



# Power2UAMs Local Report - Ghent



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# CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. LITERATURE REVIEW, DESK RESEARCH</b>	<b>7</b>
3.1 Belgian Context	7
3.2 Ghent Context	8
3.3 Reception and Centers	10
3.4 Relevant National, Regional and Local Policies, Programs and Projects for UAMs	11
3.5 Conclusions on Services, Programs, Projects	14
<b>4. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE SUMMARIES OF UAM INTERVIEWS</b>	<b>15</b>
4.1 Methodological Notes	15
4.2 Summary of Interviews with UAMs	15
<b>5. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE SUMMARIES OF STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS</b>	<b>21</b>
5.1 Methodological Notes	21
5.2 Summary of Interviews with Stakeholders	21
<b>6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>7. CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>ANNEX 1: REFERENCE LIST</b>	<b>31</b>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This local report, prepared by Caritas International and NADOE within the framework of the POWER2UAMs project, explores the situation of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in Ghent, by focusing on integration and wellbeing of UAMs through unmet needs, access to public services, and good practices at the local level. The research, conducted between May and November 2025, combined desk and literature review, stakeholder mapping, and qualitative interviews with 6 UAMs and 11 stakeholders from key organizations, including reception centers, NGOs, integration and youth services, and public authorities.

Ghent's support ecosystem for UAMs combines federal, regional, and local approaches. Key services include the federal Guardianship Service, age assessment procedures, foster care, and Fedasil reception facilities. Local initiatives such as the CPAS/OCMW provide welfare support for UAMs with refugee status, while non-profit organizations such as Minor-Ndakoplay a central role in specialized psychosocial accompaniment, and transition to independent living. Educational programs like OKAN (reception classes for non-Dutch-speaking newcomers) facilitate language acquisition and integration, complemented by psychoeducational and inclusion initiatives such as MindSpring workshops, culturally sensitive foster care, and Parkour integration program.

Despite these strengths, stakeholders highlighted persistent systemic challenges. Services are overstretched, waiting lists (e.g. for schools, vocational training programs, psychological services) are long, and support often drops off sharply when young people turn 18. Housing remains one of the most severe barriers: affordable and quality options are limited, reception centers are overcrowded, and no single actor provides house searching support. Education pathways can also be rigid, particularly for UAMs arriving at 16-17, who often face delayed access to mainstream or vocational education due to strict language requirements and persistent segregation across schools. Access to mental health services is uneven, with long waiting lists and limited culturally competent care. Overall, access to services depends heavily on the knowledge, initiative, and advocacy capacity of guardians and social workers, potentially creating disparities between minors.

Stakeholders praised Ghent's proactive and inclusive approach but highlighted fragmentation, underfunding, and uneven access. They called for trauma-informed, culturally sensitive practices and extended support (including accompaniment, house searching and family reunification, and mental health services) through the transition to adulthood.

UAMs reflected generally positive experiences, with appreciation for guardians, education, vocational opportunities, and social activities. However, housing, access to some educational opportunities, mental health services, and legal insecurity (for those still in the asylum procedure) remained the most pressing concerns.

Ghent offers a relatively strong and compassionate model for UAM inclusion, supported by committed professionals and innovative psychosocial practices, yet systemic barriers in UAM support exist, nonetheless. To strengthen outcomes, the report recommends:

- Extending follow-up support after guardianship officially ends at age 18.
- Expanding access to stable, small-scale housing solutions, including supported independent living, co-housing, and targeted rental assistance for young people leaving reception centers and for families following reunification.
- Making education pathways more flexible and inclusive, by facilitating earlier entry into mainstream and vocational education with embedded language support, reducing segregation across schools, and developing low-threshold learning routes for older arrivals who currently lack access to a diploma or qualification.
- Integrating intercultural mediators in public services to reduce barriers.
- Investing in accessible mental health and community-building initiatives.

Overall, while Ghent demonstrates a strong commitment to supporting UAMs, structural challenges at the intersection of housing, education, migration policy, and mental health threaten to undermine this commitment. Addressing these gaps will be essential to ensure that UAMs can transition to adulthood with bright perspectives for their futures.

## 1. INTRODUCTION OF THE LOCAL REPORT

The POWER2UAMs project aims to ensure equal access, participation, and voice for unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in the asylum system and in transit, in line with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The project begins with local-level research to identify the unmet needs of UAMs and to assess local social policies and services in Athens, Piraeus, Brussels, Gent, Liège, and Calais, through the work of partners in Greece (GCR), Belgium (NADOE and Caritas Belgium), and France (ECPAT). The research methodology includes desk research, literature review, stakeholder mapping, and interviews with UAMs and stakeholders. The research is coordinated by TARKI Social Research Institute across the six localities.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

For the basic quantitative information on the locality and country, several official sources were consulted, including Statbel,<sup>1</sup> Stad Gent Open Data,<sup>2</sup> Immigration Office (IBZ),<sup>3</sup> Fedasil, the Guardianship Service, and local institutions. Local-level data on UAMs were limited, with most statistics available only at the national level. Language mapping was approximated by identifying the top languages spoken among the top five nationalities in the reception system. The qualitative information was found in reports and publications from institutions such as IBZ, Fedasil, the Guardianship Service, AIDA, and ECRE, as well as academic sources and national media outlets.

For stakeholder mapping, NADOE and Caritas International combined internal networks, online research, and stakeholder referrals to identify relevant actors. Eleven stakeholders were ultimately interviewed, representing public services, reception organizations, foster care services, volunteer guardians, integration agencies, and educational institutions. Interviews generally received positive responses, though some public service organizations were slow to respond due to workload or holiday periods.

Engaging UAMs directly was the most challenging aspect in the Ghent locality. Recruitment relied on legal guardians and stakeholder contacts, with a flyer distributed to inform minors about participation. Interviews revealed that informal conversations often provided richer insights than structured questions and 'official' interview situations, and some minors were hesitant or found abstract questions difficult to answer. Language barriers were addressed through interpreters in Dari, Dutch, and Arabic when necessary. In total, six UAMs were interviewed, all with consent for anonymized audio recordings which contributed to more accurate documentation and processing of interviews.

<sup>1</sup> <https://statbel.fgov.be/nl>

<sup>2</sup> <https://data.stad.gent/explore/?disjunctive.keyword&disjunctive.theme&sort=modified>

<sup>3</sup> <https://dofi.ibz.be/en>

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW, DESK RESEARCH

### 3.1 Belgian Context

Belgium's population is diverse in terms of nationalities and ethnic background, and this diversity is increasing. The share of Belgians with a Belgian background has decreased from 79.3% in 2005 to 71.4% in 2015, and 64,0% in 2025. The share of Belgian citizens with a foreign background has increased by 4.7 percentage points in the last decade and the proportion of non-Belgian citizens has increased from 11.2% in 2015 to 13.8% in 2025.<sup>4</sup> A table on basic information on general and migrant population in Belgium and in Ghent can be found in Annex 2.

The number of people applying for international protection in Belgium reached a peak in 2015 with 39.064 applicants making a first request. In 2016 numbers dropped drastically after which they started to increase again every year. Even though there is a major so-called 'reception crisis' in 2024, the numbers are still somewhat lower compared to 2015 with 33.146 applicants making a first request.<sup>5</sup>

The number of UAMs arriving in Belgium has been decreasing since 2022. The peak of arrivals was experienced in the year 2022 with 6434 UAMs being registered for the first time by the Guardianship Service. In the subsequent years it decreased to 4366 in 2023, 4068 in 2024, and 2320 in the first 8 months of 2025. Within any given year we often also see seasonal fluctuations, namely an increase in arrivals during the summertime and a decrease in arrivals during the winter. In 2022, a high number of Afghan UAMs arrived in Belgium which dropped drastically since 2024. In contrast, the number of Eritreans and Somalians has been quite steady, while the arrival of Syrian UAMs is increasing, since at least 2020.<sup>6</sup>

Even though the overall number of UAMs arriving in Belgium is decreasing, the occupancy levels in Fedasil's first and third phase reception facilities remain exceptionally high. Despite this, the government decided to reallocate some places initially intended for UAM to accommodate families and adults. As a result, approximately 40% of the capacity of second-phase facilities was converted into places for families.<sup>7</sup>

The list of main languages of refugees and UAMs per locality is not available in Belgium. Based on the top 5 nationalities among UAMs in Belgium the most commonly spoken languages of UAMs for 2024 are Tigrinya, Dari, Pashto, Arabic and Ukrainian.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://statbel.fgov.be/en/themes/population/structure-population/origin>

