BECOMING ADULT

Understanding causes and consequences of going 'missing'

Key findings

- Local authorities and central government define 'missing' in different ways reflecting differing concerns and agendas.
- There is limited attention given to 'missing' unaccompanied young people seeking asylum once they turn 18.
- The transition to institutional adulthood (at 18 years) greatly increases young people's anxieties and fears about their futures. Fear of being apprehended and deported drives many young people with no secure status to disengage from services and abscond.
- Disengaging from services means for many an abrupt transition into precarity and destitution. Absconding means relying on community and support networks and may lead to forms of exploitation and vulnerability.

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"I was refused, and after I decided... they asked me to go signing for the reporting to the immigration office, which I didn't go. I left it, I left the house, I left everything. I ran away. For three years. I, just recently, I did a fresh claim and I got it. I got my residence permit."

I "And during those years where were you living?"

"So I was living with friends, one night here, one night there... it was rough. It was like feeling back in Afghanistan. And I had a problem with eczema on my hands, but I was scared to go to the hospital." (Kamran, Afghanistan)

Early in 2015 the EU's law enforcement agency, Europol, denounced the disappearance of 10,000 'unaccompanied minors' with a warning that they may be victims of criminal networks, subject to enslavement and sexual exploitation. The statement sparked a moral outcry, but little consideration was accorded to the causes and consequences of going missing from the perspectives of young people.

There are substantial differences in international, European and national definitions of unaccompanied children. These definitions are important because different categories provide different levels of protection in law or in practice. Some countries, including Italy, Spain and France, afford protection to unaccompanied children mostly on the basis of age and separation from relatives, leaving the consideration of the child's asylum claim as secondary. In other countries, the status of the child's asylum claim is paramount and is initiated at an early stage. This can lead to the quick dismissal of claims made by unaccompanied children and young people from so-called safe countries, as in the case of young Albanians in the UK. There are also significant differences in how data are collected on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and how identification occurs. In the UK, each of the four nations differs in how they collect and publish their statistics about children in the care of local authorities[1].

Findings

As our research shows, children may be moving between European countries, orbiting in the Schengen space and beyond, and this process paradoxically can produce two opposite results: double counting and missing children[2]. A child may be recorded as unaccompanied upon arrival in Italy, for example, and then join family members elsewhere in Europe and lodge an asylum application as an 'accompanied' minor. The paradox here is that a child can be counted as missing in Italy, reappear in another

EU country and then be counted again under a different bureaucratic label. This phenomenon may be more widespread than many assume.

Data on missing unaccompanied children we collected from Local Authorities in England via a Freedom of Information request (FOI) do not correspond to Home Office data on missing UASC[3]. The discrepancy between the FOI responses and Home Office data may be explained by the wide range of definitions of 'missing' provided by local authorities. 'Missing' for some local authorities was classified as 'any missing episode', not necessarily those where a young person remained missing. Whereas for other local authorities 'missing' was defined as all contact interrupted or ended with the Home Office. In some cases young people go missing but local authorities may not try too hard to find them, while in other cases, they become destitute and therefore have no practical way of keeping in touch with the Home Office (e.g. no money for transport, no fixed abode, dependent on others for accommodation and unable to make Home Office reporting appointments).

Bearing in mind these definitional differences, according to the FOI, the local authorities with the highest percentage of missing children were Warrington Council, Portsmouth City Council and Nottinghamshire County Council, while the largest numbers of recorded missing children in absolute terms were Kent County Council (116), Sussex County Council (26) and Essex County Council (17).

There are no published national statistics regarding former UASC care leavers who go missing. Most local authorities build their operational definition of 'missing' around lack of information on whereabouts, but significant variation exists as to further elements included in the definitions. Local authorities explained that as care leavers are over 18 years of age 'as they are neither children, nor looked after, such events would not constitute or be reported as a 'missing' episode'. The wide definition of missing for former UASC may reflect the difficulty of recording a person who is more than 18 years old as missing with the police. This indicates differing perceptions of vulnerability and risk associated with those who are less than and more than 18 years old. These perceptions of vulnerability are connected to the definition of childhood and echoed in the institutional care of children and young people in need of protection.

There was a repertoire of responses to the issue of missing young people in our research with statutory and non-statutory actors working with young

unaccompanied children and young people. While many blamed the government-driven hostile environment for young people's disengagement from services, for some support workers, there was a sense of resignation where they felt unable to reassure young people on the outcome of their cases. Some young people in our study had enjoyed exceptional support from social workers and social services departments through to and beyond the age of 21. Their educational pathways had been encouraged and resourced and they spoke positively of social workers who went out of their way to do everything they could to provide emotional as well as practical support. Other young people, however, had very different experiences which were largely dictated by their legal status. Young people who were appeal rights exhausted often described violent transitions at 18 (including immediate homelessness; enforced relocation far from their social networks and friendship groups and reduced models and packages of care).

"They didn't even give me like you know one week or two weeks' notice. The next day I just came there and they put my clothes in a small bag and I took my clothes and just left." (Dalmat, Albania)

Moreover, a number of young people described purposefully disengaging from social care when they received or anticipated a negative outcome from their asylum application. Some young people's narratives indicate how the decision to remove themselves from the surveillance of statutory services is seen as inevitable. While there is some degree of awareness of the risks of exploitation that are associated with the transition into illegality, these are outnumbered by those associated with a forced return to their country of origin (see Research Brief no. 7).

