, for example, is available in several languages and is intended to explain the procedure in a child-friendly way. It also expressly points out the danger of continuing the journey alone: “Please DO NOT continue your journey alone, even if the wait takes a long time. It's dangerous” (Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, 2022:10). At the same time, an Afghan minor criticized that the brochure was “far too long” and lacked “clear and brief information”.³⁴⁷ One

337 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025; Interview with focus group 3, 17 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

338 Interview with focus group 3, 17 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

339 Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

340 Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025; Interview with Afghan young adult, 18 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

341 Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025; Interview with Astrid Winkler, ECPAT Austria, 9 April 2025; Interview with Alyona Samar, Missing Children Europe, 25 July 2025.

342 Interview with Alyona Samar, Missing Children Europe, 25 July 2025; Interview with Astrid Winkler, ECPAT Austria, 9 April 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025.

343 Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

344 Ibid.

345 Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025; Interview with focus group 3, 17 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

346 Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

347 Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

expert expressed fundamental doubts that brochures are read by unaccompanied minors at all.³⁴⁸ An expert also pointed out that many unaccompanied minors are illiterate.³⁴⁹

Family members of unaccompanied minors are largely responsible for the provision of information and decision-making. In many cases, parents or other family members are directly involved in the decision to leave, in the financing of the journey and in the choice of destination. This was reflected both in the statements of unaccompanied minors in Austria³⁵⁰ and those who were later interviewed in Belgium and France.³⁵¹ In one such case, a Syrian boy received direct support from his brother, who lives in Austria, who organized train tickets to Belgium and provided travel information.³⁵²

In addition to family members, other migrants and peers also play an important role. Many of the minors interviewed described that they were strongly influenced by the experiences of other fellow travelers and members of their respective communities when traveling.³⁵³

Decisions along the route are also often made under the direct influence of smugglers, which is another risk factor (IOM, 2019:102). Many minors described that they had hardly any real freedom of choice due to their dependence on smuggling networks.³⁵⁴ An Afghan youth reported that his mother had told him that he should go to France, but she had only handed over the money to a man and “would not have known which route to take”.³⁵⁵ A Syrian boy described that they had to follow the smuggler “because we had no other choice, because we were isolated” and, that they never knew “whether a river was coming, whether we would have to walk through a forest or where we would spend night.”³⁵⁶ A Somali girl explained: “I had no plan at all.”³⁵⁷

The lack of their own decision-making options regarding the travel route is also evident in the stories of the two Afghans who were brought from Serbia and Romania to France in truck containers via Austria without any information about the route or duration of the journey.³⁵⁸ A Syrian teenager reported that he had followed the instructions of his smuggler on his onward journey from Austria and got into a car whose driver he did not know.³⁵⁹

348 Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025.

349 Written input: Lisa Wolfsegger, asylkoordination austria, 20 January 2026.

350 Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025; Interview with focus group 3, 17 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

351 Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025; Interview with Syrian minor, 13 years, 17 September 2025; Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan young adult, 18 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

352 Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025.

353 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025; Interview with focus group 3, 17 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025; Interview with Syrian minor, 15 years, 17 September 2025; Interview with Syrian minor, 13 years, 17 September 2025; Interview with Syrian young adult, 18 years, 15 September 2025; Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan young adult, 18 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

354 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025; Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025; Interview with Afghan young adult, 18 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

355 Interview with Afghan young adult, 18 years, 24 September 2025.

356 Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025.

357 Interview with focus group 3, 17 June 2025.

358 Interview with Afghan young adult, 20 years, 24 September 2025; Interview with Afghan minor, 16 years, 24 September 2025.

359 Interview with Syrian young adult, 18 years, 15 September 2025.

Digital communication plays a central role for many minors. Most of them have mobile phones, although this is not always the case.³⁶⁰ According to statements by unaccompanied minors in the focus groups, WhatsApp is used by some primarily to maintain contact with families. In some cases, YouTube, Google or translation apps such as Google Translate are also used to search for information or orientation. TikTok, Facebook and Instagram are known to many, but apparently serve more for entertainment and less for information gathering.³⁶¹ At the same time, it was a TikTok video of a person unknown to him that had persuaded a Somali boy to continue his journey from Italy to Austria.³⁶² Occasionally, minors also mentioned using artificial intelligence such as ChatGPT. Navigation apps such as Google Maps support orientation on the route. However, the use of these technologies is often limited, for example due to a lack of internet access, confiscation of mobile phones by smugglers or security forces, and loss or damage to devices.

Another risk arises from a lack of knowledge regarding the safe use of online media. With increasing digitalization, the risks for unaccompanied minors have also changed. The trend in recruiting trafficked persons via social media and messaging platforms continued in 2024. According to the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, a continuous increase in the use of these online platforms is to be expected (Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, 2025a:28, 30). Unaccompanied minors can be contacted and recruited through social media and online platforms and are unaware of the dangers of potential exploitation that come with it.³⁶³ There are also risks due to the use of gaming platforms by minors. With the online dimension, the classic categories of “countries of origin”, “transit” and “destination” are becoming increasingly blurred, as child trafficking and exploitation are also organized virtually (Books and Otte, 2025; Revealing Reality, 2025).³⁶⁴

At the same time, an international expert pointed out that targeted prevention or educational measures for safe and responsible internet use by unaccompanied minors are insufficient in Europe.³⁶⁵ Although there are projects in Austria that aim to strengthen the media literacy of children and young people, the offer is not explicitly aimed at unaccompanied minors in the asylum procedure (e.g. the “Saferinternet.at” initiative and the Federal Network of Austrian Youth Information; Saferinternet.at, n.d.).

360 Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025; Interview with Alyona Samar, Missing Children Europe, 25 July 2025.

