

BRIDGE THE GAP

INTRODUCTION

Bridge the Gap is a project promoted by Defence for Children International Italy, co-funded by the European Union's CERV Programme and developed within the Child Friendly Justice European Network (CFJ-EN), which brings together organisations committed to building justice systems that are genuinely accessible and understandable for children and young people.

The project was created with the aim of giving space and value to the voices of young people who have directly experienced civil, criminal and administrative justice systems, by creating safe environments in which they can exchange, narrate and be heard, recognising their lived experience as an essential source of knowledge to improve policies and practices towards a truly child-friendly justice system.

Bridge the Gap responds to a need we have encountered for many years in our work: many young people who have been through the reception system reach adulthood without stable reference points, without clear information, and within systems that are fragmented and difficult to navigate. At the age of eighteen, formal protection ends, while the ability to navigate independently is often still fragile. This is where a gap opens between what should be guaranteed and what is experienced in daily life. Bridge the Gap seeks to act precisely within this space, aiming to reduce the distance between what young people live every day and what the system should guarantee.

Between July and December 2025, a group of young people aged 18–25, all with a migratory background and who arrived in Italy as minors, formed the Young Justice Transformers group. They chose to engage in a participatory process, meeting weekly to share their experiences and collectively analyse the recurring challenges they face in the transition to adulthood: the lack of clear information, the complexity of administrative procedures, the absence of linguistic-cultural mediation, limited access to psychological support, barriers in the labour market, and difficulties in their interactions with the juvenile justice system.

The testimonies were collected anonymously and presented without filters in a White Book, which faithfully conveys their voices as fragments of experience and truth. This material forms the core of the participatory process: not only individual stories, but elements of analysis, denunciation and proposals capable of guiding institutional perspectives.

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Thanks to collaboration with the University of Genoa, the voices of these young people were reviewed and transformed into policy recommendations. These recommendations arise from lived experience and invite institutions and professionals to place the rights and real needs of young people back at the centre.

The recommendations that follow emerge from this pathway: from listening, from shared experience, from the search for common language.

They are designed as an advocacy tool for policymakers, practitioners and professionals in the juvenile justice and protection systems, at local, national and European level, to help build systems that are closer to young people's needs and better able to value the experiences of those who navigate them every day.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For children and for young people who have only recently reached adulthood, contact with the justice system can present several difficulties. According to the Council of Europe Guidelines on Child-Friendly Justice¹, the juvenile justice system must, at every stage, respond to the rights and needs of children. The Guidelines are based on the minimum standards for the protection of children's rights set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and they are reflected in EU law, in particular in Directive (EU) 2016/800 on procedural safeguards for children who are suspects or accused persons in criminal proceedings.

However, the day-to-day reality of public administration and judicial authorities does not always reflect the standards set at international and European level, generating feelings of confusion and mistrust towards a system that should instead support children in their transition to adulthood.

This is particularly true for unaccompanied migrant children who, because of the gaps and shortcomings in reception systems, are more likely to become victims or perpetrators of offences and thereby become involved in the juvenile justice system². The latter, in turn, is not always able to respond to their specific needs or provide the resources required for them to effectively access measures aimed at social reintegration. This results in unequal treatment and unequal access to resources³.

¹ Council of Europe, *Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on Child-Friendly Justice*, 2010, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/16804b2cf3>.

² Defence for Children International Italy, *Law 47/2017: A System of Analysis and Action. Between Civil and Criminal Justice: What Justice for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors?*, 2025 edition, available at: <https://www.defenceforchildren.it/it/news-468/la-legge-47-2017-rapporto-2025>.

³ Defence for Children International Italy, *Law 47/2017: A System of Analysis and Action*, cited above, p. 50 ff.

In light of the above considerations, and of the outcomes of the Young Justice Transformers' work, the following recommendations set out possible avenues for development which should be given primary consideration by policymakers and all professionals within the juvenile justice system.

1. Ensure that children receive clear and comprehensible information at all stages of reception and juvenile justice pathways

Respect for children's right to be informed (in language they can understand) about their rights and about all decisions affecting them is a fundamental element of child-friendly justice and a precondition for their effective participation. This step – which is crucial to meeting children's needs – is equally essential in the transition to autonomy, so that young adults know what their rights are and which procedures they need to initiate in order to obtain the necessary documentation, find work and housing, access essential services and be aware of the resources available to them.