<sup>5</sup> <https://dofi.ibz.be/nl/figures/international-protection/applicants-international-protection/nationale-statistieken>

<sup>6</sup> [https://justitie.belgium.be/nl/statistieken/dg\\_wetgeving\\_fundamentele\\_rechten\\_en\\_vrijheden#6](https://justitie.belgium.be/nl/statistieken/dg_wetgeving_fundamentele_rechten_en_vrijheden#6)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.caritasinternational.be/fr/asile-et-migration/politique-de-non-accueil-une-nouvelle-politique-gouvernementale-cimente-la-crise-humanitaire-dans-la-societe-belge/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://justitie.belgium.be/nl/statistieken/dg\\_wetgeving\\_fundamentele\\_rechten\\_en\\_vrijheden#6](https://justitie.belgium.be/nl/statistieken/dg_wetgeving_fundamentele_rechten_en_vrijheden#6)

Belgium's system for unaccompanied minors operates in between immigration control and child protection (De Graeve et al 2017). While grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, its structures are shaped by the idea of 'migration management' that distinguishes between categories of minors rather than their individual needs. For example, upon arrival, most UAMs are placed in the federal reception system instead of centers organized by the regional youth welfare system (though there are a few exceptions based on vulnerability criteria). The support given in the federal reception system does not adhere to the same quality criteria as in the youth welfare system, resulting in standardized procedures, limited attention to developmental needs, and unequal access to high-quality care and services compared with those offered by the regional youth welfare system. This reflects an institutional tension between humanitarian concern for child welfare on the one hand, and restrictive migration control on the other, where protection is contingent on vulnerability categories rather than universal children's rights.

### 3.2 Ghent Context

Ghent, the capital of East Flanders and the second largest city in the Flemish Region, is a diverse and growing city with a population of approximately 270.000 in 2024. Youth make up a significant portion of residents, with roughly 50.000 under 18, of whom about 8.500 are non-Belgian. Belgian nationals account for about 82% of the city's population, while 18% are foreign nationals. However, when looking at place of birth, recent data<sup>9</sup> shows that around 30% of the city's population were born outside Belgium, with the largest groups from Turkey, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Afghanistan, and Morocco, reflecting Ghent's significant immigrant presence.

Net migration patterns indicate that Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Palestine represent communities with a refugee or protection background in the city. While exact numbers of UAMs in Ghent are not available, national-level data show a predominance of male minors (84%), mostly aged 11–17, from Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Morocco, overlapping with the city's refugee population (see Annex 2).

Following the 2024 local elections, Ghent is governed by a socialist-liberal alliance and a green party. The city is generally recognized as a progressive city,<sup>10</sup> both in its policy priorities, past pledges related to welcoming refugees and encouraging integration, and in the way it presents itself through the official Stad Gent communication channels. The municipality offers open data access and has developed ambitious policy on climate (aiming to be carbon neutral by 2050), youth participation, the Sustainable Development Goals, "Smart City" innovation, and international collaboration.<sup>11</sup> Stad Gent's website has many pages with information for refugees and for residents wanting to support refugees in the city.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Stad Gent: Demographic Report 2025 <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiOGQ5YTFiMDctZGRINS00YjEwLWFIZTctYjMyZWZhNzQ3NWEOIiwidCI6ImMzYzFINmJlLTFiYmYtNDMzNS1hZDZlLTM0MTkyNjZlOTc4MSIsImMiOiJh9>

<sup>10</sup> Whitehead, O. (2024, October 29). Belgium in Brief: Everyone loses in the battle for Ghent. Brussels Times. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/1290730/belgium-in-brief-everyone-loses-in-the-battle-for-ghent>

<sup>11</sup> Stad Gent - City Policy. <https://stad.gent/en/city-governance-organisation/city-policy>

<sup>12</sup> <https://stad.gent/nl/samenleven-welzijn-gezondheid/samenleven/asiel-en-vluchtelingen/zo-help-je-een-vluchteling-gent>

Youth is central to Ghent's policies. The city was named 2024 European Youth Capital, and in 2015, the city adopted an Action Plan to become a child- and youth-friendly city. However, this plan did not include specific measures targeting unaccompanied minors or young asylum seekers, although it did contain objectives related to tackling youth poverty (which may have indirectly included UAMs).

***“The City of Ghent starts from an offensive, positive viewpoint on youth, with a strong belief in the power (and not regarding the complaints) and the potential of young people. Child and youth-friendliness is not only an objective in itself, but also a touchstone of a responsible social and people-friendly policy... Child-friendliness is also defending the interests of the most vulnerable children and youngsters.”<sup>13</sup>***

Ghent has a long history of welcoming refugees. The Refugee Task Force, established in 2015 with the Public Centre for Social Welfare (OCMW), involved coordinating multiple stakeholders and aimed to “give asylum seekers in Ghent opportunities to build a new life”.<sup>14</sup> In 2020, the city joined the Eurocities Solidarity Cities Initiative to host unaccompanied minors from Greek camps<sup>15</sup>. According to a 2023 report,<sup>16</sup> Ghent's proactive integration policies, civic engagement, and coordination through the Migration Forum have earned recognition, including an URBACT Good Practice award.<sup>17</sup>

However, challenges remain. The number of residents without regular status is rising (approximately 1.600 in 2023).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Ghent's growth and broader economic trends have led to a severe housing crisis, with soaring rents and property prices making housing unaffordable for many—especially single-income renters, 4 in 10 of whom spend over 30% of their income on housing. Despite having more social housing than most Flemish cities, with nearly 1 in 9 households accommodated, over 10,000 remain on waiting lists, forcing many to live in substandard or precarious conditions.<sup>19</sup> Social initiatives, such as repurposing long-vacant properties into sustainable social housing<sup>20</sup> and the city's council-approved plan of action (ROOF) to end homelessness for residents with regular status by 2040,<sup>21</sup> aim to address these pressures.

<sup>13</sup> <https://stad.gent/en/city-governance-organisation/city-policy/ghent-child-and-youth-friendly-city/most-child-and-youth-friendly-city-flanders>

<sup>14</sup> City of Ghent & OCMW Ghent. (2018). Ghent Refugee Taskforce: Anticipating the exodus. [https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/page/documents/170609\\_Ghent\\_refugee%20taskorce-\\_ENG\\_v2\\_LR.pdf](https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/page/documents/170609_Ghent_refugee%20taskorce-_ENG_v2_LR.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Eurocities. (2020, April 23). Cities ready to take in refugee children. <https://eurocities.eu/latest/cities-ready-to-take-in-refugee-children/>

<sup>16</sup> Vandenhove, E., Casteleyn, L., & Desmet, E. (2021). Moving cities: City report Ghent: Comprehensive policies and extraordinary collaborations. Seebrücke. [https://cms.moving-cities.eu/uploads/ghent\\_en\\_08e916f6ce.pdf](https://cms.moving-cities.eu/uploads/ghent_en_08e916f6ce.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> URBACT. (2018, March 20). Solidarity with the refugees. Ghent: An inspiring city for Europe. <https://urbact.eu/articles/solidarity-refugees-ghent-inspiring-city-europe>

<sup>18</sup> <https://hoeveelin.stad.gent/tendensen/verborgen-gentenaars/>

<sup>19</sup> Stad Gent. (n.d.). ROOF BLS Final [PDF]. Stad Gent. Retrieved October 30, 2025, from [https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/media/documents/ROOF\\_BLS\\_FINAL.pdf](https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/media/documents/ROOF_BLS_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Basem, S. (2025, October 2). Ghent temporarily takes over management of vacant house for 1st time. Brussels Morning. <https://brusselsmorning.com/ghent-temporarily-takes-over-management-of-vacant-house-for-1st-time/79896/>

<sup>21</sup> Vanderbauwhede, P., & Maesele, T. (2023). Transitioning the model: From sheltering to housing the homeless in Ghent, Belgium [Article]. European Journal of Homelessness, 17(2), 6576. [https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/2023/EJK\\_17\\_-\\_2/EJH\\_17-2\\_A04\\_v02.pdf](https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/2023/EJK_17_-_2/EJH_17-2_A04_v02.pdf)

In education, one-third of school-age youth do not have Dutch as their mother tongue,<sup>22</sup> indicating a high percentage of youth who have origins from other countries. Key challenges faced by OKAN schools (for non-Dutch speaking newcomers) across Flanders in supporting unaccompanied minors have been highlighted,<sup>23</sup> including rigid full-time study requirements that leave little room for those (such as UAMs) who need to work simultaneously to support themselves, particularly after turning 18, or those who have lost residence status. A lack of flexible learning pathways and guidance during this transition often pushes students to abandon education prematurely. Additionally, many are steered towards vocational tracks regardless of their potential, leading to frustration, lower qualifications, and restricted future prospects in both education and the labor market. Shortages of available spots and the resulting long waiting lists have also been identified as persistent challenges within OKAN schools.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, policies such as the 2025 East Flanders ban on headscarves in public schools highlight ongoing integration and school enrolment challenges for Muslim girls.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, in Ghent, initiatives like OriëntatieWerkt-BENO<sup>26</sup> (though still on a small scale) offer young newcomers aged 18 to 28 who have limited formal education and little or no employment or training prospects the opportunity to follow a full-time, one-year program. This flexible and supportive pathway provides the opportunity to improve Dutch language skills, gain practical competencies, and explore different career options.

