Crossing Vulnerability: A Study on the Experiences of Victimisation of Unaccompanied Adolescents and Young Migrants in the Basque Country, Spain[1]

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Abstract

Migrant children without family references find themselves in a situation of vulnerability and stigmatisation throughout the migration process. The lack of perception and cognitive development of childhood, together with discrimination and stigma towards foreigners, tend to increase their exposure to different forms of violence, abuse and exploitation. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the experiences of victimisation suffered by unaccompanied foreign minors residing in a protection centre in the Basque Country, Spain. The data collection consists of nineteen semi-structured interviews with unaccompanied foreign minors aged 13 to 17 from different regions of Africa. The results show that these minors have suffered different forms of victimisation in their country of origin, during the journey and once they arrive in the country of destination.

Keywords: *Migrants, migrant minors, without family references, victimisation, poly-victimisation, vulnerability, Basque Country, Spain.*

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Migration has been constant throughout human history. Today, globalization and increasing social inequalities have contributed to the development of irregular human movements (International Organization for Migration, 2005). Within migration in general and irregular migration in particular, unaccompanied minors have become one of the most visible faces, as they are immersed in the most vulnerable and unprotected circuits of migration (Chamseddine, 2010). The combination of limited perception and cognitive development typical of childhood, along with discrimination and stigma towards foreigners, tends to increase the vulnerability of unaccompanied minor migrants to various forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation. That is, different forms of victimisation, such as physical or psychological abuse, human trafficking and labour exploitation.

Victimisation during childhood and adolescence is a topic that dominates current discourse and has been globally recognised as a significant social issue, due to both the high number of victims and the profound impact on those affected (Bobbio, Bruera & Arbach, 2022; De la Vega, De la Osa, Granero, & Ezpeleta, 2013; Greco 2021). According to David Finkelhor (2008), children and adolescents are the most affected by crimes and traumatic situations in society. Children experience elevated rates of not only the same crimes as adults but also a distinct set of offenses attributed to their status as children. Within their own families, children may endure physical, psychological and sexual abuse; at school, they may face bullying and assaults from classmates and peers, while dating partners and even neighbourhood figures subject them to further mistreatment, including abuse and sexual assault (Finkelhor & Hashima, 2001). Children are also vulnerable to institutional abuse. Children and young people in care in the child protection system, and those involved in the juvenile justice system, are exposed to several adverse experiences and victimisation that

increase their risk of suicidal behaviour (Geoffroy et al., 2016; Suárez, 2020). According to Pereda, Abad, and Guilera (2012), they are the most vulnerable age group within victimology, and most of them experience more than one type of violence throughout their lives – a phenomenon known as poly-victimisation (Finkelhor et al., 2011; Frías & Finkelhor, 2017; Fry et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2018).

Certain groups of children remain particularly vulnerable to multiple forms of violence (Baumgärtel & Ganty, 2024), as they often face compounded risks based on factors such as disability, ethnic minority status, sexual orientation or growing up in impoverished or high-inequality communities (Gobierno Vasco, 2020) – including unaccompanied foreign minors. The main objective of this research is to shed light on the complex phenomenon of migration involving minors without family references who are under the care of the protection system, and to analyse their experiences of child and adolescent victimisation, both due to their condition as minors and their status as foreigners. In summary, this study aimed to analyse the victimisation and polyvictimisation experiences of migrant children throughout their life trajectories. This paper presents the results of a study conducted in a protection centre in the Basque Country, Spain, involving migrant minors without family references who have emigrated in situations of neglect and, as a result, have been exposed to various forms of victimisation and polyvictimisation, such as racist victimisation, family-based victimisation, victimisation due to indirect exposure to crime, and institutional and police victimisation, among others.

The Victimisation of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors

The migration of unaccompanied minors became highly visible in the European Union (EU) beginning in the 1990s (Durán Ruiz, 2021). Initially, the arrival of unaccompanied minors was perceived as a novel and unexpected phenomenon, possibly temporary, that required an urgent response from public administrations (Torrado Martín-

Palomino, 2012). However, the growth of these migrations has proven to be structural rather than circumstantial (Quiroga & Chagas, 2020). Spain has rapidly transitioned from a country of emigration to one of the principal destinations for international migration in Europe. More recently, Spain has also become a host country for migrants primarily from Africa seeking refuge, many of whom are children and adolescents (García-Garnica et al., 2021; Jiménez, Pedrosa, Gómez & López, 2024).