361 Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025; Interview with focus group 3, 17 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

362 Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

363 Interview with Horst Schiller, Criminal Intelligence Service Austria, 16 July 2025.

364 Interview with Helmut Sax, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights, 4 April 2025.

365 Interview with European Union Agency for Asylum, 19 August 2025.

6.1.2 Measures to increase resilience at the individual level

Many of the individual factors mentioned above, such as age, cannot be changed, but the associated risk elements can be mitigated with sufficient protective measures. Corresponding measures are closely linked to existing structures. The following existing protective measures to increase resilience at the individual level were identified in the study:

Age-appropriate and gender-segregated accommodation is an important protective mechanism. On the journey to Austria, safe accommodation and age-appropriate psychosocial services can reduce risks, especially in longer transit phases, promote stability and create spaces for recreation and orientation. Overall, accommodation and care structures on the journey have a demonstrably large influence on the mental health of unaccompanied minors (Derluyn et al., 2022:42). In Austria, corresponding structures, such as separate living areas for girls, minors under the age of 14 or unaccompanied boys, are used to protect minors, as practitioners from the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen reported. The spatial separation of particularly vulnerable groups is intended to create safe spaces and enable closer care.³⁶⁶ This also includes the practice of quickly relocating members of the LGBTIQ+ community to safe quarters, which is used in federal basic care, which requires good coordination between actors at different levels. In this context, cooperation with specialized organizations such as the NGO Queer Base, which specializes in working in the LGBTIQ+ community, is very important to ensure protection.³⁶⁷

The availability of psychosocial and therapeutic support is also an important measure to strengthen the resilience of young people. In addition to the provision of psychologists, such as in the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen, attempts are made to ensure a professional psychotherapeutic offer through NGOs and projects. A psychologist from the federal reception facility in Traiskirchen reported that some of the unaccompanied minors open up very quickly in the protected framework of the psychological conversation and sometimes report traumatic experiences, which makes it easier to provide help.³⁶⁸ An interviewed expert from the legal counselling of the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, on the other hand, pointed out that essential accounts that can also be relevant to the asylum procedure often only emerge over time.³⁶⁹ At the same time, it does not always make sense to initiate a longer-term measure such as psychotherapy in federal care, because it can be assumed that a change of accommodation will be imminent.

Unfortunately, there can be long waiting times until a suitable psychiatric or psychotherapeutic appointment can take place, even though unaccompanied minors are given priority where possible (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:135–136).

366 Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

367 Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

368 Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

369 Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025.

A relevant measure in the context of planned onward journeys to increase protection at the individual level can be found in Belgium, where there are two transit shelters for unaccompanied minors who are only temporarily staying in Belgium and intend to continue their journey – often towards France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. These facilities allow a stay of up to three months without formal registration and are intended to provide a short-term shelter, secure basic needs and provide information about the rights and risks of onward travel. After that, minors must decide whether to leave or transfer to the regular system.³⁷⁰ Fedasil considers these facilities to be an important mechanism for hard-to-reach groups that would otherwise remain outside of any care.³⁷¹

6.2 RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS: FAMILY OR HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

At the level of the family or household, risk and protective factors act in particular through social and economic conditions, the history and experiences of the family or household, intra-family relationships, as well as through expectations and dynamics that shape the behaviour and decision-making spaces of unaccompanied minors. Protective factors at the family or household level result primarily from stabilizing family relationships, emotional support and measures that reduce family pressure and strengthen the scope of action of unaccompanied minors. For unaccompanied minors, there is therefore already a gap in protection due to the absence of the families.

Even though many unaccompanied minors are physically separated from their families, family ties remain a central emotional point of reference for many of the respondents. Regular contact with parents and siblings, for example via telephone calls or messages, can be an important source of stability, hope and motivation. Family ties can have an emotionally regulating effect and strengthen individual resilience, even if relatives are far away (Derluyn et al., 2022:39–42). Conversely, a lack of communication opportunities with relatives on the trip, of which several unaccompanied minors reported, has a stressful effect; they are on their own in such situations, have to make decisions on their own and in some cases also ensure the financing of the trip independently, which in turn can lead to increased risks.

However, regular contact with families can also prove to be equally stressful and risky. Unaccompanied minors are sometimes exposed to considerable family pressure to financially support their relatives in the country of origin or in transit countries, or to bring their family with them.³⁷² Some minors feel obliged to find work as quickly as possible, even though their access to the labour market is restricted during the asylum procedure (Ebner, 2023). This tension can lead to inner conflicts and considerable frustration³⁷³ and increase the willingness to engage in dangerous and exploitative situations. Health emergencies in the family³⁷⁴ or crises

370 Interview with Arne Verscheure, Guardianship Service Belgium, 16 September 2025; Interview with Hanne Vandendriessche, Fedasil, 16 September 2025; Interview with Emilie Coomans, Child Focus, 12 August 2025.

371 Interview with Hanne Vandendriessche, Fedasil, 16 September 2025.

372 Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025; Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Andreas Diendorfer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Christine Okresek, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Daniel Simon, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025.

373 Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025.

374 Interview with Andreas Diendorfer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

at the places of residence of family members can further increase the pressure on unaccompanied minors. For example, one expert described that Syrian minors were “completely distraught” after the earthquake in the Turkish-Syrian border area in 2023 as they “very quickly wanted to send money [to their families].”³⁷⁵

The specific family or household situation can also be a risk factor in principle, especially if it is characterized by instability. Experts from specialized victim support organizations repeatedly emphasized that unstable or broken family relationships often shape the background of minors affected by child trafficking and other forms of violence, exploitation and abuse.³⁷⁶ An expert from the victim protection organization LEFÖ-IBF reported that they had seen that especially trafficked children from Nigeria had often grown up in “dysfunctional families” in which poverty and a lack of secure care created starting points for recruitment processes. The lack of stable family structures can lead minors to seek contact persons outside the family, which increases the risk of exploitative dependencies.³⁷⁷

6.2.1 Measures to increase resilience at the family or household level

For many minors, the possibility of having family members join them in the framework of family reunification, or being reunited with them in other countries, is an important measure to give them stability and prospects. For the reasons described in [Chapter 4.1.2](#) (challenges in the implementation of transfers, deadlines, sometimes lengthy procedures), the current system of the Dublin III Regulation seems to be only partially suitable.