### 3.3 Reception and Centers

In July 2025, Belgium had a reception capacity of 35.322 places. With 33.160 people in the reception system, the occupancy rate was 94%. 1.836 people were in the waiting list for a place in the reception system.<sup>27</sup>

UAMs in Belgium are, in principle, first accommodated in specialized reception facilities: Orientation and Observation Centers (OOC). In this so called “1st phase” an evaluation is being made of the needs of the specific child, after which the UAM is being sent to a reception center in the so-called 2nd phase, where he or she will reside until he/she receives a decision in the residence procedure. Once a UAM receives a positive decision, a transfer may be made to individual or group accommodation (3rd phase) where the minor prepares to live autonomously until he or she reaches the age of 18, in some cases guided by a social worker from a non-profit organization such as Minor-Ndako.

According to a mapping of shelters with available places for UAMs in Ghent, a total of 68 places were identified within the official Fedasil reception system. Data about UAMs homed in Foster Care (or private accommodation) was not available.

<sup>22</sup> <https://hoeveelin.stad.gent/tendensen/wortels-in-migratie/>

<sup>23</sup> van den Bogaard, R.-M., Groeninck, M., Verhaeghe, F., Orsini, G., & Vandevordt, R. (2025). Policy Brief 6: Education: Entering and leaving OKAN [Policy brief]. REFUFAM. <https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PB6.-Education.-ENG.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Kinderrechtencommissariaat. (2023, April 26). Capaciteitstekort in OKAN: houd de vinger dicht aan de pols (Advies 2022-2023/12). <https://www.kinderrechten.be/advies/capaciteitstekort-in-okan-houd-de-vinger-dicht-aan-de-pols> kind VRT NWS (2023, April 3). Hundreds of non-Dutch-speaking youngsters on waiting list for a place in reception class for newcomers. <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2023/04/03/hundreds-of-non-dutch-speaking-on-waiting-list-for-a-place-in-re/vrt.b>

<sup>25</sup> Clapson, C. (2025, May 7). Muslim girls scramble for school places after East Flemish heads. VRT NWS. <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2025/05/07/muslim-girls-scramble-for-school-places-after-east-flemish-heads/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://sites.google.com/cbell.be/orientatiewerkt/orientatiewerkt>

<sup>27</sup> <https://fedasil.be/nl/node/30>

### 3.4 Relevant National, Regional, and Local Policies, Services and Programs for UAMS

Various national, regional, and local policies are in place to address different needs of UAMs in Ghent.

**3.4.1 The Flemish Youth and Children's Rights Policy Plan 2025–2029<sup>28</sup>** is the Flemish Government's key four-year framework for youth and children's rights policy, setting four strategic priorities — well-being, spaces to be young, living together in solidarity, and the path to adulthood. Within these priorities, UAMs are recognized as a vulnerable group in need of additional support and attention, and in addition, 7 UAMs were consulted in the drafting of the policy plan.

**3.4.2 Guardianship Service:** Every UAM that arrives in Belgium has the immediate right to a guardian, whose role is to assist with legal and administrative procedures, follow up on reception, education and to monitor the wellbeing of the minor. The guardianship is being managed on the federal level, by the Guardianship Service, but it is the guardian that makes sure minors have access to public services on the local level. This system is an example of a good practice. A guardian is being designated to each UAM as soon as possible, representing the minor in all procedures and monitor the wellbeing of the minor. A key limitation of this system, however, is that without a guardian, UAMs cannot access certain essential services – for instance, opening a bank account is not possible without one. The Guardianship Service reported in November 2024 that for the first time in three years, there was no longer a waiting list for the appointment of guardians.<sup>29</sup>

#### 3.4.3 Age Assessment Procedures:

Upon arrival in Belgium (or later in their residence procedure), the Guardianship Service, Immigration Office or other state actors can emit a doubt on the declared age of the minor. At the moment, the age is being assessed with the so-called triple test: an X-ray of the collarbone, wrist, and teeth. The accuracy and reliability of this practice have been highly criticized in the medical world and by NGOs.

In 2024, 1,713 age assessment procedures were conducted in Belgium and the Guardianship Service made 1,654 determinations, with just over 30% declared minors. Belgian rulings clarified that official documents take priority over medical age assessments, which, in theory, are only supportive – although in practice we see this doesn't change much. In the cases where documents are present, they are often seen as falsified. The European Pact on Migration and Asylum prescribes a thorough reform of the age assessment procedure, including a multidisciplinary phase and the medical test as a last resort. These reforms are due in June 2026.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Departement Cultuur, Jeugd en Media. (2025). Jeugd- en kinderrechtenbeleidsplan 2025–2029 [Policy plan]. Vlaanderen.

<sup>29</sup>European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). (2025, June). AIDA country report: Belgium – 2024 update. Asylum Information Database. [https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AIDA-BE\\_2024-Update.pdf](https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AIDA-BE_2024-Update.pdf)

<sup>30</sup>[https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en)

**3.4.4 Family reunification** in Belgium is a particularly complicated, lengthy and expensive procedure, requiring families to wait months for appointments, and collect, translate, and legalise numerous documents. These delays often interrupt UAMs' language courses, trigger precarious work, and create psychosocial stress for UAMs who may even have to pause their education to handle administrative and caregiving responsibilities.<sup>31</sup> UAMs need help with this procedure from professional organizations such as Minor-Ndako or Caritas International Belgium.

**3.4.5 Family allocation system - 'Groeipakket'**<sup>32</sup> Every child in Flanders is entitled to a Groeipakket: a package of financial benefits tailored to each child in each family. This contributes to the cost of raising children. While it is generally intended for children with Belgian nationality, some non-Belgian children — including UAMs — can also qualify if they are registered and documented in the Belgian system. The child support system in Flanders (and similarly in Wallonia) differs from Brussels, where UAMs can access these benefits only once they have been granted residence status.

**3.4.6 Foster Care Allowance:** Foster parents receive a monthly foster care allowance (pleegzorgvergoeding) to cover regular expenses like food, clothing, and school fees. This amount varies based on the child's age and specific care needs. This includes foreign UAMs in foster care.

**3.4.7 Public center for social welfare (CPAS/OCMW):** After leaving the reception system, recognized refugees who are not yet working have a right to social welfare. This includes a monthly income, installation 'bonus' (a one-time financial support for people who leave a situation of homelessness to buy furniture), help of a social assistant and financial support with medical bills if necessary. Being a UAM gives a right to access the social welfare system, if a state of need can be proven, and if the minor is not an applicant for international protection. (UAMs who are in the procedure for international protection receive material aid from Fedasil). While the OCMW/CPAS operate within a federal legal framework, they provide their services on a local level. Each OCMW/CPAS is joined with the municipal, local government and is limited to the territory of said municipality. As such, whilst these organisations offer the same opportunities and forms of aid, the technical application may differ and local governments may offer extra benefits, beyond the federal scope.