With increasing numbers across the territory year after year (Gómez-Vicario & Gutiérrez-Sánchez, 2023), many of these adolescents and young people have settled in the Basque Country (Jiménez & Izquierdo, 2013; Bravo & Santos, 2017). In the Basque Autonomous Community (CAPV), child migration without family references was not registered until 2001. Since then, the number of arrivals gradually increased (see Table 1), with a notable rise from 2016 onward (Ararteko, 2017). The main reason they decide to migrate to the Basque Country is the awareness of favourable conditions this region offers in terms of protection and social assistance (Quiroga, Alonso, & Soria, 2009).

Table 1

Number of unaccompanied foreign minors in the Basque Country between 2015-2023.

	2015	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**
No. of UMCs sheltered throughout the year in the BAC[2]	661	1007	1721	2514	1910	1097	802
Araba/Álava	98	133	157	181	147	103	118
Bizkaia	304	438	938	1571	1222	725	405
Gipuzkoa	259	436	626	762	541	269	279
No. of UMCs sheltered as of December 31 in the BAC	255	312	587	825	731	460	391
Araba/Álava	54	65	91	93	67	62	58
Bizkaia	124	182	423	599	552	330	261
Gipuzkoa	77	65	73	133	112	68	72

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[2] Basque Autonomous Community. Source: Authors' elaboration based on data provided by the Ararteko.[2]

The profile of these minors, like the number of arrivals, has evolved over the years. Initially, many of the unaccompanied minors were Moroccan males aged 15 to 17 years. However, over time, other nationalities, such as those from sub-Saharan Africa, and girls have gradually joined this group (Aguaded-Ramírez & Angelidou, 2017; Fernández-Ramos, 2019; Flores González, 2018; Jiménez Álvarez, 2019; Tomé-Fernández et al., 2020). Currently, in the Basque Country, most of the minors are boys aged 16 or 17 from Morocco, who migrate primary with the aim of improving their future, supporting their families and finding work. Regardless of the migration phase or their individual characteristics, unaccompanied minor migrants constitute a particularly vulnerable group, susceptible to experiencing victimisation throughout the entire migration process.

The migration of minors to Europe is largely driven by the need to flee adverse conditions in their countries of origin. These include structural violence, armed conflicts, climate change, war, poverty, significant family loss, severe deprivation, and the lack of opportunities or the guarantee of democratic rights (Menjívar & Perreira, 2019; Quiroga & Chagas, 2020). Moreover, studies conducted by Wu et al. (2018) and Pavez-Soto, Galaz & Ansaldo (2020) indicate that migration processes can negatively affect resilience and lead to polyvictimisation, exposing minors to potential traumatic situations that may leave a deep mark (Jiménez et al., 2024).

In the pre-migratory phase, minors are directly and/or indirectly exposed to various forms of victimisation in familial, peer, and community settings. Finkelhor et al. (2011) outline that the characteristics of the environment where children live significantly influence their experiences of victimisation and polyvictimisation. Densely populated, low-income areas with limited family networks make children and adolescents more susceptible to victimisation (Galaz, Pávez, & Magalhães, 2021). According to El Baba and Colucci (2018),

most migrant minors are victims of armed conflicts, wars, family losses, poverty, and severe deprivation in their countries of origin.

These conditions and social inequalities (García-España, 2023; Kanics, 2017) lead many children and adolescents to embark on solitary and dangerous journey. Gullo et al. (2021) found that unaccompanied migrant minors seek employment and a better quality of life, viewing migration as a journey to a land of opportunity where they can fulfill their aspirations and dreams (Perazzo & Zuppiroli, 2018). However, the journey is fraught with risks that many never complete (Inofuentes et al., 2021). The need for legal and safe migration routes often forces children to resort to dangerous and irregular means (García-España et al., 2021). Along the way, they face physical and psychological victimisation, including sexual abuse, threats, theft, detention, and even death (Casado Patricio, 2023; Inofuentes et al., 2022). Criminal organisations further exploit minors, kidnapping, extorting, and torturing them for ransom, with some children forced into exploitative labour to pay off debts (Casado Patricio, 2023; Hanewald et al., 2020).

One of the main entry points to Spanish territory is through the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, Spain's only land borders with Africa, both characterized by their permeability (García-España et al., 2021). In these cities, many minors choose to live on the streets near port areas, hoping to reach the Iberian Peninsula. While living on the streets, they face significant criminogenic and victimogenic risks, specifically related to survival strategies and exploitation, victimisation and harassment (García-España et al., 2021).