Measures aimed at reducing family pressure also have a protective effect. Austrian experts reported that directly informing parents, with the consent of the minors concerned, about the living situation, rights and limitations of their children in Austria can help to reduce unrealistic expectations, such as regarding rapid employment or family reunification.³⁷⁸

6.3 RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS: COMMUNITY LEVEL

At this level, protective and risk factors include social contexts and networks in which minors move outside their family that can have a decisive influence on their safety or vulnerability. This includes institutional relationships, contacts with peers and external actors. A lack of social networks and trusted persons, isolation and risky contacts in the minors’ environment can impact the situation of unaccompanied minors.

On the way to Austria, travelling in groups is a protection strategy for unaccompanied minors. Shared paths provide not only physical security, but also emotional stability, social embeddedness, and orientation (Derluyn et al., 2022:42). The results of an IOM study indicate that a significant proportion of unaccompanied minors join groups, mostly with accompanying persons without a family relationship (IOM, 2024b:14).

375 Interview with Christine Okresek, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

376 Interview with MEN VIA, 26 March 2025; Interview with Eva Kaufmann, LEFÖ-IBF, 24 March 2025.

377 Interview with Eva Kaufmann, LEFÖ-IBF, 24 March 2025.

378 Interview with Katharina Schmidt-Dengler, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025; Interview with Daniel Simon, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025.

However, many unaccompanied minors come to Austria without family or reliable social caregivers. The focus group discussions conducted suggest that only a few of the minors surveyed had relatives in Austria.³⁷⁹ Concrete statistics on this are not recorded.³⁸⁰

The absence of a familiar environment increases dependence on institutional relationships and can create an environment in which risky contacts develop more easily.³⁸¹ An international expert confirmed that a lack of trust in and knowledge of the environment can be a factor that makes minors more likely to end up in exploitative conditions, such as in the hands of child traffickers.³⁸² The absence of trusted ties can also make it difficult for unaccompanied minors to report threats or reveal problematic contacts.³⁸³

A lack of trust in the environment is considered a central risk factor for minors to fall into exploitative structures, while stable and reliable caretakers make a significant contribution to prevention.³⁸⁴ Central to this is the establishment of sustainable relationships of trust with caretakers. Several experts emphasized that stable caretakers are one of the most important protective factors for unaccompanied minors.³⁸⁵ Reliable caretakers can enable minors to share concerns, find emotional relief and address situations in which they feel overwhelmed at an early stage. This presupposes that the caretakers do not have to look after too many minors at the same time and have the time resources to be there for them accordingly.

Continuous, everyday support can also have a protective effect. Caretakers who see the unaccompanied minors on a daily basis can perceive changes in behaviour at an early stage and initiate support.³⁸⁶ This is particularly relevant because many minors do not actively address stressful experiences, isolation or risky contacts. Such indications often only become visible in the context of reliable relationships.³⁸⁷

Finally, contact with peers can also promote the resilience of minors. In the focus group discussions, for example, the impression arose that minors provide emotional relief to one another, support each other and stand up for each other in stressful situations.³⁸⁸ Such forms of solidarity and collective management can strengthen the feeling of safety and belonging and thus act as a supplementary protective factor (Derluyn et al., 2022:39).

379 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025; Interview with focus group 2, 3 June 2025; Interview with focus group 3, 17 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

380 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

381 Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025; Interview with Andreas Diendorfer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

382 Interview with Alyona Samar, Missing Children Europe, 25 July 2025.

383 Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025; Interview with Alyona Samar, Missing Children Europe, 25 July 2025.

384 Interview with Alyona Samar, Missing Children Europe, 25 July 2025.

385 Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025; Interview with Gernot Kues, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Zaneta Chlebinska, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 20 March 2025; Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025.

386 Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025.

387 Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025.

388 Written input: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 9 October 2025.

6.3.1 Measures to increase resilience at the community level

In Austria, there are various projects that train and support Austrians who wish to take on an informal mentorship for unaccompanied minors in order to provide them with concrete support, for example in contact with the authorities or in learning the language; one example is the “connecting people” project, which the NGO *asylkoordination austria* has been implementing for many years. The focus is on building a long-term stable relationship between the mentors and the minors, which offers emotional support and accompaniment in everyday life (*connecting people*, 2026).

In other EU countries, former unaccompanied minors pass on their experience to new arrivals through structured peer mentoring programmes. Such peer-to-peer approaches aim to promote trust, mutual understanding, participation and self-efficacy among unaccompanied minors. As an example, an international expert highlighted the mentoring project “Supporting Unaccompanied Children in Greece”, which promotes the participation of minors in Greece, enables exchanges with former minors and provides guidance for newcomers in a supportive and safe environment (EUAA, 2025a:20, 686 et seq.; UNICEF, 2025a).³⁸⁹

In Austria, individual diaspora organizations have set initiatives to provide unaccompanied minors with support and orientation. For example, the Viennese NGO *NEUER START* was founded by former refugees from Afghanistan to support Afghan young people and to promote contacts between refugees among themselves, but also with the Austrian population. The NGO offers cultural and sports activities, awareness-raising measures and intercultural work with boys and men (*NEUER START*, n.d.).

6.4 RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS: STRUCTURAL LEVEL

Structural risk factors arise from the legal framework, institutional responsibilities, administrative processes and organizational gaps in the Austrian asylum and child protection system. They work independently of individual characteristics and can significantly increase the vulnerability of unaccompanied minors. At the same time, vulnerabilities can also be reduced and addressed at the structural level. Structural protection mechanisms include effective care, clear responsibilities, reliable processes and procedures, and coordinated institutional frameworks that register, support and protect unaccompanied minors at an early stage, thus reducing the risk of exploitation, violence and abuse.