<sup>31</sup> Debruyne, P., Groeninck, M., Belloni, M., Desmet, E., Geldof, D., & Orsini, G., et al. (2025). Policy brief 10: Family reunification – The cornerstone of social inclusion. REFUFAM. <https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/PB10.-Family-Reunification.-ENG.pdf>

<sup>32</sup><https://www.groeipakket.be/en/tegemmoetkomingen/groeipakket-voor-een-kind-met-niet-belgische-nationaliteit>

**3.4.8. OKAN - Onthaalonderwijs voor Anderstalige Nieuwkomers (Reception Classes for Non-Dutch-Speaking Newcomers):** This is a type of schooling offered to all foreign-speaking, newcoming minors, between 12 and 18 years old. In Flanders this is called OKAN. The goal is to focus for a period of, on average, one year on Dutch language acquisition and integration, after which the students can enter classes in secondary education. Although this structure provides students with a safe and supportive environment in which to develop linguistic competencies, it frequently results in de facto segregation. OKAN classes are often organized in separate classrooms, and in some cases even distinct wings or buildings, thereby limiting interaction with the wider school population.<sup>33</sup> This program is not available for children in primary education: younger children of newcomers often sit in the same classes as their Belgian peers.

Existing research indicates that UAMs consistently place a high value on educational attainment; however, structural characteristics of the educational system often constrain their opportunities and outcomes. Following their initial year in DASPA or OKAN, UAMs are disproportionately represented in vocational and part-time vocational tracks, as well as in programs designed for learners with special educational needs. Conversely, they remain underrepresented in general and technical educational pathways that typically serve as preparatory routes for higher education. Moreover, UAMs who reach the age of 18 or who lose residence status before completing their DASPA or OKAN year are at heightened risk of exiting the school system without obtaining a formal qualification.<sup>34</sup>

**3.4.9 Health care:** UAMs in Belgium have a right to basic health insurance (mutuality) after going to school for 3 months. In case they don't have basic health insurance yet, Fedasil takes care of medical care for those UAMs in the procedure of international protection, and the CPAS/OCMW takes care of urgent medical needs for UAMS who aren't in the procedure for international protection. Empirical studies indicate that UAMs in Belgium exhibit significantly higher rates of severe anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (worsened by traumatic experiences, daily stressors, and uncertainties in asylum procedures, )—not only when compared to peers born in the host country, but also relative to refugee adolescents who came to Belgium with their parents. Despite these elevated levels of psychological distress, the availability and accessibility of psychological and psychiatric services for UAMs remain insufficient, falling markedly short of addressing their substantial mental health needs.<sup>35</sup>

**3.4.10 Children Rights Commissioner / Kinderrechten Commissariaat** is an independent body that monitors whether children's rights are adhered to in Flanders by the central and local governments and by private organizations in education, childcare, child welfare and health care. It detects (warning) signs from children, young people, their immediate environment and professionals. It mediates, investigates complaints and provides policy advice – always with a view to compliance with and the application of children's rights in Flanders.

<sup>33</sup> van den Bogaard, R.-M., Groeninck, M., Verhaeghe, F., Orsini, G., & Vandevordt, R. (2025). Policy Brief 6: Education: Entering and leaving OKAN [Policy brief]. REFUFAM. <https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PB6.-Education.-ENG.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> De Graeve, K., Vervliet, M., & Derluyn, I. (2017). Between immigration control and child protection: Unaccompanied minors in Belgium. *Social Work & Society*, 15(1). <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319542310>

<sup>35</sup> De Graeve, K., Vervliet, M., & Derluyn, I. (2017). Between immigration control and child protection: Unaccompanied minors in Belgium. *Social Work & Society*,

### 3.5 Conclusions on Services, Programs, Projects

Many of the services affecting the lives of UAMs in Belgium are organised at the federal level, with a limited impact from the local level. Only once UAMs leave the official reception system – typically after receiving residence status and reaching the age of 18 – do they access more public services on the local level. Key elements such as guardianship, age assessment, and reception policy are coordinated federally, while access to housing, education, and social services is shaped by regional and municipal implementation.

This results into dispersed policies for UAMs across federal, regional and local levels, leading to a fragmented governance landscape. While federal agencies (e.g. Guardianship Service, Immigration Office and Fedasil) ensure legal protection and basic services, regional and local initiatives provide educational, housing and integration support. This multi-tiered system can create inconsistencies in access and quality of services.

Ghent aims to provide a supportive environment for unaccompanied minors, with a network of local, regional, and federal services that facilitate integration and wellbeing. The city demonstrates strong coordination between public authorities, NGOs, and volunteer actors, and its proactive approach to refugee integration and youth participation has earned recognition in the past at the European level. Previous efforts to host minors from other countries illustrate Ghent's capacity for solidarity and responsiveness.

At the same time, structural challenges remain, many of which mirror broader national dynamics. The city faces a severe housing crisis that limits transition options for UAMs leaving reception centers or turning 18, pushing many into precarious conditions or temporary arrangements, or pushes UAMs to remain in group homes which can limit integration. Although some local initiatives such as ROOF and the repurposing of vacant properties for social housing exist, the need continues to outweigh the supply.

Despite high educational aspirations, UAMs face language barriers, interrupted schooling or waiting lists, rigid rules, and restricted access after turning 18 or after losing residence status, which often results in leaving school without a diploma or certificate. However, new initiatives such as flexible education and vocational programs for young newcomers take a (small) step in addressing gaps for those with limited schooling or work experience.

UAMs have access to basic medical health care, but access to mental health support is insufficient both at national and local levels. UAMs experience high levels of anxiety, depression, and PTSD, worsened by traumatic experiences, daily stressors, and uncertainties in asylum procedures, yet access to psychological and psychiatric care remains largely inadequate.<sup>36</sup>

There is also a need for stronger assistance in navigating family reunification and administrative procedures,<sup>37</sup> as well as more targeted multilingual support to ensure accessibility of services.

<sup>36</sup> De Graeve, K., Vervliet, M., & Derluyn, I. (2017). Between immigration control and child protection: Unaccompanied minors in Belgium. *Social Work & Society*, 15(1). <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319542310>

<sup>37</sup> Debruyne, P., Groeninck, M., Belloni, M., Desmet, E., Geldof, D., & Orsini, G., et al. (2025). Policy brief 10: Family reunification – The cornerstone of social inclusion. REFUFAM. <https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/PB10.-Family-Reunification.-ENG.pdf>

## 4. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE SUMMARIES OF UAM INTERVIEWS

### 4.1 Methodological Notes

Engaging UAMs proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of the fieldwork in Ghent. Despite outreach through various stakeholders, only legal guardians were ultimately able to facilitate contact with potential interviewees. In some cases, language barriers affected the depth of responses; while interpreters in Dari, Dutch, and Arabic were used when needed, certain nuances may have been lost or left unexplored.

As most participants were teenage boys, discussions around psychological wellbeing or personal difficulties were often met with brief or guarded answers, reflecting shyness, discomfort, or reluctance to share sensitive experiences. Some questions—such as “What are your needs?” or “What services do you use?”—seemed to be too broad to elicit answers easily, and required a flexible, conversational approach with probing and follow-up questions to elicit more detailed responses.

Overall, while the interviews offered valuable insights into daily life, integration, and aspirations, some narratives remained fragmentary and required careful interpretation.

### 4.2 Summary of Interviews with UAMs

#### 4.2.1 Basic information of UAMs interviewed

Altogether, six UAMs were interviewed in Ghent, with participants from Afghanistan (2), Somalia (2), Palestine (1) and Morocco (1), with ages between 17 and 21 years old. Five participants identified as ‘male’ and one as ‘non-binary’. All six participants were unaccompanied minors at some point during their time in Belgium. However, by the time of the interviews in Ghent, some had already reached the age of majority, and one was still a minor but no longer unaccompanied. All six participants had applied for international protection in Belgium, with four having already received refugee status, and two still in procedure (with one of those having already received a negative response and was appealing this).

The six UAMs left their countries for various reasons, including seeking personal safety and security (for one, specifically due to fear of persecution based on gender or sexual identity), pursuing education, joining family members other than parents, and searching for better life opportunities, such as starting a new life. They chose Ghent or Belgium specifically to join family or friends, pursue study opportunities, follow parental plans, or escape poor living conditions elsewhere.

The time spent in Ghent ranged from eight months to almost four years, with some participants having lived in other areas of Belgium beforehand. On average, they had spent around 2 years in Ghent. Their ages upon arrival in Belgium ranged from 13 to 17 years old.

When discussing **future mobility**, four of the UAMs planned to stay in Ghent, describing it as a good (or very good) city to live in, while one mentioned possibly relocating to an Arab country due to not feeling culturally integrated in Belgium (but only after several more years of studies in Ghent), and one was unsure because of his precarious residential status.