Upon arrival, the context is marked by a culture different from their own, so the minors must adapt to new cultural norms and potentially learn a new language. These challenges can be very stressful and can affect the minors, which can lead to an identity crisis that conditions the inclusion process (Ocariz & Bermejo, 2008). Furthermore, the arrival context is characterized by racist and xenophobic behaviours, creating adverse situations that

migrant minors must face (Inofuentes et al., 2022; Ivert & Magnusson, 2019). There is a

prevailing perception that too much money is spent on caring for them and that young

foreigners do not want to work but to take advantage of the system and enjoy luxuries instead

of fulfilling their basic needs (Barba del Horno, 2021). Additionally, the creation of the

immigrant-criminal myth is one of the key elements in the xenophobic discourse that rejects

immigration (Daunis Rodríguez, 2021; Izu Seriola, 2020). In this context, many migrant

adolescents and young people suffer assaults and discriminatory behaviour based on their

skin colour or national origin (Román Luján, 2019). As Suárez-Navaz (2006) points out,

unaccompanied foreign minors are often seen not as individuals in need of care, but as

"problems".

Throughout their migration journey, these minors also face institutional victimisation,

mainly from the police. In their countries of origin, police aggression is common, but it does

not stop once they reach Spanish territory, where they are more likely to be identified and

detained on the street, often facing insults or threats from the police (Casado 2023;

Rodríguez-Rodríez, 2016). Similarly, García-España et al. (2021) identified in their study that

a significant part of the victimisation suffered by unaccompanied foreign minors is due to

abuse and ill-treatment by police and other security organisations.

In addition, the minors are sometimes victimised within the very protection centres

intended to safeguard them, by peers, educators and other professionals. Racist and/or

xenophobic attacks on foreign minors' shelters are deeply concerning, such as those that

occurred in Oviedo in November 2018 or in March 2024 in Canet de Mar and Castelldefels

(Román Luján, 2019). Even in the absence of direct aggression, the condition of these

facilities can be traumatic. A clear example of this is the overcrowding in shelters like La

Purísima in Melilla or Pinier in Ceuta (Casado, 2023; García-España et al., 2020; López Ulla,

2022), where these minors' needs cannot be adequately met. Even though most countries in

the world have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), there is a negative

and mistrustful attitude towards unaccompanied foreign children and adolescents.

In summary, unaccompanied migrant children experience complex migration

processes, during which they are frequently victims of abuse and various forms of violence

(Gobierno Vasco, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to investigate the incidence of these various

forms of victimisation and to identify cases of polyvictimisation to understand the severe

impact these experiences can have on their development (Pereda, Abad & Guilera, 2012).

Methodology

As mentioned, the primary objective of this study was to examine and analyse the

various victimisation experiences encountered by unaccompanied migrant minors under the

protection of the child welfare system in the Basque Country. To understand and make

visible their victimisation experiences and impact, this research focuses on their voices

through their narratives of victimisation and resilience (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

To accomplish this, the overall methodological framework of this study is qualitative,

as it seeks not only to quantify experiences of victimisation but to understand them in their

complexity (Green & Pemberton, 2017). The primary data collection technique used was the

semi-structured interviews (Lune & Berg, 2017). Given the sensitivity and complexity of the

topic, introductory questions were posed prior to discussing the victimisation experiences to

build rapport with the minors. The initial questions covered aspects such as age, age upon

arrival, the migration route, country of origin and reasons for migrating.

Following these introductory questions, a semi-structured interview focused on

victimisation experiences was developed and conducted, using the Juvenile Victimisation

Questionnaire (JVQ) designed by Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, and Turner (2005) as a

reference. The questionnaire, created to assess the victimisation experiences throughout the

lives of children and adolescents, provided a solid and validated structure to investigate the

various forms of victimisation that these minors might have faced. The instrument is particularly suitable for the study of polyvictimisation, as it explores different types of interpersonal violence perpetrated by various aggressors in diverse contexts (Forns et al., 2013). Validation of the JVQ was conducted with a sample of 2030 American children and young people, aged two to 17 years, demonstrating strong psychometric properties for reliability in U.S. samples (Finkelhor et al., 2005). In addition, the Spanish/Catalan version of the instrument has also demonstrated its appropriateness (Pereda, Gallardo-Pujol & Guilera, 2016).