At the time of writing this study, a significant structural risk factor in the Austrian asylum context is the lack of guardianship from day 1 onwards for the majority of unaccompanied minors. As described in [Chapter 3.1.2](#), no one takes over guardianship in the areas of care and upbringing as well as legal representation outside the asylum procedure in the first phase of their stay in Austria, which the Commission on the Best Interest of the Child assessed in 2021 as a violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Federal Constitutional Law on the Rights of the Child (Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:114-115, 221). International organizations and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

³⁸⁹ Interview with Alyona Samar, *Missing Children Europe*, 25 July 2025; Interview with European Union Agency for Asylum, 19 August 2025.

have also repeatedly voiced criticism of the existing guardianship system (CRC Committee, 2020; UNHCR Austria, 2019; UNHCR Austria et al., 2022). In the context of the present study, numerous experts confirmed that the lack of a clearly responsible person or institution, for example for medical decisions, school matters or psychosocial support, leads to significant gaps in protection.³⁹⁰ Decisions, with longer-term implications, such as the consent to a voluntary return, cannot be made either (UNHCR Austria, 2019:6). A representative of the child and youth welfare service pointed out that the basic care of minors by the federal and provincial governments is guaranteed from day 1 even without formal guardianship.³⁹¹ Other experts, however, were clearly in favor of closing the guardianship gap.³⁹² In March 2026, the Federal Ministry of Justice presented a bill which – implementing the EU Migration and Asylum Pact – provides for an amendment to the current legal guardianship arrangement: in the future, the child and youth welfare service responsible for the respective province is to be entrusted *ex lege* with guardianship for unaccompanied minors from the moment they are first encountered on federal territory (Austrian Parliament, 2026).

A long period of stay in structures that are not designed to accommodate this can also represent a structural risk. Although federal reception facilities are intended for short-term initial reception, unaccompanied minors sometimes remain there for longer periods of time, especially in times of high numbers of asylum applications when many minors have to be cared for (see [Chapter 3.3.2](#)). Many services that are generally available for unaccompanied minors, e.g. basic education for minors who are no longer subject to compulsory schooling can only be used meaningfully if the place of residence does not change in the foreseeable future. Since this cannot be assumed in principle in federal reception facilities, and a change of residence is to be expected in the imminent future with the transfer to one of the nine provinces for basic care of the province, such offers can only rarely be arranged. In times of high occupancy rates, this leads to unplanned extended stays without a clear daily structure, without regular school attendance for minors aged 14 or older and with limited leisure activities, which, according to experts, has an impact on psychological stability, motivation and social behaviour; for a longer period of stay, another form of care would be needed.³⁹³ In addition, there are long asylum procedures and unclear prospects (see [Chapter 4.1.1](#)) which increase the willingness of young people to take risks.

Another structural risk factor can result from the federal organization of child and youth welfare services and basic care, when the necessary framework conditions are not in place to prevent risks. The federal structures in Austria lead to considerable regional differences in procedures, standards and quality of accommodation and care (see [Chapter 3.1.2](#) and [Chapter 3.3.1](#); Commission on the Best Interests of the Child, 2021:125 et seq.; Plattform Asyl, 2025).³⁹⁴ There are significant differences between provinces and individual facilities in terms

390 Interview with Helmut Sax, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights, 4 April 2025; Interview with Astrid Winkler, ECPAT Austria, 9 April 2025; Interview with Andreas Diendorfer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Eva Kaufmann, LEFÖ-IBF, 24 March 2025.

391 Interview with Susanne Stokreiter-Strau, Baden District Administration, 26 March 2025.

392 Interview with Eva Kaufmann, LEFÖ-IBF, 24 March 2025; Interview with Lisa Wolfsegger, asylkoordination austria, 24 March 2025; Interview with Astrid Winkler, ECPAT Austria, 9 April 2025; Interview with Helmut Sax, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights, 4 April 2025.

393 Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Andreas Diendorfer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Jutta Lang, Garten der Begegnung, 2 April 2025; Interview with Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Basic Care, 18 March 2025.

394 Interview with Katharina Schmidt-Dengler, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025.

of staffing, staff-to-child ratios, psychological care and child protection structures.³⁹⁵ These differences can affect the stability of care as well as the sense of safety and well-being of unaccompanied minors. According to an expert, children who are accommodated in facilities with limited staff capacity or less child-friendly protective measures may be exposed to greater risks.³⁹⁶

Another problem repeatedly described by various experts is the challenges (sometimes due to data protection law) in the exchange of information between the federal and provincial governments. In the past, when minors were transferred from federal basic care to provincial basic care, medical documents, psychosocial information or school-related data were sometimes not transmitted or only incompletely transmitted to the provincial basic care providers. Sensitive data is only transmitted in encrypted form to the provincial basic care authorities via the Care Information System; not all providers of provincial basic care that ultimately are in charge of the minors have direct access to this information, at least according to information provided by the providers.³⁹⁷ For example, there have been cases in which it was unclear whether a minor had already been examined, vaccinated or registered as being required to attend school. Without the transmission of relevant information in advance, their needs are sometimes only assessed after several weeks. In isolated cases, it even happened that minors carried documents of other people.³⁹⁸ These deficits are attributed to both data protection law interpretations and the lack of binding communication and handover structures and can contribute to the fact that protection needs are overlooked or not considered in time.³⁹⁹

Institutional fractures that arise from this fragmentation can be used in a targeted manner by exploitative structures, as one expert clarifies: “Ultimately, exploitation is always about taking advantage of such systems and problems.”⁴⁰⁰

Finally, there is a structural risk resulting from the lack of a national child protection facility for victims of child trafficking and other forms of violence, exploitation and abuse in Austria. Such a facility, combined with an effective national referral mechanism that facilitates access to protective services, could significantly improve the identification, awareness-raising and reporting of suspected cases.⁴⁰¹

Reliable, speedy procedures and coordinated cooperation between relevant states and institutions can also increase protection for unaccompanied minors on their travels. Consistent procedures for identifying, reporting and assisting potentially vulnerable minors are crucial to address protection gaps along migration routes. International experts emphasize that early and uniform identification procedures in border and

395 Interview with Katharina Schmidt-Dengler, Child and Youth Welfare of the City of Vienna (MA11), 7 May 2025; Interview with Birgit Salzburger, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Legal Counselling, 19 March 2025.

396 Interview with European Union Agency for Asylum, 19 August 2025.

397 Written input: Marion Noack-Brammer, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, 27 February 2026.

398 Interview with Andreas Diendorfer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Christine Okresek, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

399 Interview with Andreas Diendorfer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Christine Okresek, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025; Interview with Martina Spitzer, NGO tralalobe, 14 April 2025.

