

“If my mom would be here, I would go to university:”

Short-Term Success and Long-Term Resiliencies Among Unaccompanied and Accompanied Minors

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF 

Mackenzie Seaman



Key Messages

- Unaccompanied respondents were more likely to: (1) be employed; (2) previously enrolled in education; (3) attain higher German-language use and achievement; and (4) express an optimistic outlook on integration. However, being accompanied was an asset in regard to enrollment in university-track education.
- Accompanied respondents bore many family responsibilities, particularly regarding translation, navigating the Austrian bureaucracy, and serving as a bridge to Austrian society. However, their slower integration trajectories indicate accompanied respondents likely struggle to carry out such responsibilities.
- Respondents overall exhibited high education and labor mobility. Progressive advancement characterized the education mobility of respondents, while the labor mobility was far more sporadic, with individuals changing not only their jobs but also their career paths.
- Respondents repeatedly emphasized the role of language and social connection with German speakers as critical to their integration and overall success. In contrast, respondents often devalued intra-community relations, sometimes making self-discriminatory remarks.
- Discrimination remained a consistent theme throughout the research, with Muslim female respondents who wear headscarves the most negatively impacted, in particular when seeking and securing employment.
- Gender was a critical difference maker. Female respondents generally exhibited slower integration trajectories than their male peers, particularly in regard to language achievement and employment.

Research Overview

This paper summarizes findings from one of four studies on youth, migration, and resilience that emerged from a collaboration between Save the Children Federation, Inc. and the Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. This study focuses on protected persons who arrived as minors to Austria. The other projects researched i) young men from rural areas working in the platform economy in Bengaluru, India; ii) young Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Kampala, Uganda; and iii) young rural-urban migrants to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The research team produced a synthesis report that discusses common themes and practical implications across all four contexts. In addition to these materials, the virtual repository (<https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/partnership-on-youth-migration-and-resilience/>) houses the full final capstone documents, the final presentations, and the data collection tools.

Research objective

Based on the researcher's previous experiences in refugee service provision in Vienna and a prior literature review, the research investigated whether integration differs according to family status in three specific domains: the labor market, social connections, and outlook on integration. Educational attainment and language were subsumed into labor market and social connections accordingly. Family status refers to whether Austria considered respondents accompanied or unaccompanied.

The following research question was investigated: *Do the integration experiences of unaccompanied and accompanied protected persons who came as minors to Austria differ regarding their experiences in the labor market, social connections, and outlook on integration?*

It was assumed that unaccompanied respondents would fare better in all three domains given their

legal and social situation fosters, and at times even forces increased contact with Austrian society.

Overall, the research hoped to gain insight into how family status impacts integration and to more fully understand how the differential legal and social experiences of unaccompanied minors influence their integration, even into adulthood. We hope this research can provide a stronger evidence base for programmers and policymakers considering support for these populations.

Background

Austria is the third-highest asylum-receiving country within the European Union (EU) on a per-capita basis, having received roughly 200,000 of the over 4 million asylum applications in the EU between 2013 and 2017. For comparison, it would be as if the United States had received 7.5 million applications. Within Austria, minor protected persons are mostly from Afghanistan (19%), Iraq (6%), and Syria (52%).¹ Various ethnicities, such as Kurdish, Arab, Pashto, and Hazara intersect these nationalities. Moreover, protected persons receive two divergent legal statuses (subsidiary protection and Convention status²), which at times creates dissimilar opportunities and result in different integration realities. Other critical factors, such as age, gender, and family status, further diversify the identities of protected persons in Austria. The study specifically focused on protected persons who arrived as accompanied and unaccompanied older minors (between the ages of 14 and 17). As a result, this population must additionally grapple with their transition to adulthood, both socially and legally. Further, the anti-migrant, far-right government in Austria has continually attempted to degrade and limit the rights of asylum seekers and protected persons since it came to power in December 2017.³ Many of the individuals surveyed and interviewed were thus in a period of transition and tenuous legal security.

¹ European Commission, "First instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data (rounded)," distributed by Eurostat, [migr_asydcfst](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&plugin=1) (accessed February 28, 2019).