Based on selected items from the JVQ, the first section of the interviews explored primary victimisation experiences suffered by unaccompanied migrant minors. This section included questions about various forms of victimisation, such as common delinquency (e.g., physical assaults by strangers in the country of origin), family-based victimisation, peer victimisation (including from peers in the protection centres), and indirect exposure to crime (such as witnessing homicides). This section also incorporated questions on racist victimisation, considering it may be a relevant form of victimisation for these migrant minors.

The second section of the interview focused on police and institutional victimisation. This was included in the interview design because victimisation by authorities is a recurring experience for adolescent and young migrants, both in their countries of origin and during their journeys, as well as upon arrival in the host country. This study adopted a victimological perspective that prioritised the voices of victims as the primary source of data. By doing so, it departs from approaches reliant on quantitative surveys, political manipulation, or mediated representations of victimhood (Green & Pemberton, 2017). Specifically, we draw on narrative victimology, which shifts the focus from understanding why individuals perpetrate

harm (Presser, 2013) to exploring how individuals experience and interpret wrongdoing

(Cook & Walklate, 2019; Pemberton, Mulder & Aarten, 2019).

The fieldwork was conducted between March and June 2022 in a room at the

Bideberri protection centre (located in Vitoria, Spain) after obtaining the necessary

authorization from the Álava Provincial Council and the centre's management. Additionally,

the participation of the minors required their informed consent. However, an important

limitation to mention lies in the fact that, for the minors residing in the centre, their

participation was sometimes determined by the educators or other staff members. This may

have influenced the results by introducing biases stemming from the perceptions,

expectations, or subjective criteria of the educators themselves. In some cases, an interpreter

was required as some minors had just arrived in Spain and did not speak Spanish fluently.

This represents another significant limitation, as the use of interpreters may have influenced

the minors' ability to fully express themselves, potentially affecting the depth and accuracy of

the data collected. It is important to note that the original narratives of the minors were in

Spanish, and these were later translated into English for this publication. The duration of the

interviews varied depending on the victimisation experiences shared by each participant. All

interviews were recorded for later analysis, ensuring precise documentation of the

experiences recounted.

In compliance with the Code of Ethics of the Spanish Society for Criminology

Research (n.d.), the protection of participants was guaranteed to avoid any physical, social, or

psychological risks. Within this ethical framework, all interviews were conducted under strict

anonymity and confidentiality guidelines. Participation was voluntary, and minors were

informed of their right to decline participation or to skip any questions they felt

uncomfortable answering. Following the transcription of the interviews into text format—a

process that facilitated familiarization with the data and the preliminary identification of

emerging themes (Gibbs, 2012)—an inductive thematic analysis was conducted. This approach aims to derive meaning from the participants' narrated experiences, organizing their responses into categories that naturally arise from the interviewees' accounts (Arbeláez & Onrubia, 2014).

The analysis was carried out with the support of the Atlas software Ti 24, which allowed for a systematic and organized approach to analysing the interviews through open and axial coding, enabling the identification of patterns, themes, and categories (Lopezosa, Codina, & Freixa, 2022). These categories included various forms of victimisation, such as common delinquency, family victimisation, and racist victimisation. Additionally, categories were created based on the minors' feelings and perceptions, exploring emotions like fear and hopelessness (Charmaz, 2006; Jones, 2007). Finally, we included graphs and numerical representations in this study primarily for descriptive purposes, to provide a clearer understanding of the data while maintaining the integrity of the qualitative approach.

The use of such tools allows us to summarize trends and illustrate patterns identified during the analysis, offering readers a visual aid to complement the narrative descriptions. This approach does not aim to quantify the phenomena but rather to enhance the presentation and accessibility of the findings, ensuring that the depth and richness of the qualitative data remain central to the analysis.

Participants of the Study

Nineteen minors participated in this study; however, one interview was conducted with two young brothers who chose to participate together, resulting in a total of eighteen individual interviews. All participants were adolescent boys between the ages of 12 and 18, with the majority being in the 16-17 age group. The children came from various regions of Africa, with Morocco (47.36%), Algeria (26.31%) and Gambia (21.05%) being the most represented countries of origin. Regarding the motivations for migration, participants cited a

range of factors, including economic reasons, expectations associated with the destination country, and various issues in their countries of origin, such as political conflicts, violence, or persecution. For the methods of arrival in Spain, most adolescents (84.21%) travelled by boat, a migration method that involves significant risks during the journey.