In terms of their **living arrangements**, three UAMs lived alone in private accommodation, two lived in private accommodation with friends or family (one was now living with his mother who had arrived after some time), and one lived in the state-run Fedasil centre (“Reno boot”) in Ghent.

The highest **level of education** completed by the six UAMs ranged from primary or religious education to lower and upper secondary education, with some having studied the Quran or only completing part of primary school. Four were currently studying, mostly vocational subjects such as mechanics, electronics, nursing, or at regular Belgian high school. Two UAMs were not currently studying but wanted to start a new course, such as house painting or a Dutch language class. Aside from two participants enrolled in regular Flemish high schools and one studying nursing, the other three appeared dissatisfied with their educational situations, having had negative experiences with previous courses or struggling to find suitable programs. One person could not access mainstream education due to having been declared as an adult once he had arrived in Ghent.

Most of the UAMs assessed their **overall health** between ‘very good’ and ‘moderate’. Two participants reported health-related problems affecting daily activities, both related to mental health challenges, including past depression and stress linked to the asylum procedure – these two participants did not yet have a decision on their asylum application.

Two of the UAMs currently have an **official legal guardian** in Belgium, while the other four no longer do, but did previously. Among those without a guardian, one previously had a guardian but now lives with his mother, and the other three were over 18 and no longer have a guardian, though one had one before turning 18.

#### 4.2.2 UAMs’ needs and their assessment on legal and social services used

***"In Belgium, I'm so appreciative. I don't care what I went through in the society, but Belgium has always been there for me, and I didn't face any battles from the government. I haven't felt like I was unwanted."***

On the whole, life in Ghent was evaluated rather positively. For participants still waiting for their residence papers, the most pressing and recurrently expressed need was obtaining residential/regular status, which they perceived as the foundation for stability and access to all other (local) services. Interestingly, despite this uncertainty, both were actively engaged in work, classes and maintaining some level of support through their guardians or social networks — one working full time while still living in a reception center, and the other relying on friends for accommodation in precarious conditions.

By contrast, participants who already held refugee or residence status generally described more secure living situations, often in private accommodation shared with others or alone. Their needs were therefore less about legality and more about navigating education, employment, and integration opportunities—for instance, one respondent described prolonged challenges in gaining access to a desired educational program.

### **Education**

All UAMs engaged (or had previously engaged) in educational programs, including OKAN school, practical high schools (e.g., mechanics), and regular Flemish high schools. While language learning and vocational training were considered helpful, several participants reported negative experiences, such as feeling culturally isolated, encountering racism from a teacher in a vocational program, or experiencing violence from peers in their OKAN school. In this case, the participant felt that although a complaint was filed with the help of their guardian, the school responsible did not do enough to support the victim. Attendance was also affected by mental health issues for some. Despite these challenges, participants appreciated supportive staff, though they noted that schools sometimes failed to adequately intervene in incidents.

### **Reception and housing challenges**

Some participants initially stayed in Fedasil reception centers (e.g., “the boat”), which were often described as cramped and lacking private space. The Ghent center was perceived as unsafe or unwelcoming, particularly for LGBTQ+ youth who experienced bullying from other roommates (“I think what was making everything difficult, there was no space for people like me.”) However, the assistants working there were described as kind and “trying the best they could”.

**Social workers and assistants** were generally supportive, visiting regularly and assisting with integration and social activities. One UAM lived with a foster family for a month and described the experience as very positive. Social housing transitions were experienced as stressful due to limited availability and abrupt requirements upon turning 18.

Most of the UAMs reported that they have not experienced **homelessness** since arriving in Ghent. Initial accommodation was provided by authorities (e.g. at the Fedasil boat center, or the Stedelijke Opvang Initiatief third phase center), and some were able to live with family, relatives, or friends. While the support ensured they were not entirely without shelter, several participants highlighted challenges in securing stable and independent housing – especially for the person who had a large family arriving in a few months and desperately needed a larger place to accommodate them all. These included long searches (up to a year for some), difficulties with landlords due to their Afghan background, prejudices about their Orange Card or residential status (“I don’t have ID card — if I apply for someone’s home, they don’t give me”), and shared living arrangements that were unsatisfactory. One participant noted prior homelessness in Italy, underlining the precarity faced before arrival in Belgium.

### Legal issues, Lawyers and Guardian Support

Guardianship services were consistently praised, with participants describing their guardians as exceptionally supportive.

***"I think she is the nicest person I have ever met. I think I will say... I don't know what to define her... but she's magical".***

Legal support via lawyers was neutrally to positively evaluated and had been used for processes such as family reunification or appealing on the first asylum decision.

For the two UAMs with a precarious residential status, ongoing legal challenges remained, related to age verification in the past, and asylum status. These two participants expressed extreme frustration with the length of the asylum and appeal procedures—one had been waiting for a response for a year, and another for nearly two years or more. This prolonged uncertainty became a significant source of stress and depression, despite their strongly positive conviction and ability to build a life in Belgium and become part of the local society.

***"Because why? Without the ID card, there's nothing. Nothing – no programs, no living, no life here. Yes, you become nothing..."***

For these two UAMs, their most pressing need is to obtain residential/regular status in Belgium. One described Belgian residence status as "life", saying his main concern is his future — he wants to have a stable life, a home, and to be treated like other Belgians. He feels that without regular status or stability, people don't respect him.

***"I want to be like a normal person, like from Belgium. Yeah, I want to have a nice home. But there [are] the people, if you don't have life [i.e. ID card] here, they don't respect you [the same way as they respect other people] ."***

He also distances himself from other Afghans in Belgium because he feels judged by them for adapting to Belgian culture, which makes him uncomfortable.

### Employment and Vocational Training

Participants expressed strong motivation to work and pursue vocational training. While some were able to engage in temporary jobs (e.g., B-Post, Volvo Cars), accessing formal vocational training (e.g., painter training via VDAB, driver's license test) was hindered by long waiting lists and bureaucratic delays. One UAM reported that an incorrect age assessment affected his ability to study or plan for his future while still considered a minor.

UAMs emphasized that work provides not only income but also mental well-being and purpose, and a means to build a life in Belgium, particularly for those who had faced mental health challenges.

***"I want to work. I don't have motivation to continue [my] studies because I am a worker. I really like work."***

This participant expressed a keen desire to start his own business but was restricted due to his precarious residential status.

### Financial Support

Participants received monetary support through Fedasil and OCMW, though it was often insufficient to cover personal and family needs, particularly for those awaiting family reunification. Some UAMs expressed frustration with limitations on work permits and income, which restrict their ability to support themselves and relatives. The OCMW and CAW were not well-evaluated by some in terms of what they could offer – “They only listen to your problems but don't help”.

### Health and Mental Health Services

Overall physical health was often rated as good or very good, but mental health challenges were reported, including stress linked to the asylum procedure and past depression. Some participants attempted to access psychological support, with mixed outcomes: while CAW helped in facilitating appointments, the services were often perceived as insufficient or lacking follow-up. One UAM sought psychological help due to stress and threats but was told to pay and could not afford it. Later, CAW helped him make an appointment, though he felt the support was limited and is still waiting for follow-up from the psychologist. For a UAM who had had a physical health condition, the service from hospital UZ Gent was rated very highly.

### Social Integration and Leisure Activities

Three participants benefited from social clubs (e.g. Habibi Network of the AMAL integration agency), Scouts, theatre, a youth house (in Brussels), and other activities, which helped them develop social networks and integrate culturally. In fact, for them, these activities and groups provided a great sense of belonging in a community, and satisfaction with life, despite challenges. Similarly, one UAM who had been in foster care with a Belgian family said that “they were the best, I learnt everything from them, the language, the culture, everything, so still I visit them”. The other participants did not report detailed involvement in such activities, indicating a potential gap in social integration or a lack of connection to these opportunities. For these cultural differences — such as Muslim youth avoiding bars while Belgian peers frequently socialize there — and feeling judged by others sometimes (whether Belgians or others) hindered their sense of belonging.

### Unmet Needs and Gaps

Despite the services received, several critical needs remain insufficiently addressed:

- Stable residential status and legal documentation, which affects access to education, work, and housing. While this issue is certainly one decided at the federal level, the impact of uncertain residential status is strongly felt at the local level, often causing stress and anxiety, and a lack of perspective or optimism towards the future.
- Adequate vocational training and employment opportunities, particularly for motivated youth who want to start working immediately. Long waiting lists for training courses and for help from job-seeking agencies were mentioned.
- Mental health support that is affordable, and accessible.
- Support for housing, family reunification, and integration of relatives once they arrive.
- Social inclusion initiatives / activities tailored to cultural differences, particularly for LGBTQI+ youth or those feeling socially isolated.

