



Prospective  
research

# **How to improve the quality of informal and formal support provision to unaccompanied refugees in their transition to adulthood?**

# Key messages

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- 1** This study provides unique insights into the social support networks of unaccompanied young refugees in their transition to adulthood through combining long-term follow-ups of young refugees themselves and research with organizations located in Brussels Capital Region (BCR) supporting this group.

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- 2** There are significant changes in the support from informal and formal networks that unaccompanied young refugees receive during their transition to adulthood.

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- 3** Social networks and their support are key resources in the mitigation of social exclusion and the promotion of participation to society, and have a significant impact on young refugees' wellbeing.

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- 4** Collaboration between organizations supporting unaccompanied young refugees in BCR is limited, decreasing the efficiency and quality of the support given to these young people.

# Key messages

## 5

Concrete recommendations with regards to the mobilization of young refugees' informal support structures, the improvement of their access to the Brussels housing market and the enhancement of the cultural competency of formal actors working with unaccompanied young refugees are put forward for Brussels policymakers and practitioners in order to improve these young people's socio-economic participation to society.

# Introduction/summary of the problem

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Social networks are key sources in the wellbeing of unaccompanied young refugees through their mitigation of social exclusion from and promotion of participation to society, in particular in these youngsters' transition from child- to adulthood. Social support is not only beneficial to a young person's wellbeing through providing positive experiences, stability and predictability, but close, supportive relationships also have a protective function when one experiences stressful life events, such as traumatic experiences and daily hassles.

A deeper understanding of how social networks develop over time and young refugees' access to social support may therefore foster improved settlement conditions for newcomers in the host society.

Although there is substantial evidence on the importance of social support structures for newcomers, there is limited knowledge about the social support networks of unaccompanied young refugees in their transition to adulthood, despite the fact that this transition is known to pose meaningful challenges to their settlement processes.

Given the significant number of unaccompanied refugee minors in Belgium, an adequate understanding of these young people's access to formal and informal support networks, also when turning 18, is needed to foster their participation processes in Brussels (and Belgian) society and their overall wellbeing.

# Methods, approaches and results/body

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To gain insight into the social network development and access to social support of unaccompanied refugees in transition to adulthood, our project adopts a two-fold approach: First, through a qualitative, longitudinal action study, we investigated the social networks of fifteen unaccompanied refugees on the brink of adulthood (study one). Second, in-depth interviews with representatives of organizations involved in the reception and support of these young newcomers document the collaboration and network integration between these formal care structures (study two).

Study one documents how our participants' highly mobile reception-, care- and residential trajectories and the challenges they experience in accessing leisure activities, schools and workplaces hamper their possibilities to receive the necessary informal support. Moreover, this study reveals how our participants' access to formal support after their transition to adulthood is strongly hindered, mainly because of financial and language barriers and because the support structures show limited cultural sensitivity and affinity towards this group. This is particularly the case for the accessibility of formal support in the BCR, mostly because of additional language barriers and a general limited accessibility of public services in this region.

Study two reveals that the collaboration within the network of Brussels organizations would benefit from improved information exchange, case transfer and case coordination. Our analysis identifies shortcomings in five different, interrelated domains of interprofessional collaboration: timely and adequate diagnoses; knowledge of service providers; sufficient capacity; informal trust relationships between professionals; and cultural competencies of professionals. While some of these shortcomings can be addressed within the organizations, the global context in which these care structures function proves to be the most challenging.

# Conclusions

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By documenting both the perspectives of unaccompanied young refugees themselves and of organizations working with the group, our analysis reveals that young refugees' access to informal and formal support structures is seriously hampered, especially throughout their transition to adulthood.

As revealed in the literature and confirmed by our study, the availability of a wide variety of (both formal and informal) contacts is important in accessing a wide range of types of support, which in turn is crucial for a successful adjustment and participation to a new environment.

Although integration processes are impacted by certain individual characteristics, our study points out that a number of specific characteristics of the Brussels care-, reception- and residential infrastructures play a key role in the (in)accessibility of social support structures for the target group.

# Policy recommendations

**1. First, OCMW/CPAS social workers (and other formal actors who provide support to unaccompanied refugees throughout their transition to adulthood) should consider the development and mobilization of informal support structures a central aspect of the assistance they provide.**

In order to achieve this, CPAS/OCMW social workers (who are central in the formal support of refugees in transition to adulthood) should first be sensitized about the impact informal networks have on the integration processes of these young people. The follow-up of our panel of young refugees demonstrates how informal relations cover a wide range of types of support that promote their participation to society. The testimonies of representatives of organizations working with young refugees reveal that the promotion of informal support is not always part of the assistance they provide. Next, concrete actions are required. Our study demonstrates that social support offered through informal relations cannot be replaced by mere formal assistance.

Paying considerable time and effort in tracing and including family members and friends in the assistance of unaccompanied refugees maximizes the benefits of their available informal support structures. Brussels CPAS/OCMW social workers should concentrate on two interventions:

**A.** Although our follow-up reveals that social media do not allow for strong relationship building, participants stress their effectiveness in providing a pleasant way to spend free time and a sense of belonging to their family 'back home'. Since these types of support have a considerable impact on the mental health of young refugees, OCMW/CPAS should invest in unaccompanied refugees' guaranteed access to digital media.

**B.** OCMW/CPAS social workers should get acquainted with their clients' (local) friends and relatives, and consider these contacts allies in the guidance they offer. Social workers can materialize implicit support structures by referring their clients to certain informal contacts. The mobilization of informal support can be organized in a more explicit way by bringing together several informal contacts in the context of a client's specific request for support.