Results and discussion

The results have been structured into two main thematic blocks, along with an additional section. The first block, primary victimisation experiences, covers various forms of victimisation suffered by unaccompanied migrant minors, including physical assault, family abuse, peer victimisation, and exposure to traumatic experiences. The second block, police and institutional victimisation experiences, investigates victimisation related to the treatment received from authorities and the protection system. Additionally, a specific section on street life has been included, analysing the risks and conditions associated with living on the streets before the intervention of the protection system.

Primary Victimisation Experiences Throughout the Migration Journey

In this study, primary victimisation experiences are understood as the process by which an individual directly or indirectly suffers physical or psychological harm due to criminal or traumatic events (Tamarit, 2006). These experiences are very common in the lives of the participants, occurring mainly in two stages: in the country of origin and during the migration journey. Although less frequent, primary victimisation experiences in the destination country were also identified, as indicated below.

Firstly, regarding victimisation due to common crime, approximately 60% (N= 11) of the study participants reported experiencing at least one of the following types of victimisation: theft, physical assault, and racism or discrimination. According to Saad-Diniz and Bessoni (2018), the prevalence of conventional victimisation varies depending on the country in which children are born and reside. In underdeveloped countries, where poverty

and socioeconomic inequalities are widespread, this form of violence and victimisation is notably more common. Children's narratives show that in their countries of origin, they experienced various types of theft. These situations also occurred during the migration journey and after arriving in Spain (Inofuentes et al., 2021).

> *In Gambia sometimes, yes, money and my phone. When I was younger, one day someone broke into my house to steal money from my room. Not in Spain.* (Participant 3).

> *In Lanzarote, stealing in the centre, clothes and everything, also money. Never in Morocco.* (Participant 9).

Moreover, physical assaults were also common in the lives of these boys, primarily occurring in their country of origin.

> *Once in Algeria. Here, I fought with a boy. Here I have a scar; it happened in the street; I live in a problematic neighbourhood.* (Participant 6).

> *Yes, in Algeria, two older boys hit me twice; they cut me with a knife.* (Participant 11).

Once in Spain, racism and discrimination emerged as significant forms of victimisation for the migrant minors (Inofuentes et al., 2021; Ivert & Magnusson, 2019). These experiences mainly included exclusion, threats, insults, and unequal treatment in various contexts.

> *Many times, that. Not hitting but walking down the street and people looking at you because they think you're going to steal something, so they look at you badly.* (Participant 6).

> *Very racist police in Ceuta, a lot of racism, also very racist people in Ceuta.* (Participant 18).

Prejudices and stereotypes toward immigrants are often rooted in their association with delinquency, aggressiveness, and violence, particularly against North African populations and young Moroccans (Barba del Horno, 2021). In Spain, such perceptions are reinforced by biased media coverage, which disproportionately emphasizes illegal entry, administrative irregularities, and criminal acts involving foreigners, particularly through events like border crossings in Ceuta and Melilla or the arrival of small boats on Spanish coasts (Román, 2019). This selective reporting not only perpetuates the immigrant-criminal myth but also serves as a cornerstone for xenophobic discourse opposing immigration (Daunis, 2021).

After exploring experiences of common crime victimisation, the study moved on to family-related abuse, addressing aspects such as physical or psychological abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic and gender-based violence. In this context, most minors (70%, N=13) lived in structured families before migrating and had not experienced abuse at home. However, Rojas (1995) points out that there are communities and cultures where the rules of coexistence and moral principles are not clearly established, leading many children to perceive physical punishment as part of their cultural upbringing.

Nevertheless, the remaining participants expressed having suffered various forms of abuse, indicating they had been polyvictimised. These minors reported not only experiencing physical abuse but also psychological abuse and neglect. Additionally, two minors reported witnessing instances of domestic and gender-based violence.

> *Our father married another woman when our mother died, and the relationship was very bad. She treated us very poorly, insulted us, spoke badly to us, forced us to go out at night as punishment and sleep on the street, and hit us with the door. We had a terrible time with her. Our father has a lot of influence over her, so sometimes she would hit us.* (Participant 4).

> *I get along with my mother, but I don't talk to my father because he used to abuse my mother.* (Participant 10).

> *Hitting hard, sometimes with a stick and belt, that's normal in Morocco, for education.* (Participant 18).