From the group work and the exchanges during the meetings, many experiences were reported in which children within the reception system and, later, in contact with the justice system did not receive clear, complete and age-appropriate information about what was happening. From the moment of arrival in the country, children who are already in a situation of disorientation and need do not go through an initial moment of encounter in which they can receive clear and complete information on where they are, why they may be subject to identification procedures or medical examinations, and what the subsequent steps in the reception system will be.

Access to clear and age-appropriate information about the procedures needed to obtain the necessary documents is likewise lacking, especially after reaching the age of majority. The same difficulties arise in contact with the juvenile criminal justice system, where the absence of specialised staff and/or cultural mediators (see Recommendation 6) makes it even harder for children to understand what is happening. There is therefore a shortage – if not a complete absence – of resources able to put children in a position to understand the reasons behind the procedural steps and decisions that concern them, as well as the possible future developments.

We recommend:

- Allocating greater resources to provide unaccompanied minors with multilingual information materials and/or support from adequately trained professionals who can guide them through the different stages of the reception system.

- Allocating greater resources to provide multilingual information materials and/or support from adequately trained professionals in order to improve access to clear, complete and age-appropriate information for children in contact with the criminal justice system.

2. Ensure effective access to cultural mediation services

Cultural mediators play a key role in all contexts where unaccompanied migrant children or young adults exiting the reception system need to acquire the tools to move through the world autonomously. Cultural mediation does not simply involve translation or interpreting: the mediator's role is to build bridges between two different cultures so that they can find ways to communicate and understand each other⁴.

Their presence is therefore essential to ensure the rights to information and participation: their mediation helps overcome linguistic and cultural barriers that may arise when interacting with reception-system staff or justice-system actors.

Young people's testimonies highlighted several situations of difficulty that could have been resolved had a cultural mediator been present.

We recommend:

- Monitoring the effective availability, at local level, of adequately trained cultural mediators, ensuring that they are present or easily reachable in reception facilities and in the public offices with which children and young adults interact.

3. Make psychological support a structural component of reception and transition-to-autonomy pathways, with specialised and competent professionals

The right to health is one of the fundamental rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 24) and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Articles 24 and 35). The right to health necessarily includes mental health, which requires targeted interventions to ensure emotional support, qualified psychological assistance and living conditions that foster the harmonious development of the child. As a fundamental right, the right to health applies transversally to all EU policies and to all issues that concern children.

⁴ Defence for Children International Italia, *Legge 47/2017: un sistema di analisi e azione*, cit., p. 21. (English translation of the title: *Law 47/2017: A System of Analysis and Action*)

EU law on the reception of unaccompanied minors obliges Member States to guarantee access to essential healthcare and appropriate treatment (Article 19 of Directive 2013/33/EU, implemented in Italy through Legislative Decree 142/2015 and Law 47/2017)⁵. Further safeguards are provided for children who come into contact with the criminal justice system: Article 12(5)(a) of Directive (EU) 2016/800 requires Member States to protect and safeguard the physical and mental health and development of children who are suspects or accused in criminal proceedings.

Access to appropriate psychological support is particularly important for children in situations of vulnerability, especially during the delicate transition from adolescence to adulthood. However, according to the testimonies gathered, this support is not provided regularly. From the moment of arrival in the country, the absence of qualified staff who can provide information and guide children through the reception process also translates into a lack of personnel trained to provide psychological support at this crucial stage. The fact that children are sometimes placed in adult reception facilities is a clear indicator that they are not receiving the support they need.

The absence of psychological support also emerged in the stories of boys and girls who described their contact with law-enforcement officers following arrest or stop: the treatment they received – often in the absence of specialised staff – does not appear to reflect the safeguards that should apply to children, and can in fact exacerbate their distress.

We recommend:

- Strengthening psychological support services at all stages of the reception pathway, to ensure children have effective access to psychosocial and mental-health assistance.
- Strengthening transcultural/ethno-psychological support services so that they are genuinely accessible to children preparing for the transition to autonomy, and can accompany them during the first stages of adulthood.
- Reducing reliance on psychotropic medication for children and young adults in the criminal justice system, in favour of comprehensive and rights-based psychosocial care.

4. Harmonise and speed up procedures for obtaining the documents required for residence permits

⁵ With reference to the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, largely applicable as of 11 June 2026, the relevant provisions are in particular Articles 13 and 19 of Directive (EU) 2024/1346.

Migrant children face a transition to autonomy marked by significant complexity, as entering adulthood means having to apply for the documents needed to remain in Italy. After exiting the reception system, young adults must manage administrative procedures on their own, which requires linguistic and organisational skills that are often not yet fully developed.