400 Interview with Helmut Sax, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights, 4 April 2025.

401 Interview with MEN VIA, 26 March 2025; Interview with Eva Kaufmann, LEFÖ-IBF, 24 March 2025; Interview with European Union Agency for Asylum, 19 August 2025.

initial reception situations can be a central instrument for quickly identifying victims of child trafficking and exploitation (EUAA, 2025a).⁴⁰²

In this context, the challenges of reunification with family members in other Member States under the Dublin III Regulation should be specifically emphasized, because in theory they represent the appropriate official way for minors to continue their journey safely. In practice, evidentiary problems in the case of proof of kinship, child welfare considerations, cooperation and procedural difficulties between agencies as well as tight deadlines make it difficult to use the family criteria.

Last but not least, the lack of opportunities for regular entry into Europe for unaccompanied minors was identified as a risk factor.⁴⁰³ The unaccompanied minors interviewed in Austria also repeatedly emphasized that it would have been much better and safer for them to come via regular, safe entry routes.⁴⁰⁴

6.4.1 Measures to increase resilience at the structural level

In Austria, there are already numerous measures at the federal level that strengthen the resilience of minors: At the structural level, these include the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services' child safeguarding concept implemented in the federal reception facilities. It systematically anchors the protection of the best interests of the child in all work processes and provides for mandatory training, codes of conduct, clear reporting channels and trained child safeguarding officers (Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, 2023). These structures are intended to contribute to prevention, to facilitate the early detection of threats and the initiation of necessary measures, even in cases where minors themselves do not immediately report distress or assault.⁴⁰⁵ Child-friendly complaint mechanisms and regular risk analyses complement this preventive function.

The Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services' violence protection concept, which is intended to prevent and address violence in the social environment, is also part of the structural protection measures. The concept was developed to provide targeted support to the people cared for by the Agency. This also includes a practice-oriented toolbox, which contains guidelines for action with tips on what to do in case of suspicion of violence or in acute cases. In this context, the Agency works together with victim protection organizations and counselling centres (Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, 2025).

With regard to the risk area of child trafficking, Austria has introduced important structures and measures. In 2007, for example, the Task Force for Combating Human Trafficking, coordinated by the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, set up a working group against child trafficking. It is headed by the Federal Chancellery and is dedicated to coordinating efforts against child trafficking – in particular,

402 Interview with European Union Agency for Asylum, 19 August 2025.

403 Interview with Astrid Winkler, ECPAT Austria, 9 April 2025; Interview with Alyona Samar, Missing Children Europe, 25 July 2025; Interview with Hannah Stott, Safe to Grow, 10 September 2025.

404 Interview with focus group 1, 2 June 2025; Interview with focus group 4, 23 June 2025.

405 Interview with Nicole Fenz, Federal Reception Facility Traiskirchen, 21 March 2025; Interview with Astrid Winkler, ECPAT Austria, 9 April 2025; Interview with Helmut Sax, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights, 4 April 2025.

improving the identification and care of trafficked children. The Working Group against Child Trafficking includes the Federal Ministry of the Interior, the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs and the Federal Ministry of Justice, the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, the provinces and non-governmental organizations, research institutions and international organizations (LEFÖ-IBF, MEN VIA, SOS Children's Villages, ECPAT Austria, the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights, IOM and UNHCR). The specific tasks are set out in the National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking (Working Group against Child Trafficking, 2021).

Representatives of IOM, LEFÖ-IBF, MEN VIA and the Criminal Intelligence Service Austria have been conducting various training courses for asylum and immigration actors on how to identify trafficked persons, including trafficked children, for many years. Since 2020, 543 representatives of the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services and the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum have been trained. These training courses strengthen the cooperation between the trained actors, the police, and the victim protection organizations, even in suspected cases, and have already led to the identification of trafficked persons in the past.⁴⁰⁶

The 7th National Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings (2024–2027) provides for a number of significant measures to increase the protection of minors; such as the development of child-friendly information material for distribution to potential victims of child trafficking; the creation of uniform standards for the care and accommodation of trafficked children throughout Austria; the preparation of recommendations on the application of the non-punishment principle of the Council of Europe Convention to trafficked children in practice, the implementation and further development of the “Guidelines for the Identification and Dealing with Potential Victims of Child Trafficking”, the establishment of a (nationwide) protection facility for trafficked children based on the concept of the Working Group against Child Trafficking, the collection of examples of good practice for the establishment and strengthening of a transnational referral mechanism for intergovernmental cooperation in the field of child trafficking or the examination of the implementation of a study on the extent of child trafficking in Austria (Federal Government Austria, 2024; GRETA 2025:13). Even though some of the planned measures were already included in earlier national action plans, it is to be hoped that significant progress can be made in the current implementation period of the action plan. Since the beginning of 2025, the establishment of a nationwide protection facility for victims of child trafficking has also been supported by a Council of Europe project co-financed by the EU, which is being implemented on the initiative of the Federal Chancellery.

In this context, it is encouraging that proven models from other countries are also being considered. In Belgium, there are two national protection institutions that are responsible for trafficked children. One of them is the institution Esperanto, which was founded in 2002. It is a small centre that is geared towards particularly vulnerable minors. It is also one of two institutions in Belgium whose mandate explicitly includes the care of victims of child trafficking and victims of “honour crimes” (e.g. forced marriages).⁴⁰⁷

406 Written input: Katie Klaffenböck, International Organization for Migration (IOM), 27 February 2026.

407 Interview with Sébastien Biaudelle, Esperanto, 17 September 2025.

In France, the Ministry of Justice finances a specialized protection facility for children and adolescents aged 13 to 18 who are victims or suspected victims of child trafficking and other forms of violence, exploitation and abuse. The Koutcha facility offers sheltered accommodation with special security precautions and works in a multidisciplinary manner with professionals in social work, psychology, pedagogy and criminology. The aim is to stabilize the minors and transfer them to long-term protection and care structures. Confinement is carried out exclusively by order of a juvenile court; legal representation remains with the relevant departments (Koutcha, n.d.).⁴⁰⁸