Thirdly, most migrant minors experienced peer victimisation. Valdés-Cuervo, Martínez-Ferrer, and Carlos-Martínez (2018) define peer violence as coercive and intentional physical, verbal and relational behaviours directed towards peers. Specifically, 60% of these minors reported having faced problems with their peers in their country of origin, in protection centres, and with friends and classmates in the Basque Country. It is important to note that although 60% of the minors were involved in conflict situations with peers in various contexts, only one minor experienced insults and discrimination from a classmate in the Basque Country, which can be categorised as racist bullying (Román, 2019).

> *One boy insults me, says things like 'your mother,' 'go back to your country,' they laugh at me in class, and look at me badly*. (Participant 7).

Most of these victimisation experiences manifested mainly through fights and minor conflicts, typical of interactions among children, rather than serious assaults.

> *Lots of group fights, in school they've hit me many times. Also, they've hit me with knives and everything*. (Participant 11).

> *Older boys hit you, that's normal in the neighbourhood. Older boys have hit me with knives*. (Participant 18).

However, some severe assault situations within the peer group were also reported.

> *In another centre, lots of problems, abuse, theft, beatings. In Lanzarote, there were very bad situations, no security or supervision, and they did whatever they wanted, threats, hits... I didn't sleep many nights out of fear they'd steal everything from me.* (Participant 5).

> *In Ceuta, the centre is very dangerous. I left to live at the port. In the centre, they steal from you or beat you. I cry every day in the centre and am scared.* (Participant 18).

To conclude the analysis of primary victimisation, the study explored victimisation by indirect exposure to crime, understood as the experience of witnessing conflictive or traumatic situations. In this area, it was observed that 100% of the migrant minors interviewed confirmed witnessing at least one such experience.

Indirect exposure to victimisation is particularly prevalent in socially vulnerable contexts (Galaz, Pávez, & Magalhães, 2021), where many children witness acts of violence, as well as social issues such as drug trafficking, theft, and robbery. For many minors, these experiences occurred in their countries of origin, often characterised by pervasive violence, poverty, and social conflict. These adverse environments subjected them not only to direct violence but also to a spectrum of traumatic events, including witnessing violent incidents, familial conflicts, and social instability. Chart 1 highlights the prevalence of poverty and conflict in the environments where most of these minors lived.

> *I live in a completely unprotected place, with many fights. In front of me, there is a prison, and I see how the police abuse their power* (Participant 8).

> *Fights almost every day, problems, a troubled neighbourhood, drugs... Every day people die in fights, that's normal there* (Participant 10).

By living in unprotected and conflict-ridden environments, almost all unaccompanied migrant minors have witnessed violent situations or traumatic experiences in their home countries. These experiences include family conflicts, community violence, and other violent events, such as homicides (see Chart 2).

> *Yes, in Algeria I have often seen people fighting in the street. Then a friend of mine had an accident, he was in the water trying to cross, and when I arrived, it was too late to help him. During the journey, I was in very bad shape, very scared* (Participant 1).

During their migratory journey, many minors also witnessed violent or conflictive situations, further increasing their exposure to traumatic experiences. Once in Spain, although some minors report witnessing violence, these cases are significantly less frequent compared to what they experienced in their home countries or during the migration journey.

> *During the journey, I saw many things; it's a very dangerous journey. There are mafias that kill you if you do not pay. People die on the road* (Participant 12).

> *Ceuta is very dangerous. There are kids at the port who crawl under trucks and the truck's wheel crushed their heads, and they died, and the mother screams 'that kid is my son,' Ceuta is really bad* (Participant 16).

Experiences of Victimisation Due to Treatment by the Police and Professionals in Care Centres

The second section of the interview focused on analysing experiences of institutional victimisation, including both police victimisation and victimisation by professionals in care centres, that is, institutional victimisation. Institutional abuse or violence, as defined by the

European Restorative Justice Forum's working group[3], refers to harm—individual or collective—that occurs within the context of organisations or institutions. This harm can manifest in various forms, but its impact extends beyond interpersonal relationships to affect society due to the institutions' inherent functions.

Primary institutional victimisation often stems from power imbalances, authority dynamics, and organizational culture. Secondary victimisation may involve victim-blaming, denial of responsibility, cover-ups, isolation, intimidation, and systemic discrimination rooted in broader structural or cultural factors. In this context, 52% (N=10) of participants reported suffering various forms of victimisation from police authorities, including physical assaults, insults, threats, and discriminatory situations. In several African countries, minors are often victims of serious abuse (Beck, 2024). En el caso de Marruecos, las agresiones policiales son una problemática muy común (UNHCR, 2019). According to the children's narratives, most of the physical assaults occurred in their countries of origin or during the migration journey before reaching Spain.