### 4.2.3 UAMs' experiences with law enforcement, border police

Most participants reported no direct or negative experiences with law enforcement or border police in Belgium. One participant, however, described two incidents: being stopped and fined by the police while on a scooter where the officers allegedly treated him disrespectfully and in a humiliating way, and another time where he was randomly searched in the street by police. Another participant expressed a more positive view, stating, "I give respect, I get respect" noting that police interactions in Ghent are generally calm and respectful.

### 4.2.4 UAMs' experiences with discrimination, violence

No participants mentioned any instances of violence from Belgian authorities or service providers. However, one participant experienced physical violence from peers at school who also lived with him in the reception center. He felt that the school staff did not take his reports seriously.

One participant described being discriminated against by a teacher in a mechanics school, which led him to leave the course despite filing a complaint with his guardian that produced no result. Discrimination in the housing market was also mentioned, with landlords refusing to rent to migrants. Some participants highlighted subtle forms of exclusion, noting that not having a regular status or an ID card affected how others perceived and treated them. As one explained,

***"I live a long time here – I learn the culture from Belgium, I learn the language, I learn the people, everything I learn. But I don't have life here... if I show my Orange Card, they don't think good... I feel shame."***

Others contrasted this by saying that racism was rare in Ghent compared to Brussels, and that they generally felt respected by Belgians.

### 4.2.5. UAMs' experiences with the age assessment procedure

Four of the participants had not undergone an age assessment procedure, either because they already had documents proving their age or were accepted without one. Two participants, however, described having gone through the process in Belgium, with contrasting experiences. One reported that the procedure was fair and the outcome accurate. The other described major inconsistencies — initially being recognized as 15, then later reclassified as 17 — which caused confusion and limited his opportunities once he turned 18. He explained that the disbelief surrounding his age prevented him from accessing education – or at least, not for enough time (e.g. the OKAN school program being only for minors) – and support as a minor, leaving him feeling disadvantaged and frustrated.

## 5. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE SUMMARIES OF STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

### 5.1 Methodological Notes

Recruiting stakeholders was relatively straightforward. Most were contacted via email, with an explanation of the project and a request to participate in an interview. Finally, 11 interviews were conducted with representatives of a broad spectrum of actors: reception centers, foster care service, legal guardians, the Guardianship Service, NGOs, youth integration services, and an OKAN school. The only notable difficulty was timing: research fieldwork fell mainly during summer when availability was reduced due to holidays, while in the following weeks stakeholders were particularly busy for services working with UAMs due to start of the school year.

Interviews were done either in the offices of the interviewees, or online. Once interviews had been arranged, interviews proceeded smoothly, with stakeholders generally open and willing to share information and expertise, and passionate about the cause.

### 5.2 Summary of Interviews with Stakeholders

#### 5.2.1 organization types, positions, years of experience

In Ghent, 11 stakeholders were interviewed, including two state actors, two municipal actors, two regional actors, and five actors categorized as “other,” encompassing non-profit initiatives, a school, and legal guardianship roles funded by the state or region. Interviewees held diverse positions such as project managers, team leaders, coordinators, youth support workers, social experts, reception center vice-directors, integration counsellors, and policy officers. Their work spanned social guidance for unaccompanied minors, guardianship, legal support, school-based reception and integration, housing, and inclusion programs, with some focusing specifically on accompaniment of UAMs and prevention of exploitation.

**Years of Experience:** Several interviewees reported extensive careers, including one with 15 years in school coordination, another with 13 years leading a youth support team, and one with 7 years as a social expert guiding guardianship. Others had 5–7 years of experience in their current roles or prior related positions. A number of stakeholders were relatively new, having started in 2022–2023, though they brought experience from related sectors or previous engagements in guardianship and integration services.

#### 5.2.2 Number of UAMs they support, and key challenges faced by the UAMs

Across the 11 interviews, the number of UAMs that stakeholders’ work with varied widely, depending on their roles and organizational capacities. Some actors, such as regional reception and guardianship services, supported large groups ranging from 100 to over 300 minors annually, while smaller organizations and individual guardians typically accompanied between 5 and 25 minors. School-based and municipal services reported mixed engagement, working with both UAMs and other young migrants or families.

The stakeholders primarily work with UAMs from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Palestine, Eritrea, Ukraine, Guinea, and Morocco. Most of them are boys aged 12–18, often in the asylum procedure, with varying residential statuses — some awaiting decisions, others in family reunification processes, or recently granted residence permits. A minority are girls or younger children, and no one reported working with other profiles such as wandering or in transit minors.

According to the stakeholders interviewed, UAMs face a wide range of interrelated challenges affecting their legal, social, educational, and psychological well-being. Many experience trauma linked to pre-flight violence, family separation, and the migration journey, which is often compounded by uncertainty surrounding asylum procedures, long waiting times, and the stress of family reunification processes as well as the actual reunion. Several actors emphasized persistent psychological distress, loneliness, and pressure to work to financially support family members back home (often leading to dropping out of school).

Educational barriers were also widely noted: language acquisition takes time, and the Belgian system's high academic and linguistic thresholds often prevent older UAMs from completing secondary education or accessing vocational training. This leads many to leave school early or enter precarious, low-skilled work.

Stakeholders further highlighted difficulties related to housing shortages, limited psychological support, and intergenerational tensions after family reunification, where minors often assume adult roles as translators and mediators. Older minors transitioning to independent living struggle with budgeting, administrative procedures, and emotional adaptation, while younger ones encounter integration difficulties in schools and foster care settings. The anxiety of lengthy asylum procedures was also noted:

***"People who are still waiting have a lot of different needs than people who have their positive decision. For the people that are waiting, there's so much anxiety about what is going to happen. I feel sometimes they are frozen until they have a decision, not all, but a lot of times I see that they are so stuck in not knowing that they do not really take on information or really are hands on with their lives. They're just waiting. Not all. Some are really driven and go either way, but some are so stuck in, in this, in this waiting position, that their life is on hold."***

It may be important to note that the stakeholders interviewed work mostly with UAMs in the asylum procedure or with refugee status; no homes or services were provisioned specifically for other profiles such as undocumented, in transit or wandering minors, as in Brussels. 5

### **5.2.3 The support ecosystem in Ghent**

Stakeholders in Ghent offer a wide range of services for UAMs. These included psycho-educational workshops in multiple languages aimed at strengthening coping skills and well-being (CAW MindSpring), specialized foster care and family assessments for UAMs under 13 (Pleegzorg), schooling programs for newly arrived minors (OKAN), and residence and/or semi-independent living guidance for older UAMs (Minor-Ndako and the SOI). Guardianship services ensured legal representation, coordination with lawyers, and monitoring of accommodation and welfare, while municipal and integration services provided housing, language classes, training, and socialization opportunities.

Ghent's support ecosystem functions through a network of public, civil, and private actors. Coordination occurs through both formal and informal mechanisms, such as the Network Tafel, where partners like MindSpring, CGG, and the City of Ghent exchange information and plan joint initiatives. Referrals typically come from Fedasil, OKAN schools, guardians, or Opgroeien to organizations like Minor-Ndako or Pleegzorg, depending on the minor's profile and needs.

Foster care is coordinated between Minor-Ndako's MINA team (for initial accompaniment) and Pleegzorg (long-term support up to age 25). Legal guardianship is managed by the Dienst Voogdij under the Justice Department, in close contact with schools, asylum centers, and psychosocial services. The system largely mirrors that available to Belgian minors, though guardians and social workers often initiate support applications, and NGOs frequently fill gaps where state support is limited. Beyond formal services, leisure and community organizations — such as Overkop, KOPERGIETERY, sports clubs, and volunteer networks — play an important role in promoting social integration and wellbeing.

#### **5.2.4 Assessment of services provided, and service gaps and challenges identified by stakeholders**

Overall, it appeared that services and initiatives in Ghent are numerous and generally high quality – for those UAMs who can access them. Many stakeholders expressed a great sense of pride in terms of Ghent's solidarity with migrant populations and UAMs in particular and noted how much work has been and is being done, as Ghent remains a progressive city in an increasingly right-leaning political climate. Collaboration between actors works well, particularly among long-standing partners. Networks regularly meet to discuss challenges and plan joint actions, ensuring follow-up and referrals. Overall, the system functions through active referrals and cooperation between key actors such as schools, guardians, and social services, though gaps may arise when a minor is not referred or when initiatives fail to connect.