Another good practice from Belgium concerns the procedure in the event of missing unaccompanied minors. The procedure is regulated in detail in a ministerial guideline that contains binding instructions for the police, the judiciary and other authorities. Any missing person, regardless of origin or residence status, must be immediately registered as “missing” and alerted in the Schengen Information System (SIS). The Directive defines criteria for classification as “worrying absence”, including minority, indications of harm, health risks or signs of exploitation. In such cases, involvement of the NGO Child Focus and the Federal Special Unit for Missing Persons are mandatory; a formal cooperation protocol for the exchange of information is in place between the police, the public prosecutor’s office and Child Focus (Ministry of Justice Belgium, 2022:13–14).⁴⁰⁹ Public search appeals (so-called amber alert alerts) are only used restrictively for unaccompanied minors; instead, targeted, non-public information is often passed on to relevant actors, to clarify whereabouts and minimize (Amber Alert - European Centre for Missing Children, 2025; Child Focus, 2024).

408 Interview with Olivier Peyroux, Koutcha, 26 September 2025.

409 Interview with Emilie Coomans, Child Focus, 12 August 2025; Interview with Frank Hoen, Amber Alert Europe, 31 July 2025.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study examined the situation of unaccompanied minors in Austria in terms of possible risks of becoming victims of violence, exploitation and abuse (including child trafficking). The starting point of the research was the fact that unaccompanied minors are in a state of particular vulnerability due to their age, distance from their place of origin and separation from parents or guardians. The specific focus of the study was on the situation of minors who were registered in the Austrian asylum procedure and were accommodated and cared for within the framework of the basic care provided by the federal government.

Between 2015 and 2025, more than 41,000 asylum applications from unaccompanied minors were registered in Austria. The figures were subject to strong fluctuations, with a peak in 2022 and a significant decline in the following years. The study shows that many minors leave the Austrian care system shortly after applying for asylum and that their subsequent whereabouts are not reliably known.

The analysis makes it clear that uncoordinated absences from reception facilities cannot be explained by a single phenomenon. Rather, unaccompanied minors are affected by an interplay of independent onward travel, structural conditions of the asylum and child protection system and potential risk situations. Three possible risk scenarios are conceivable: risks of violence, exploitation or abuse within Austria, risks during onward travel and risks in the destination country after leaving Austria. In all three scenarios, there are indications of increased vulnerability.

Unaccompanied minors can be exposed to a continuum of violence along the entire migration route – from the country of origin to transit countries to host countries in Europe. The qualitative research shows that many minors have already experienced physical, psychological or sexualized violence before their arrival in Austria. Minors also report forced labour, imprisonment, ill-treatment, exploitation and deception on the migration route, especially along the Balkan route and in transit countries outside the EU. These previous experiences shape their situation after arrival and increase their vulnerability to further risks.

Even after arrival in Austria, there are risks of violence, exploitation and abuse. The study shows that the data available on this is limited and that no systematic statistics on the experiences of unaccompanied minors are available. Clues emerge primarily from expert interviews, from the experiences of reception facilities and from case numbers from victim protection organizations and law enforcement agencies. Risks of sexual exploitation, exploitation in connection with criminal acts, drug crime and individual indications of labour exploitation were mentioned. Cases of child trafficking were also highlighted. However, the extent of the risk is difficult to determine; experts assume there is a large number of unreported cases and that not all cases are identified. For example, a major case of child trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation uncovered in

Belgium shows that the more than one hundred trafficked Afghan unaccompanied minors were also abused in the transit countries between Türkiye and Belgium, without prior identification.

Regarding child trafficking, the study concludes that although individual cases have been identified and documented, a comprehensive and coherent picture of the situation is missing. The available data from police statistics, from the case management data of specialized victim protection organizations and from internal reporting systems does not allow any reliable conclusions to be drawn about the actual extent of child trafficking among unaccompanied minors. At the same time, national and international actors point to structural data gaps, different recording logics and limited comparability of the available information.

Based on IOM's vulnerability model, the study identifies a number of risk and protective factors of unaccompanied minors at the individual, family and household, community and structural levels. It highlights structural challenges in the Austrian protection system. These include, in particular, the lack of full guardianship in the initial phase of residence for a large proportion of unaccompanied minors, possible long periods of stay in federal basic care facilities in combination with high occupancy figures (which, however, were not a concern at the time of the study), a federalized division of responsibilities and practices, and fragmented data and communication structures between actors involved. These factors can increase the vulnerability of unaccompanied minors and make it difficult to identify risks at an early stage and to follow up continuously, especially for minors over the age of 14 whose whereabouts are unknown.

At the European level, these dynamics continue to have an effect. Despite envisaged protection standards, inconsistent definitions, data practices and operational procedures persist between EU Member States, making it difficult to reliably track missing persons and coordinate child protection measures and safe onward journeys. It remains to be seen whether the changes provided for in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum will quickly lead to significant improvements.

At the same time, the study identifies several existing approaches and practices that can contribute to strengthening the protection of unaccompanied minors. In Austria, these include age-appropriate and gender-segregated accommodation, psychosocial and therapeutic support, the use of protection concepts, and the concept of primary caretaker, which provides for a continuous contact person. The existing cooperation between reception facilities, child and youth welfare services, law enforcement authorities and specialized victim protection organizations in the event of concrete suspicions of violence, exploitation or child trafficking must be highlighted in this respect. The systematic training of employees of the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services and the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum to identify (possible) trafficked persons is also seen as good practice. At the European level, the examples examined from Belgium and France refer to established guardianship systems as well as specialized child protection institutions that are geared towards the reception and long-term support of unaccompanied minors. In addition, EU-wide instruments such as Dublin family reunification procedures, specialized guidelines and practical tools of the EUAA, as

well as networks for the protection of missing children, are identified as relevant reference points which, if applied consistently and with sufficient resources, can contribute to improving protection, coordination and cross-border cooperation.