> *They hit me in Morocco, yes. Over there, the police hit you, they even shoot. I was detained, and in jail, there's no food, they treat you very badly* (Participant 6).

> *On the route, entering Algeria, they caught me, stopped me, and beat me very badly, then threw me out* (Participant 15).

> *Yes, in Morocco, the police would catch me, beat me, and take me home. In Ceuta, every day, the Civil Guard is very bad; they hit us all the time* (Participant 18).

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[3] European Forum for Restorative Justice. (n.d.). *Working group on institutions and restorative justice*. https://www.euforumrj.org/working-group-institutions

In Spain, despite the existence of this legal framework regulating the competences of the State Security Forces and Corps[4], police abuse and aggression continue to be a problem. In addition to being more likely to be stopped and searched in public spaces, minors are often subjected to verbal insults or threats by law enforcement officers (Rodríguez, 2016), exacerbating the hardships faced by migrant minors in their new environment.

> *Every time they see me in Vitoria, they stop me. They always search me, I do not understand why, but it makes me feel bad. There's a lot of police racism here in the Basque Country* (Participant 8).

> *Yes, in Lanzarote, in the police station, they hit me, insulted me. You could not eat, the food was frozen and in bad condition. They treated me very badly. Here in the Basque Country, they stop me all the time, but it's because I'm Moroccan and that makes me feel bad* (Participant 9).

Finally, the minors were asked about the treatment they received from professionals in the care centres where they had stayed, including the centre where they were most recently residing. Most minors had not stayed in another centre before arriving at the Álava-Araba protection centre. It is important to note that, in general, in the Álava-Araba centre, most minors have not been victims of assault or inappropriate treatment by educators and other professionals. Most complaints focus on aspects such as the centre's rules, a lack of affection, and the absence of trust in the treatment received (see Chart 3).

However, three minors did report experiences of racist assaults and inappropriate treatment by certain professionals in the centre, although these situations were very isolated.

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[4] Ley Orgánica 2/1986, de 13 de marzo, de Fuerzas y Cuerpos de Seguridad. *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, *63*, de 3 de abril de 1986. https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-1986-6377

Despite these isolated incidents, the overall perception of the minors regarding the treatment received in the centre is mostly negative due to strict rules and a lack of affection.

> *There are two educators at the centre who speak poorly. I have problems with one of them because she thinks I take pills. I misbehaved because of a family issue, and the educator treated me very badly, called the police. Another day, she did not let me into the centre, kicked me out at night in pyjamas with nothing else, it was very cold, and she did not let me back in. She's racist* (Participant 1).

> *Generally good, some days bad. There are many rules in the centre, and that is difficult. Problems with the rules, they have not hit anything, or me but I have had some problems for not following the rules. Sometimes they speak poorly* (Participant 14).

In contrast, minors who had been in protection centres before arriving at Álava-Araba, Spain, reported having suffered serious victimisation by educators. The issues occurred in the protection centres located in the Canary Islands of Spain, which are currently overwhelmed (Alonso-Bello et al., 2020) due to the significant influx of unaccompanied foreign minors in recent months. UNICEF (2020) highlights that the saturation of these centres hampers their ability to meet the basic human needs of the minors effectively.

> *Lanzarote was very bad. An educator hit me; he thought I did something wrong and hit me, then I ran out of the centre* (Participant 5).

> *In Lanzarote, they treated me very badly, no studying, nothing at all, just eat and sleep. Hits, insults, and a lot of racism in the centre* (Participant 9).

Ceuta centre is very bad, that's not a centre, it's worse than prison, educators with batons and everything, and beatings (Participant 18).

Living on the Streets

It is important to note that, although it was not directly addressed in the interviews, many minors mentioned that they had lived on the streets both during the migration journey and once in Spain. Living on the streets places adolescent and young migrants in situations of heightened risk for both criminal activity and victimisation (García-España et al., 2021; Prado, 2022). The street situation not only perpetuates the victimisation already suffered but also generates new experiences of victimisation. Specifically, ten of the interviewed minors (more than 50%) experienced this situation: eight of them in Spain, mainly in Ceuta, and two during the migration journey before meeting with the boat. Being on the streets exposed the minors to significant risks of exploitation as well as violence from third parties.