Stakeholders also acknowledged significant gaps in services, and that coverage and funding are limited, particularly in terms of accessibility, continuity, and coordination/consolidation of initiatives that can lead to fragmentation and inefficiencies. Stakeholders reported long waiting lists exist for psychological services, foster care, schooling, and post-18 integration/accompaniment. Reception centers, such as the Fedasil boat center, are overcrowded and offer limited privacy and inadequate facilities. In addition, there is a lack of small-scale local reception initiatives (LOIs) and specialized care in group homes for younger minors, meaning that UAMs often have to stay for prolonged periods in large group centers that are not conducive to integration.

According to stakeholders, many minors experience abrupt discontinuity in support once they reach 18 years of age or are reunited with their families.

***"When the kid has been followed by so many organizations for a while... and then once they either reach 18 or the family comes over, everything stops – they kind of fall off the tree."***

Housing emerged as a major challenge for UAMs, highlighted by many stakeholders. Difficulties included a lack of affordable and quality housing, long waiting lists, limited social housing, and barriers in the private rental market. While most UAMs initially have a place in reception centers, the transition to independent living —after turning 18 or especially after receiving a negative asylum decision — remains particularly difficult. Stakeholders noted that existing services are fragmented, and no single organization is able to provide comprehensive support in searching for and securing housing, making this a persistent and critical issue.

Education, while being a potential avenue for successful integration, also faces big challenges. While the OKAN system provides an essential entry point, its design is highly age-dependent: UAMs who enter before age 15-16 can often transition successfully into mainstream education, whereas older arrivals (e.g. 16-17) face extremely limited prospects. The requirement for high Dutch proficiency before accessing regular schooling or vocational pathways creates a barrier that delays inclusion and forces many into early exit from education. Teachers often lack training in multilingual and multicultural pedagogy, leading to misrecognition of students' abilities and limiting their academic progression. One OKAN school coordinator explained:

***“You need seven years to learn a new language. So you cannot say ‘you first have to learn the language, and then you can enter my class’... Teachers don’t know how to see a child as clever [i.e. to recognize their intelligence beyond their current language or other ability].”***

This rigid approach limits academic progression and access to vocational training or higher education, leaving many young people in low-skilled jobs despite their potential:

***“They really don’t get a very good education, and then they do not have any prospects for work. They can only do specific jobs, because the courses are just not really accessible... I see so much potential that is not accessible through the normal schooling.”***

Segregation in secondary schools further complicates matters, with some schools and teachers more welcoming of OKAN students than others:

***“We know in Ghent, this school will care a lot about the OKAN students; this school will not, so we don’t send students there. And then you have the white schools and the mixed schools and the black schools... in Ghent, we try to fix it, get it right, but it’s still not OK.”***

For many UAMs, particularly those arriving at 16 or 17, the combination of structural obstacles, slow language acquisition, financial pressures, and inaccessible pathways results in early school leaving, low-skilled employment, and restricted long-term prospects.

Access to services also heavily depends on the knowledge, initiative, and engagement of guardians or social workers. This creates inequities in service access, with some UAMs missing out entirely due to inconsistent advocacy or support. As one respondent explained:

***"You have to have the luck of having a guardian who knows the system. I see so much difference in guardians and how they approach their guardianship. And so that's the first thing, having a network that helps you get where you need to go; it's crucial. We see a lot of differences in how guardians see their role. What they think about their role, and how far they go in it, and how much knowledge they have about our services... It's a lot to do with luck, where you are placed, who your guardian is, who your social assistant is, that makes you go places [i.e. receive services]."***

Several stakeholders pointed out that cultural and linguistic sensitivities are frequently overlooked in service provisions (e.g. office workers, psychologists). For example, families with little formal education may struggle to express their needs in administrative or support settings, and minor cultural differences are often misinterpreted as lack of motivation or understanding. One example highlighted the issue:

***"What do YOU want?' – But an Afghan woman, who has never been to school from a village, she has no idea... so they (CAW) say: 'Well, if she doesn't know, we can't help her.' I think it should not be like that — you can't expect someone in that situation to know."***

This points to the need for greater cultural awareness and trauma-informed practices across all services. Other gaps in support that were noted were pre- and post-family reunification support, limited opportunities for meaningful social interaction between UAMs and Belgian youth, lack of protection for and information about undocumented UAMs.

In terms of more institutional and political challenges, stakeholders highlighted that UAM support in Belgium is increasingly affected by a rightward shift in government politics, which deprioritizes mental health, integration, and refugee rights. Policies around schooling, language requirements, and hijab bans create barriers to inclusion and can exacerbate educational inequality, while family reunification procedures have become stricter and more bureaucratic. Guardians face ambiguous roles, balancing advocacy with working within government-mandated structures, which limits collective action. Structural challenges also include limited reception and housing capacity, long waiting lists, and funding reductions, leaving NGOs and volunteers to fill systemic gaps. It was noted that although policies often stress integration, practical implementation lags, creating a disconnect between rhetoric and reality.

***"What I always hear is 'integration is so important'. If there would be more services for newcomers, the integration process would go so much smoother and faster, but they make it so difficult for newcomers to integrate, because there's so many thresholds... In politics they always say 'they have to integrate'; I do not see it in their policy or how they make it possible."***

***"It's also political; they (Guardianship Service) follow the rules set by the government. That is difficult because more and more now, as the political climate is changing, I feel myself more a collaborator and a bringer of bad news." (legal guardian)***

Overall, while services exist, they are often overstretched, unevenly accessible, and not fully adapted to the cultural, linguistic, and trauma-related needs of UAMs.

### 5.2.5 Good practices

Alongside the many challenges discussed, many good practices could be identified, focused on inclusion, autonomy, cultural sensitivity, and integration.

Several encouraging programs/services were described. Through the guidance of Minor-Ndako, UAMs crossing into adulthood receive specialized, daily life guidance in cooking, shopping, household management, and integration into local communities. Programs such as MindSpring workshops and trauma-sensitive foster care provide psychoeducational support, social integration, and trauma-informed guidance in UAMs' native languages. Some services in foster care are now being developed to be culturally sensitive and tailored specifically for UAMs.

A key approach is bringing services to the minors, such as workshops and activities conducted in reception centers and delivered in the UAMs' own language, rather than requiring minors to leave the center. A range of activities like drawing, games, theater, and outings help build trust, social skills, and a sense of belonging. Peer mentorship—where older former UAMs guide younger ones, or foster families who have other children – and maintaining contact with biological parents via video calls support emotional wellbeing and cultural connections.

Education and individualized guidance/mentorship also stood out. Transition programs from OKAN to regular schools, flexible teaching approaches, and one-to-one mentorship allow minors to adapt, gain autonomy, and engage with the education system effectively. Guardians and social assistants spend quality time with UAMs to gradually foster autonomy, balancing empathy with professional boundaries, and explaining rights, procedures, and finances, while also encouraging independence and linking minors to broader social networks.

Collaboration and using networks for support enhance care. Strong connections with schools, NGOs, volunteers, and municipal services allow minors to access sports, leisure, and cultural activities, which should create warm, welcoming environments. Initiatives like Parkoer (AMAL), buddy projects, and culturally sensitive programs exemplify inclusive care. Separate housing for minors (rather than mixed-age), and psychoeducational sessions in their own language (e.g., MindSpring) further support safety, wellbeing, and resilience.

Overall, good practices involved being mindful of time, creating a welcoming environment, offering clear explanations, showing flexibility, culturally-sensitive and trauma-informed care, linking UAMs to other activities and services/NGOs, fostering connections with local children, providing gradual guidance toward autonomy, spending quality time, and maintaining contact with their biological parents.

### 5.2.6 Interactions with police and law enforcement

Most stakeholders reported limited or occasional interactions with law enforcement when working with UAMs, usually in routine or administrative contexts such as missing minors, school fights, or conflicts within reception centers. In general, police conduct was described as professional and correct, although sometimes slow in handling paperwork. However, several stakeholders highlighted inconsistencies in treatment, noting that it often depends on the region, department, and individual officers' experience with UAMs.