Overall, the study shows that not all risk factors are countered by sufficient protective measures. The structural challenges mentioned above require fundamental further development of the protection system, from legal frameworks and institutional processes at the national level to increased and more coherent intergovernmental cooperation in Europe.

Against this background, the following measures are recommended for Austria:

Early, multidisciplinary initial screening: Through a mandatory comprehensive risk and vulnerability analysis by a multi-professional team (social work, psychology, medicine, if necessary police) upon arrival and regularly afterwards, individual protection needs (e.g. traumatization, indicators of child trafficking and other safety or exploitation risks, special vulnerability) should be detected at an early stage and appropriate measures should be taken. The intentions and prospects of the minors (including intentions to continue their journey) should also be clarified through an assessment of the best interest of the child at an early stage, and appropriate information and support should be offered. The first contact with unaccompanied minors should be trauma- and culturally sensitive and account for the limited ability of many minors to absorb information immediately after arrival.

Guardianship from day 1: Many unaccompanied minors remain without guardianship for weeks to months, which creates gaps in protection (e.g. in medical decisions, school attendance, contacts with authorities). Unaccompanied minors, regardless of their residence status or the province in which they reside, should receive clear and reliable guardianship from the first day in Austria or from their first contact with the authorities, ensuring their full representation in accordance with Article 158 et seq. General Civil Code. This is to ensure that all relevant decisions are geared to the best interests of the child and that a stable relationship of trust is enabled as soon as possible.

Guardianship from day 1 requires sufficient personnel and structural resources so that the persons entrusted with guardianship can fully perform their tasks. The provision of these resources should ensure continuous monitoring, accessibility and decision-making ability. Guardianship should be ensured until the child reaches the age of majority, and transitions to the age of majority should be prepared at an early stage.

Suitable accommodation and care: Particularly in times of high occupancy rates, long stays in large accommodations make it difficult to identify individual vulnerabilities and risks. Unplanned longer stays in large structures and a lack of prospects reinforce risky behaviour, including independent onward travel. Minors should only remain in the federal basic care system for as short a time as possible and should

be quickly transferred to suitable, child-friendly facilities. To this end, the necessary measures should be taken (apart from basic care), such as the faster implementation of age assessments.

Small-scale, individual care, small living units, stable caretakers, care provided in minors' first language, rapid access to school, training, leisure time and social participation prevent a lack of prospects, demotivation and boredom leading to risky behaviour or exploitation by criminals. In order to reduce the current large differences between provinces and institutions, the child and youth welfare standards should be applied nationwide for all facilities that care for unaccompanied minors (e.g. staff-to-child ratio, qualification of staff, child safeguarding concepts, participation measures, complaint mechanisms see also EASO, 2018:25–26). This also includes secure and low-threshold complaint mechanisms, with which complaints and information on harm can be submitted anonymously and digitally (see also EASO, 2018:25–26).

For particularly vulnerable groups such as girls, minors under the age of 14, children with disabilities or minors from the LGBTIQ+ community, the expansion of specialized accommodation or available care places is recommended. Such facilities are intended to offer targeted care and increased security.

To strengthen relationship stability, it is advisable to involve fixed, clearly named contact persons who, in addition to the person with guardianship, maintain regular contact with the minors and act as confidants. This is intended to provide orientation and promote long-term relationships.

Early, culturally sensitive psychosocial support: Most unaccompanied minors have been traumatized multiple times and need specific support to strengthen their resilience. Sufficient places for therapy and counselling services should be available throughout Austria, and offers for particularly vulnerable groups (LGBTIQ+ individuals, girls, younger children) should be expanded in order to give all minors the support they need to acquire the skills for an independent, self-determined and low-risk life (see also EASO, 2018:25–26). To improve communication and build trust, the increased use of native-speaker and interculturally trained specialists is recommended. These are intended to ensure that minors can be approached in an accessible and understandable manner.

Child-friendly information and digital child protection: Many unaccompanied minors have little knowledge of their rights and risks, leaving them vulnerable to misinformation, violence, exploitation and abuse. They should be informed repeatedly and in a way that is understandable and accessible to them about their rights (including the possibility of complaints and appeals), procedures, support options, safe behaviour on the internet and in the social environment, as well as the risks that a possible independent onward journey entails. This should also be done digitally and in their first language, taking into account their level of education or literacy (see also EASO, 2018:25–26). Educational measures on the risks of violence, exploitation and abuse, including child trafficking, as well as opportunities for

self-protection should be developed by minors themselves or in cooperation with communities, and include communication with families in the country of origin. When developing information material, the expertise and materials of stakeholders (e.g. EUAA) can be used and adapted to the national context. Digital child safeguarding should focus on raising awareness among minors as well as raising awareness among people working with them.

Data collection, coordination and information exchange: The whereabouts of many children cannot be traced because information is not passed on or responsibilities end. Clear responsibilities and communication channels – even after an onward journey – should be identified and communicated (e.g. institutionalized information chains, exchanges with neighbouring countries, use of EU databases such as SIS; see also EASO, 2018:25–26). Missing and fragmented data prevents effective protection and targeted prevention – on an individual and systemic level (see also Missing Children Europe, 2025).

To avoid double counting and data gaps, recording and reporting systems should be harmonized between the federal government, the provinces, the child and youth welfare services, the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, the police, accommodation facilities and other relevant actors. Uniform input standards should improve the comparability of data. Existing data on violence, exploitation and abuse, including child trafficking (e.g. on reports, prosecution, etc.), should be analysed and presented separately according to residence status and whether the minors concerned are accompanied, unaccompanied or with caregivers in Austria. The same applies to statistics on deregistrations, missing persons status, reappearances and international requests for information. These statistics should be compiled and published anonymously to create a comprehensive annual situation report on the situation of unaccompanied minors in Austria, which can serve as a basis for evidence-based decisions and prevention measures. To examine the implementation of the measures, a comprehensive and independent monitoring system for children's rights could be set up, as recommended by the Commission on the Best Interests of the Child.