² Convention status within the EU refers to those persons who receive asylum according to the guidelines set forth in the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its Additional Protocol (1967). The EU confers subsidiary protections status for those persons who do not meet the criteria set forth in the Convention and its Protocol but who, if returned home, would face a real risk of suffering serious harm.

³ *Der Standard*, "1,50 Euro Stundenlohn für Asylwerber: Kickl will nun prüfen," April 23, 2019, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000101895872/1-50-euro-lohn-fuer-asylwerber-kickl-will-nun-pruefen>.

Methods

The research employed a mixed-methods methodology, consisting of a quantitative survey and semi-structured qualitative interviews. The researcher also interviewed 13 key informants from local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations to receive feedback on the research question and gather contextual information. The quantitative paper survey was completed by 72 respondents, and 31 of those respondents completed the semi-structured qualitative interview.

The researcher established four strict inclusion criteria for respondents in the study, namely:

- i. Arrived as an asylum-seeking older minor (ages 14 to 17) to Austria;
- ii. Their older minor status was self-reported or determined by Austrian authorities;
- iii. Originated from or have the nationality of Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria;
- iv. Received international protection (i.e., subsidiary protection or Convention status).

In addition, the researcher used purposeful snowball sampling to gather respondents for the study. The respondents were a combination of referrals from organizations and personal referrals.⁴ Moreover, the researcher controlled for gender, ethnicity, nationality, and type of former residence (rural, peri-urban, urban).

Limitations

In the field, it proved difficult to control for gender within family status, as unaccompanied female protected persons are tightly protected by NGOs in Austria. The researcher was thus unable to obtain referrals for these individuals. Nonetheless, those girls who arrived as accompanied asylum-seeking minors constituted the majority of accompanied respondents (57%), ensuring that the experiences of women and girls were accounted for in the research. Moreover, while all nationalities, countries of origin, and legal statuses were fairly represented, the respondents did skew urban (68%) for both

unaccompanied minors (65%) and accompanied minors (71%). Finally, the small sample size of survey respondents (72) makes the analysis that follows mainly descriptive; however, important significant relationships were identified.

Key Findings

In both the quantitative and qualitative findings, being unaccompanied was largely an asset, with unaccompanied minors reporting greater integration “success.” In particular, unaccompanied respondents were significantly more likely to be or have been enrolled in education in Austria, as well as more likely to both have had a job and be currently employed. Unaccompanied respondents also were significantly more likely to have begun German courses immediately upon their arrival in Austria, with beginning German immediately correlating with higher German levels. Further, those who arrived specifically without parents were significantly more likely to have higher German language ability levels.

In part, the interviews with unaccompanied respondents explained their achievements. For example, unaccompanied respondents often referred to an Austrian, usually a social worker, who had been critical to their well-being in Austria. Such bridging social capital provided guidance and further social connections, aiding their integration success. Many unaccompanied respondents further referenced robust and immediate organizational contact during their initial weeks and months in Austria. Immediate contact with organizations, and thus German speakers and Austrians, accelerated their integration. Moreover, unaccompanied respondents spoke about how they were able to focus on their own well-being instead of on family members, with many explicitly stating that the opportunity to be “selfish” and not take care of family responsibilities was a substantial benefit to integration. Unaccompanied respondents’ progress in many of these domains may have contributed to their greater optimism regarding integration, as unaccompanied respondents were significantly more likely to report feeling a part of Austria.

⁴ Given that many respondents had completed high levels of German (69% had completed B1 i.e. gained general proficiency), were enrolled in education (58%), or were working (43%), respondents often no longer had intensive contact with the organizations that had referred them or had no contact with the organizations at all (40%).

However, unaccompanied respondents also endured obstacles because of their family status, in particular regarding their educational paths. Of those respondents in education, more accompanied minors were enrolled in university-track education (28%) than were unaccompanied minors (19%). Further, 49% of unaccompanied respondents enrolled in education were partaking in the work-education system in Austria—not just education. The work-education system in Austria is a formal apprenticeship program that combines work with schooling and for which participants are paid. Unaccompanied respondents who have become adults and thus must support themselves “chose” the formal apprenticeship system in Austria to secure both education and financial stability. Such decisions represent a calculated livelihood choice taken by unaccompanied respondents in which greater long-term resilience was sacrificed in favor of short-term well-being.