A non-statutory support worker explained how whether or not young people continued to engage with her while 'under the radar' depended on what their prospects were:

"Sometimes they just go and I don't hear from them again. But I know they haven't been removed because I still get letters saying, 'Can you update this person's details and where are they?' Other times yes they will keep in contact with me if we know that they need to get a certain amount of time in the UK before they can make an application again. And that might succeed under the immigration laws for instance. If they just want to be under the radar they may still check in with me now and again or they might not, it really depends on what their prospects are."

This finding suggests that current policy discourses surrounding the underlying reasons for children going 'missing' (such as being subjected to trafficking) may be over simplified and indicates that in practice, the situation is likely to be more complicated.

For young people who receive a Home Office letter dictating their removal and decide to become 'invisible', or those who move away and hide in order to avoid receiving the letter – the outcome can be living by illegal means and in constant fear of police and immigration services. Direct and indirect experiences of detention and removal contributed to this anxiety.

"I had to go to X (name of place) to sign but I refused it because I said if I get caught (detained) there, no one can help afterwards… and I know so many Afghan people and after 18 that's what has happened to them… they have been deported. My friend who was studying with me in the same school, same class, that's what happened to him… and another one I know from the community, that's what happened to him." (Kushan, Afghanistan)

Many experienced sometimes severe mental health problems including problems with sleep, generalised anxiety and depression. If they had physical health problems they feared going to the hospital and one young person, Ghulam from Afghanistan, spoke of how when he eventually accessed help for his poor health through an NGO, he was found to have severe tuberculosis.

Young people talked about how they depended on the good will of others, frequently moving around to find somewhere to stay and often feeling a burden on others. In order to make money to survive and try and contribute to the households of others, they worked cash in hand, in restaurants or leafleting for small companies, usually in exploitative conditions, paid well below the minimum wage and in continuous fear of being reported or apprehended by the police because of their undocumented status. Shamal's experience as an underpaid and yet resigned cash-in-hand worker was shared by a number of other participants:

"Basically they pay me a very low wage because I don't have my national insurance number. I'm not gonna lie to you I'm gonna be straight forward. I been working cash in hand only 3 days a week. And they give me like 8 hours and every hour they give me like £3.50." (Shamal, Afghanistan).

Policy implications

- Protracted legal uncertainty impacts negatively on young people's health and wellbeing and has potential long term impact on their capacity to integrate in society.
- There are crucial transitions when 'invisibility' becomes one of the few options left for young people who cannot or refuse to go back to their country of origin.
- Disengaging from services means for many an abrupt transition into precarity and destitution which in turn may make them more vulnerable to different forms of exploitation.

1. All Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2016) 'Inquiry into the safeguarding of "absent" children', Final Report May 2016: https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/appg-absent-inquiry-final-report-may-2016.pdf
2. Sigona, N., Humphris, R. (2016) 'Outrage Over Unaccompanied Minors Highlights Massive E.U. Data Gap', *Refugees Deeply*, https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/community/2016/10/10/outrage-over-unaccompanied-minors-highlights-massive-e-u-data-gap; see also Becoming Adult Research Brief no. 8 'Unaccompanied Minors and Secondary Migration between Italy and the UK'.
3. Humphris, R. and Sigona, N. (2016) 'Mapping unaccompanied asylum seeking children in England', *Becoming Adult Research Brief Series*, no. 1, London: UCL

The Becoming Adult project

The Becoming Adult project is a three-year ESRC-funded research project exploring the post 18 wellbeing outcomes of young people who migrated on their own to the UK as children from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Albania. While the main focus of the research has been on young people who arrive in the UK, the policy implications are relevant to Europe and beyond. Furthermore, the grant-linked studentship has enabled a comparative analysis of experiences of unaccompanied young people in the UK and Italy.

Methodology

The study comprises three research components addressing (i) how ideas about migration, futures, 'becoming adult' and wellbeing are conceptualised in different cultural media; (ii) unaccompanied young people's lived experiences of becoming 'adult' after migrating on their own as children; and (iii) policy and practice governing unaccompanied young people.

Young people between the ages of 18–25 took part in research. A narrative enquiry approach was used, combining retrospective narrative interviews and longitudinal research with participants up to a period of 18 months. Questions were asked about: experiences of turning 18 and other key transitions; educational experiences and outcomes; accommodation and living arrangements; factors perceived to promote or undermine their health and wellbeing; migration history, influences and experiences; social ties and networks; experiences of social care and leaving care; family ties; and aspirations for the future. In addition to taking part in interviews, other young people engaged in the research through activities including photography, art, writing, and theatre projects. A core team of young people who had previously migrated to the UK on their own worked as core members of the research team. In total some 100 young people participated in the research in the UK and Italy. Fifty interviews with policy stakeholders and practitioners in four local authorities and a FOI survey of all local authorities in England offered insights into the governance of this population and the encounters between the asylum and child protection regimes and young migrants.

How to cite