For consistent documentation of vulnerabilities, it is recommended to set up a uniform case management system at both the federal and the provincial level from day 1 onwards, which bundles all relevant information, considering data protection requirements, and allows screening results to be shared with other relevant actors at in Austria and abroad. A case management approach would ensure that interventions for people with complex and multiple needs are coordinated, comprehensible and timely. The approach should be based on clearly defined, interlocking steps such as screening, registration, needs analysis, planning, implementation and monitoring (IOM, 2019:31f). Within Austria, it should be ensured that all relevant actors are identified as such and have access to the information that is important to them. In the case of onward journeys (accompanied and unaccompanied), it should also be possible to make the relevant information available to specialized actors abroad.

Reporting and follow-up in case of unexplained absence: In the case of many absences of minors, it is assumed that they will continue their journey; individual cases are only tracked in exceptional cases, which increases the risk of undetected violence, exploitation and abuse. As in the case of minors with Austrian citizenship, any unexplained absence of unaccompanied minors (without any age-related distinction) should be treated uniformly as a missing person case and entered in the SIS (see also EASO, 2018:25–26; Missing Children Europe, 2025) . To ensure a uniform approach among different actors, the creation of guidelines for cooperation between relevant actors is recommended. The guidelines should also address different forms of absences of unaccompanied minors and include a set of criteria for assessing a possible risk of violence, exploitation and abuse (as in Belgium).

Specialized victim protection facility: The lack of a nationwide facility for trafficked children not only makes it more difficult to effectively protect trafficked children, it also has a detrimental effect on the identification of potential victims. The fact that the establishment of specialized protection facilities contributes to improved identification is shown by the experience of MEN VIA, the establishment of which led to an increase in the number of identified trafficked men (Working Group against Child Trafficking, 2021:13). Accordingly, a national, specialized protection facility for child victims of trafficking and exploitation, that provides protection against digital influences and contact with perpetrators, should be established as soon as possible.

Protection against criminalization: Victims of child trafficking must not be punished for acts they were forced to commit, e.g. drug offences or other criminal acts. Corresponding investigations, including interrogations, must be carried out in a child- and age-appropriate manner for all minors. Recommendations for the application of the non-punishment principle to trafficked children, especially in the case of forced criminality, should be established, as envisaged in the current National Action Plan against Trafficking in Human Beings.

A number of changes are also necessary at the international and EU level to reduce the risks to unaccompanied minors:

Harmonization of definitions and data collection: There is a need for uniform definitions of the various forms of absences or “missing minors”, an annual standardized collection of comparable data and the availability of harmonized statistics in all EU Member States. This is the only way to identify trends and coordinate cross-border protection measures (see also Missing Children Europe, 2025).

Cross-border cooperation and institutional coordination: During the onward journey, there is often an interruption in the official registration of unaccompanied minors, so that existing protective measures cannot take effect. Uniform procedures for cooperation on missing children, including rapid dissemination of information and mutual recognition of risk analyses, would be necessary to specifically search for children and uncover any crimes (see also Missing Children Europe, 2025). It is recommended that cooperation between Austrian authorities and the competent authorities of other EU Member States be systematically expanded in cases of onward travel or unexplained absences of unaccompanied minors. The aim is reliable and timely coordination, especially in situations of increased risk.

In order to strengthen operational cooperation, bilateral and multilateral exchange formats could also be established on a regular basis with those states in which unaccompanied minors frequently travel on or reappear. These formats are intended to coordinate joint protective measures and facilitate coordination in individual cases.

Such exchange formats should be used to integrate existing structures and systems such as e.g. to further develop cooperation within the framework of the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (successor to the Dublin III Regulation) in such a way as to remove barriers to accessing support formats for reunification with family members in other EU countries, which are already theoretically possible, and to create a real alternative for the safe, legal onward travel of unaccompanied minors.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The challenges in dealing with unaccompanied minors are complex; they concern care and guardianship systems as well as complex transnational migration dynamics. The present study shows that improvements in the protection of unaccompanied minors from violence, exploitation and abuse are possible both in Austria and in the EU. The implementation of the EU Migration and Asylum Pact, which had not yet been completed at the time the study was prepared, offers numerous opportunities to consolidate and further expand the steps that have already been taken. The consideration of the recommended measures would improve the living conditions of the minors concerned and strengthen the entire child protection system.

ANNEX

A.1 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Term	Abbreviation
in accordance with	acc.
approximately	approx.
Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund of the European Union	AMIF
Article	Art.
British Broadcasting Corporation	BBC
Common European Asylum System	CEAS
Compare (confer)	Cf.
Committee on the Rights of the Child	CRC Committee
Convention on the Rights of the Child	CRC
Displacement Tracking Matrix	DTM
European Asylum Support Office	EASO
European Convention on Human Rights	ECHR
International Network to Ending the Sexual Exploitation of Children (including Child Trafficking)	ECPAT
European Council on Refugees and Exiles	ECRE
European Court of Human Rights	ECtHR
example given	e.g.
European Guardianship Network	EGN
European Migration Network	EMN
European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats	EMPACT
European Parliamentary Research Service	EPRS
and so on (et cetera)	etc.
European Union	EU
European Union Agency for Asylum	EUAA

Term	Abbreviation
Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Agence fédérale pour l'accueil des demandeurs d'asile)	Fedasil
European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights	FRA
Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings	GRETA
inter alia	i.a.
International Centre for Migration Policy Development	ICMPD
that is (id est)	i.e.
International Labour Organization	ILO
International Organization for Migration	IOM
Intervention Centre for Victims of Trafficking in Women	LEFÖ-IBF
lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer; the plus (+) serves as a placeholder for other gender identities or forms of sexual orientation	LGBTIQ+
litera	lit.
Federal Ministry of the Interior	Mol
US National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children	NCMEC
not dated	n.d.
Non-Governmental Organization	NGO
Number	No.
French asylum authority (Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides)	OFPRA
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights	OHCHR
Paragraph	para.
Schengen Information System	SIS
Subparagraph	subpara.
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	UNHCR
United Nations Children's Fund	UNICEF
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime	UNODC

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