It took me 5 months to travel, yes, sleeping on the street, in the desert, without water, without food, very cold at night; I had a very bad time (Participant 12).

I took 4 months on the street to get into Algeciras, before or doing this, just the street to come (Participant 16).

In Spain, I slept on the street, two days in Almeria and then four in Murcia, people giving food. In Barcelona, also on the street, very bad in Barcelona, people look very bad and a lot of police, a lot of drugs (Participant 1).

When I arrived, first I was on the street for a week in Seville. I wasn't scared; people gave us food (Participant 3).

> *First, I was on the street, very bad, on the street, no sleeping, and no eating. A month*
>
> *on the street, very bad, I don't want to talk about it* (Participant 8).

Studies on childhood victimisation emphasise its profound, long-lasting effects on various aspects of victims' lives (Varona, 2021). Victimisation can disrupt psychological functioning, cognitive abilities, self-esteem development, puberty onset, and interpersonal relationships (Mitchell et al., 2020), leading to significant consequences throughout life. Moreover, experiencing multiple forms of victimisation – referred to as polyvictimisation, exacerbates these effects. Research has shown that polyvictimisation increases the risk of severe psychosocial impairment, with each additional form of victimisation compounding the negative impact (Finkelhor et al., 2011). The cumulative effects of polyvictimisation expose children to heightened risks of mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, delinquency, self-harm, and even suicide (Feng et al., 2019; Huynh & Li, 2024; Pinto-Cortez et al., 2024; Schmidt, 2022; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2017).

Conclusion

Unaccompanied minor migration has emerged as a prominent concern within the global migration context. This study highlights the severe victimisation these minors face throughout their lives, confirming the theory of polyvictimisation. Approximately 60% of the interviewed minors reported experiencing victimisation through theft, physical assaults, and discrimination, both in their countries of origin, during the migration journey, and upon arrival in Spain (Finkelhor et al., 2011; Inofuentes et al., 2022).

Firstly, primary victimisation in the countries of origin and during the migration journey manifests as a persistent form of polyvictimisation. Minors experience violence and abuse from their early environments through to their destination, confirming that exposure to various forms of abuse is common in their migratory trajectories (Casado, 2023; Finkelhor et al., 2011). Secondly, the analysis reveals that over 50% of the minors also experienced

victimisation from the police and professionals in care centres. Physical assaults, discrimination, and mistreatment by authorities highlight a dimension of institutional victimisation that exacerbates the suffering of these minors in their new environment (García-España et al., 2021; Rodríguez, 2016). Furthermore, overcrowding and inadequate resources in care centres exacerbate these vulnerabilities (López Ulla, 2022).

Life on the streets emerges as a critical phase in these minors' migratory experiences, characterised by abuse, exploitation, and violence (García-España et al., 2021). This underscores the urgent need for a deeper understanding of these forms of abuse and specialised interventions to address the multiple dimensions of suffering and promote effective protection (Pereda et al., 2012; Varona, 2021). The study also presents several limitations, such as language barriers and difficulties accessing all minors during interviews. The lack of interviews with unaccompanied foreign minors and the inability to analyse sexual victimisation due to ethical constraints limit a complete understanding of their experiences (Save the Children, 2012). Additionally, contact with the judicial system was not documented in this study, suggesting a need for future research exploring this dimension of victimisation (Viana Salinas, 2023).

In conclusion, unaccompanied migrant minors face persistent polyvictimisation throughout their lives, experiencing violence and abuse from their countries of origin through their migration journey and into their receiving environments. Addressing these multiple dimensions of victimisation is crucial for developing effective policies and practices to ensure their protection and well-being. The vulnerability, exclusion, and discrimination faced by unaccompanied adolescents and young migrants highlight the urgent need to rethink both research and interventions in the social sciences, as this is a critical issue concerning human rights and public health.

Delving into the various forms of victimisation and violence that these minors endure throughout their migratory journey is essential for understanding the scale of the problem and, consequently, for developing effective strategies to protect their well-being and dignity (Quiroga & García, 2023). Behind the numbers of migrants, we can find historical, social, political and economic issues that show the complexities of mobility (Carvalho Da Silva, 2023). Recognizing the reality of their suffering, despite it challenging traditional academic notions of objectivity, is essential for understanding the full scope of victimisation, de-victimisation, and reparation processes (Varona, 2021). By accepting and addressing these realities, we can better approach the truth about their experiences and work towards more comprehensive solutions.

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