# Policy recommendations

## **2. Second, we urge for a substantial improvement of the accessibility of the Brussels housing market for unaccompanied refugees in their transition to independent living.**

The follow-up of our panel of young refugees reveals how participants are often forced to move away from Brussels due to the inability to find housing. Residential moves from Brussels to different Belgian regions rupture established formal and informal support structures and represent a significant set-back in our participants' settlement process. Especially in the context of family reunification (which represents a highly intense process that requires strong social support provision), we notice how participants are forced to move away from built-up support structures.

Certain conditions observed in the context of social and regular housing explain this forced residential mobility. First, access to social housing for unaccompanied refugees in transition to adulthood is severely compromised. Currently, an average waiting time for obtaining social housing in Brussels amounts to almost 12 years. Hereby, the accessibility of housing units that offer more than one bedroom (and that are sought for in the context of family reunification) is most problematic. In addition to the documented scarcity of social housing, specific requirements make social housing particularly unfriendly towards the target group: participants testify to a variety of regulations with regards to minimal age, minimum stay in the municipality, .... which also differ depending on the community. We believe

contractual obligations should be imposed on the 19 Brussels municipalities that enforce their share of social housing capacity in relation to the total number of house units on their territory. Furthermore, the eligibility criteria and application procedures for social housing of all Brussels communes should be streamlined in order to make social housing options more comprehensible for young refugees.

Second, finding access to the regular housing market - especially in the Brussels context - proves to be challenging. Participants report language- and administrative barriers in their attempts to ensure a rental contract. Participants furthermore perceive cautiousness in tenants' attitude towards accommodating young refugees. Several members of our panel report cases of structural discrimination. We believe the accessibility of the regular rental market would be much improved if BCR (Brussel Huisvesting/ Bruxelles Logement, more specifically) would invest in their service provision towards the target group. Our analysis reveals how participants benefit greatly from the support certain organizations offer in participants' search for housing: language mediation, administrative support, but also the sensitization of tenants about the target group and their specific rights have a major impact on these young people's housing accessibility.



# Policy recommendations

### **3. Finally, Brussels formal service providers should invest in the enhancement of their cultural competence in working with unaccompanied young refugees.**

Our study reveals a heightened inaccessibility of formal support structures in the Brussels context. Both the panel of young refugees and representatives of organizations working with the target group mention shortcomings in the cultural sensitivity (or the awareness of culturally dependent aspects of service providers and their clients) of several types of formal actors as an important factor contributing to their inaccessibility.

Raising the cultural competence of staff members of Brussels companies and organizations that provide support to unaccompanied refugees in transition to adulthood, and particularly those that are not specifically targeting unaccompanied refugees (e.g. Actiris, employers' associations, trade unions, social housing societies, leisure initiatives, youth clubs, youth organizations, ...) needs to be high on the agenda. These Brussels actors need to be informed about the target group's particular challenges, needs and sensitivities. Information- and sensitization sessions and specialized training programs could significantly improve these actors' client outcomes.

We urge for specific attention to the consideration of challenges related to young refugees' literacy. Participants refer to the limited attention Brussels OCMW/CPAS and communal services pay to the challenges linked to the acquisition of several national languages. We believe Brussels policy should push for the guaranteed bilingualism of formal assistance. Additionally, our study reveals how low-profile interventions, like the conscious engagement of Dutch speaking staff members in the assistance of youngsters who acquired Dutch, would make a remarkable improvement in the cultural sensitive support provision of these services.

# List of publications

## Published

**De Backer, L., Derluyn, I., & Schuermans, N. (2022).**

*The accommodation and support of unaccompanied refugee minors in Belgium: factors that complicate interprofessional collaboration.* European Journal of Social Work, 1-12.

**De Backer, L. (2021).**

*Unaccompanied minor newcomers: A village to raise a child, one trustee to lead the way.* In Adam, I., Adefioye, T., D'Agostino, S., Schuermans, N., & Trauner, F. (Eds.), *Migratie, gelijkheid & racisme* (p. 276). Brussels: ASP editions-Academic and Scientific Publishers.

## Submitted

**De Backer, L., Derluyn, I.**

*When researchers become part of their research topic. Methodological reflections on doing social network research with young refugees.* Qualitative Research, 1-17.

**De Backer, L., Derluyn, I.**

*Niet-begeleide nieuwkomers in transitie naar volwassenheid: toegang tot formele dienst- en hulpverlening in België en Brussel.* Brussels Studies, 1-13.

**De Backer, L.**

*Unaccompanied minor refugees' geographies of informal care: the development and maintenance of friendship ties through space and time.* Children's Geographies, 1-17.

## In completion phase

**Doctoral thesis:**

*'Social network development and access to social support of unaccompanied refugees in transition to adulthood'.* In view of obtaining the degree of Doctor in 'Interdisciplinary Studies, option Urban Studies', Faculty of Geography, Department of Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

## Other Publications

**Report: De Backer, L. (2021).**

*Kwalitatieve netwerkanalyse van Brusselse organisaties die instaan voor de opvang en begeleiding van niet-begeleide minderjarige nieuwkomers.*

**Protocol: De Backer, L. (2023).**

*De sociale netwerkvorming en toegang tot sociale steun van niet-begeleide nieuwkomers in transitie naar volwassenheid.*

# The author & project

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Her research - based on a longitudinal study with unaccompanied refugees and in-depth interviews with organizations responsible for the reception and support of the target group - focusses on the social network development and access to social support of unaccompanied refugees in transition to adulthood.

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Prospective  
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