Gender was a critical difference maker throughout the study, with female respondents generally performing worse than their male counterparts. For example, female respondents were significantly more likely to have never been employed in Austria, as well as to have lower German levels. The qualitative interviews elaborated and expanded upon these findings. Women repeatedly opined the discrimination they experienced regarding their headscarf, both socially and in the labor market. In light of female respondents’ unemployment and lower language levels, such discrimination both engenders and exacerbates the integration obstacles they must overcome.

Several overarching trends emerged in the study. For example, respondents exhibited high educational and labor mobility. While the labor mobility was sporadic, the educational mobility had an upward trajectory. Despite the variable character of respondents’ employment histories in the study, work remained a critical space for respondents, one where they believed they could foster German

connections—and where they often did. In addition, respondents repeatedly emphasized the positive role of Austrian and German-speaking social connections in the integration process, coloring not only employment but all “Austrian” spaces and activities as highly sought after and advantageous. In contrast, respondents often devalued intra-community relations, with self-discrimination against their own communities commonly reported. Such self-discrimination flowed from the perception that intra-community connections were unhelpful and was likely due to internalization of the discrimination respondents had experienced in Austria.

Implications

Family status impacted the integration experiences of protected persons in regard to labor market experiences, social connections, and outlook on integration, with unaccompanied minors having greater “success.” Nonetheless, such success should be conceptualized along short-term and long-term resiliencies. For example, many unaccompanied respondents successfully pursued short-term livelihood strategies. As a result, however, they often sacrificed pursuing long-term strategies that may generate more robust resiliencies, such as attending university. The qualitative interviews revealed such choices were intertwined with their family status. As one respondent noted, “If my mom would be here, I would go to university.”

In addition, the integration “success” of unaccompanied minors must be further contextualized within the reality that this population suffers from a greater prevalence of psychological problems than their accompanied peers,⁵ and that their psychological health may worsen with age.⁶ Indeed, unaccompanied respondents in the study struggled with feelings of loneliness (30% reported always being lonely compared to 19% of accompanied respondents). Some respondents’ lack of family at times was a clear integration barrier, preventing such respondents from focusing

⁵ Stine Byberg, Laura Nellums, Runa Nielsen, Marie Norredam, and Jørgen Petersen, “Incidence of Psychiatric Disorders among Accompanied and Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children in Denmark: A Nation-wide Register-based Cohort Study,” *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 27, no. 4 (2018): 439–46, doi.org/10.1007/s00787-018-1122-3

⁶ Berthold Gersons, Rolf Kleber, Jeroen Knipscheer, Gerty Lensvelt-Mulders, and Geert Smid, “Late-Onset PTSD in Unaccompanied Refugee Minors: Exploring the Predictive Utility of Depression and Anxiety Symptoms,” *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* 40, no. 5 (2011): 742–55, doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2011.597083.

on themselves—one of the greatest self-reported benefits of being unaccompanied.

As a result, although the findings demonstrated that unaccompanied minors have largely benefitted from their different social and legal experiences, ongoing support for this population is needed. Similarly, programs specifically targeting accompanied minors must be established and encouraged, as the findings suggested accompanied minors may be at risk of being left behind by their unaccompanied counterparts. The qualitative findings also demonstrated the significance of family dynamics in accompanied minors' decisions and lives. As a result, accompanied programming must focus dually on the individual and on the family unit.

Areas For Further Study

- The gendered dynamics of refugee families should be further investigated to provide a specific evidence base for gendered family programming.
- Longitudinal research on protected persons in Europe should be encouraged to better understand how the resiliencies protected persons are developing currently evolve over time and impact future livelihoods.
- The impact of family status should be further disaggregated to differentiate between those who arrive accompanied by parents and those who arrived accompanied by other guardians.

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