A few stakeholders described instances of racial profiling, where UAMs—particularly boys of African descent—were stopped or searched without cause. More serious concerns included isolated incidents of discriminatory or abusive behavior, such as police mocking foreign names, making racist remarks, or failing to provide translators during arrests. One particularly severe case involved two boys who were detained overnight, denied water, and felt threatened; a formal complaint was filed. Stakeholders also observed that police often lack adequate training and guidance on handling minors, language barriers, and cultural sensitivities, suggesting the need for more specialized and trauma-informed approaches.

On the other hand, a positive initiative was mentioned, where local police in Ghent run neighborhood boxing sessions, primarily targeting youth with migration backgrounds to build positive interactions and reduce tensions.

### 5.2.7 Discrimination and violence

Most stakeholders reported that serious violence or abuse by authorities or service providers is rare, though isolated incidents and systemic discrimination do occur. One stakeholder noted that while Belgium, and particularly Ghent, is generally open and supportive, cases of abuse among minors or by institutions occasionally happen but often remain hidden. Many young people, especially from Afghan or Arab backgrounds, are reluctant to report such experiences due to fear, shame, or cultural taboos, particularly when it comes to sexual abuse.

Several stakeholders emphasized discrimination and racism within the social sector and broader society, describing it as sometimes unconscious but deeply felt by UAMs. Reported examples included bias in the housing market, where landlords refuse foreign tenants; discriminatory treatment in schools, such as teachers discouraging students with weaker Dutch language skills or pressuring girls to ignore cultural or religious sensitivities; and limited cultural competence among social workers, who may overlook the need for interpreters or make assumptions about a minor's capabilities based on stereotypes. In the education sector, UAMs are often streamed into lower academic tracks or pushed towards specific vocational fields such as cleaning, care work, or gardening—choices that reflect stereotypes rather than the minors' potential or aspirations. While Ghent was often praised for its relative openness and diversity, stakeholders agreed that racism, stereotyping, and unequal treatment persist subtly across multiple sectors.

### 5.2.8 Experiences with age assessments

All respondents were aware of age assessment procedures, though few had direct involvement. The process was widely described as stressful, unreliable, and inconsistent. As one interviewee explained, ***“It gives a lot of stress to UAMs. They say it is an outdated procedure that is not so reliable... Becoming legally ‘adult’ changes the entire support structure and available services.”***

Several noted that outcomes often depend on the discretion of officials: ***“You are lucky or you are unlucky. Based on how you look, they say there is a doubt or there is no doubt.”*** The process typically involves document checks, interviews, and sometimes medical exams, but respondents questioned its accuracy and fairness.

A practitioner from an observation center highlighted its emotional impact: ***“It is very difficult for them – it has a huge impact on their mental wellbeing”***. Others mentioned cases where inconsistent results created administrative confusion or forced young people to alter documents to match official records.

Overall, the procedure was not perceived as dignified, lawful, or non-discriminatory, and several respondents expressed doubts about possible ethnic bias and the lack of reliable appeal mechanisms.

## 6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Support should continue beyond age 18.** Extending structured support arrangements after guardianship ends at 18 or introducing case-by-case follow-up until age 25 would prevent young people from being left unsupported at a critical stage. This includes continued administrative, psychological, and housing guidance.

**Housing remains one of the biggest challenges in Ghent.** Public authorities should invest in individual, permanent housing solutions tailored to the needs of unaccompanied minors (and their families following reunification) and young people transitioning out of reception centers. This could include supported independent living, small-scale dispersed housing units, and targeted rental assistance. While some housing support services exist to assist newcomers with landlords, contracts, and understanding their rights, none of the UAMs interviewed mentioned using or being aware of such services. This suggests potential gaps in awareness or accessibility, including the availability of interpretation support.

**To improve educational outcomes for UAMs in Ghent, the education system needs to be made more flexible and responsive to the realities of newcomer youth.** This begins with easing the strict language requirements that delay access to mainstream schooling and vocational training; UAMs should be able to enter regular classes earlier, supported by tailored language assistance rather than excluded until proficiency is reached. Teachers also need better preparation for multilingual and multicultural classrooms so that students’ abilities are recognized beyond their Dutch level.

**Ghent should take steps to reduce school segregation** and ensure that all schools — not only a few committed ones — are prepared to welcome OKAN students. At the same time, older arrivals require dedicated, low-threshold learning pathways, as the current system leaves some without a viable route to a diploma or profession.

**Educational support should not abruptly end at 18.** Continued guidance, counselling, and administrative assistance would help young people stay in school rather than move prematurely into low-skilled work. Schools and services also need to be more attentive to the mental health needs of UAMs, integrating culturally sensitive support within the learning environment.

**To strengthen access to public services, municipalities should employ intercultural and linguistic mediators** (e.g. Pashto or Arabic speakers) in key institutions to bridge communication gaps and counter misinformation. Psychosocial programs like MindSpring could be formally integrated into public services for long-term sustainability.

Finally, **community-building initiatives** — such as mentorship schemes, shared meals, arts and sports programs, and affordable access to leisure — should be expanded to foster relationships between Belgians and newcomers, reduce loneliness, and promote social cohesion.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

**Ghent aims to provide a supportive environment for unaccompanied minors, through a network of local, regional, and federal services and policies that promote genuine inclusion and well-being.** The city demonstrates strong coordination between public authorities, NGOs, guardians, and volunteer actors, and has a history of proactive approach to refugee integration and youth participation. Stakeholders recognize innovative practices like psycho-educational workshops in minors' languages, culturally sensitive foster care, and mentorship programs in Ghent. Nevertheless, services are overstretched, and often overlook cultural, linguistic, and trauma-related needs. For unaccompanied minors living in Ghent, the reality presents both opportunities as well as persistent gaps in support structures available to them.

**Transitioning to autonomy after the age of 18, including independent living and family reunification, poses significant challenges.** These stem from the limited capacity of support systems to assist all young people who turn 18 and lose their guardianship, as well as from the shortage of social housing and barriers in the private rental market. The accompaniment provided by non-profit organizations such as Minor-Ndako and Foster Care is essential, but unfortunately, it does not cover all UAMs in need of this support.

**Indeed, housing remains one of the most pressing challenges in Ghent, shaping every aspect of young people's integration.** Most minors first enter the federal reception system, where initial accommodation is often cramped and impersonal. Some, particularly LGBTQ+ youth, experience social exclusion, though staff and social workers are generally supportive.

**Interviews revealed widespread housing struggles:** long, uncertain searches, months of couch-surfing, discrimination from landlords, and — in the most severe cases — homelessness among young people, particularly Tigrinya speakers and former UAMs who lose reception support at 18. To address this, the city should expand co-housing options for young people leaving reception centers and for reunited families awaiting accommodation, while investing in individual and permanent housing solutions. Without accessible, stable housing, all other integration efforts remain fragile; tackling this issue must be a central priority for Ghent.

**UAMs often rely on guardians and social workers to navigate these systems,** and their access to services and projects in Ghent can vary widely depending on the initiative and knowledge of these intermediaries.

**Education offers both potential and frustration.** OKAN schools and vocational programs provide language support and skill-building, yet somewhat rigid pathways, segregation, and lack of flexibility leave some minors discouraged or directed into low-skilled tracks. Some positive steps have recently been taken to encourage more flexible schooling options (e.g. Orientatiewerk-BENO), though this is not yet wide-reaching. Negative experiences with teachers (e.g. racism) and/or peers (e.g. bullying) can strongly discourage UAMs from continuing their educational path. Long waiting lists for vocational training can hinder progress to autonomy.

**Interviews with UAMs reveal generally positive experiences in Ghent.** Minors appreciate supportive guardians, access to education, work possibilities, and social integration opportunities, particularly through leisure and/or social activities. For those still in the asylum procedure, their most pressing needs are legal and structural: precarious residence status affects education (especially those over 18 years), work opportunities, housing, and social recognition, while bureaucratic delays cause stress and uncertainty, for which psychological support is not always available.

**Mental health needs remain only partially addressed:** psychological and psychosocial services exist but are limited or have long waiting lists, are difficult to access, and sometimes fail to follow up.

**In summary,** Ghent provides a relatively supportive ecosystem for UAMs, combining formal and informal services to encourage integration and wellbeing. Yet systemic constraints — limited housing, rigid education pathways, legal precarity, and under-resourced mental health and other services — continue to shape an environment where access to opportunities depends heavily on guardianship quality, persistence, and sometimes sheer luck. The city's experience illustrates both the promise and the limits of localized support for unaccompanied minors within a national system dominated by migration management imperatives.

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