The procedures for issuing or renewing residence permits involve understanding complex legislation, complying with strict deadlines and interacting with public offices that are often not equipped to engage with young migrants. In addition, the practice followed by police headquarters responsible for residence-permit applications varies widely across the country. These issues were strongly reflected in the group discussions, where participants frequently described the difficulty of obtaining the documents required to remain in the country and to find work (which is often an essential condition for obtaining a residence permit, creating a vicious circle).

We recommend:

- Harmonising and accelerating procedures for obtaining the documents required for the legal stay of young adults on national territory.
- Allocating greater resources to ensure that qualified staff are available to guide young adults through administrative procedures, reducing linguistic and bureaucratic barriers.

5. Strengthen access to vocational training and labour-market orientation

As highlighted by the Young Justice Transformers' testimonies, one of the most delicate aspects for children approaching adulthood and building their autonomy is precisely the search for work. Difficulties in the labour market compound those experienced by young migrants, who in the process of entering the labour market and achieving personal autonomy often face linguistic, logistical and organisational challenges, as well as various forms of discrimination.

We recommend:

- Strengthening support measures for the transition to adulthood by developing, from the moment a child enters the reception system, an individual future-planning pathway that necessarily includes access to housing and employment.
- Strengthening access to vocational training and career-orientation programmes.

6. Ensure the concrete and consistent implementation of minimum standards for a child-friendly justice system

The above-mentioned child-friendly justice standards, developed by the Council of Europe⁶, apply to all children, in full accordance with the principles of equality and non-discrimination. These standards include the primary consideration of the best interests of the child, the requirement that proceedings be conducted within a reasonable time, full respect for the rights to be heard and to participate, and respect for the dignity and fundamental rights of the child. Children in particularly vulnerable situations are at greater risk of these standards not being applied when they come into contact with the juvenile justice system. For migrant children, this risk is concretised by linguistic and cultural barriers that can lead to a systematic lowering of protection standards.

The testimonies gathered during the Young Justice Transformers meetings highlighted situations in which children did not receive the information they needed at different stages of proceedings (beginning with first contact with the justice system, for example with the police, and continuing through subsequent stages, such as understanding the reasons for procedural steps or decisions and their possible consequences), or were not heard by judges or other professionals before decisions concerning them were taken.

The length of proceedings is another critical factor: there were cases where probation orders were applied several years after the offence, forcing young people to abandon work or life projects they had built in the meantime.

We recommend:

- Ensuring the concrete and uniform application of minimum child-friendly justice standards through increased resources and enhanced training for all professionals involved in the juvenile justice system.

7. Create safe spaces for dialogue and peer exchange, to foster participation and listening

For a migrant boy or girl, the transition to adulthood is an especially delicate phase: at eighteen, many of the institutional safeguards that characterise the reception pathway come to an end. This creates a protection gap precisely at the moment when continuous support towards autonomy would be most necessary.

⁶ Council of Europe, Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on Child-Friendly Justice, 2010, cit.

In this phase, marked by bureaucratic difficulties, the search for work and housing and many other challenges, a social gap can also emerge: the absence of institutional support and of reference figures can lead to loneliness, when what is needed instead is the possibility to cultivate social relationships and to have spaces for dialogue, where young people can interact not only with professionals but also and especially with peers facing similar challenges.

We recommend:

- Increasing resources to create safe spaces for dialogue and peer exchange, available to girls and boys, where they can meet in a protected environment, share experiences and find opportunities to participate and be heard.

8. Respect the dignity and physical and mental integrity of children and young people

For many migrant boys and girls, first contact with the justice system occurs through law-enforcement agencies. It is therefore essential that law-enforcement officers are aware of their obligation to act in a way that respects the rights and needs of children, in light of their inherent vulnerability. Children must be protected from all forms of harm, intimidation, retaliation and secondary victimisation.

In particular, during the arrest or detention of a child, law-enforcement officers must refrain from any action that could cause physical or psychological harm or distress, and must provide adequate and understandable explanations, recognising that the manner of intervention must differ significantly from that used with adults.

According to the testimonies collected during the meetings, this does not always reflect reality.

We recommend:

- Increasing resources to strengthen the training of law-enforcement officers, ensuring full respect for the dignity and physical and mental integrity of children.
- Establishing an adequate system for monitoring law-enforcement practices in all situations where they come into contact with a child.

This document has been developed within the project Bridge the Gap, with the support of the Child Friendly Justice European Network (CFJ-EN), as part of the FSTP 2025 scheme of the CERV Programme of the European Union.

Co-funded by the European Union.

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Child Friendly Justice Network.

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