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The pathways of unaccompanied foreign minors evaluated by the social workers: a case study in Italy

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Abstract

Social workers, who are responsible for unaccompanied minors (UAM), have in-depth knowledge of those minors' backgrounds and the reception pathways they follow. The social workers support key aspects of UAM integration such as learning the host country's language, school integration and vocational training. Via 566 interviews collected through a survey carried out in collaboration with the Municipality of Milan, we asked social workers to provide an overall evaluation of the progress of each reception path, to test a synthetic indicator capable of effectively measuring UAM progress. We confirmed the reliability of this indicator, as the results correlated with outcomes used in the literature to assess UAM pathways, such as learning the host country's language, uninterrupted schooling and training, and deviant behaviour related to crime and drug abuse. We used ordinal logistic regression to identify the UAM characteristics associated with the overall operator's evaluation. Our analysis showed that the duration of stay in Italy before and after the start of the reception process had an impact on the social workers' evaluations, as did certain pre-arrival characteristics such as country of origin, years of study in the home country and underlying motivations for migrating. Finally, the psychological vulnerability of a significant number of UAM, often linked to traumatic experiences leading to migration or experienced during the journey, significantly penalises the success of reception pathways.

Keywords: Unaccompanied minors, Immigration, Integration, Social workers, Evaluation

Introduction

In Italy, as in the entire European Union, 'unaccompanied minors' (henceforth UAM) is a term that refers to 'minors without Italian or European Union citizenship who, for any reason, are present on the territory of the State or otherwise subject to Italian jurisdiction, without the assistance and representation of parents or other legally responsible adults in accordance with the laws in force in the Italian legal system' (Article 2 of Law 47/2017).

UAM arrivals to both Italy and Europe more broadly increased in 2022, amplified by the war in Ukraine. According to Eurostat (2024), UAM made 39,180 applications for international protection in the member states of the European Union in 2022. This was the highest number of applicants since 2016, with an increase of 56.1%¹ compared to 2021.

UAM flows into Italy have been irregular over time, with increases due to contingent geopolitical events such as the Arab Spring and the wars in Syria and Ukraine. At the same time, Italy's geographical position as a crossroads for many UAM migrations has led to undocumented mobility. High turnovers have led to important changes in the characteristics of UAM over time, which have also been determined by changes in the main countries of origin.

Taking all these aspects into account, inclusion/integration strategies become even more important for a potentially very vulnerable group of underage foreign migrants, unaccompanied by responsible adults and often survivors of traumatic and highly dangerous journeys (Foschino, Barbaro and Sgaramella, 2021). For this reason, Italy, one of the main landing countries for UAM, has adopted legislation specifically aimed at this subgroup of migrants with the approval in 2017 of Law No. 47, the so-called 'Zampa Law', which attempts to strengthen their protection under Italian law.² This law includes the right to education and health. Of particular relevance is Article 13, which allows the Juvenile Court to entrust an individual newly "of age" to social services, to complete the social integration pathways already initiated, until the age of twenty-one. The reception centres for UAM are, therefore, strengthened with integrative educational and social pathways.

In this framework, the quantitative vision is currently limited and it is crucial to measure the effectiveness of these pathways. The first question to address is which aspects of the reception process should be measured once, and the second is which data sources to use and how to measure them. Additionally, it is important to note that measures of reception process performance should also relate to factors that facilitate or hinder them.

Social workers can provide valuable information on UAM. This study leverages their knowledge, which was identified through a survey of reception centres for UAM and facilitated under an agreement with the Municipality of Milan. First, we verified the link between social workers' evaluations regarding UAM progress on reception pathways and the UAM's objectively achieved results during their reception process. In particular, we considered the link between positive performance, the learning of the Italian language, and educational and training outcomes (Augelli et al., 2018; Crea et al., 2017; Di Rosa et al., 2019). Once we had verified the predictive value of social workers' ratings, we identified the determinants that influence social workers' ratings and, consequently, positive performance.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asyunaa/default/table?lang=en&category=migr.migr_asy.migr_asyapp.migr_asyum.

² Law 47/2017 provides Italy with an advanced regulatory framework for the recognition of rights and the protection of UAM. This law reaffirms the absolute principle of non-refoulement of UAM, introduces new provisions regarding identification measures, establishes the creation of a social file for each of the UAM, and introduces the new role of voluntary guardian.

This paper is structured as follows. A section on trends in UAM flows in Italy and the municipality of Milan follows the Introduction. The next section reviews the literature on UAM performances, the role of social workers and data sources on UAM, and it concludes with the research questions. This is followed by the data and methods section, and then the descriptive and multivariate results section. Finally, the main findings are discussed in the final section, our Conclusions.

The trend of UAM presence in Italy

On 30 June 2023, the General Directorate for Immigration and Integration Policies of the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies³ reported the presence in the country of 20,926 UAM, an increase of 34% compared to 30 June 2022. The flows significantly increased in 2022, especially after the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, and experienced a slowdown in 2023 when arrivals from Ukraine almost ceased. From this source, it is possible to deduce the main structural characteristics of the UAM currently housed in centres (reception facilities) or associated facilities. UAM in Italy come mainly from Egypt (5341 minors), Ukraine (4512), Tunisia (1781), Guinea (1174) and Albania (1137). Over the years, the main nationalities of UAM present in Italy have changed; for example, Bangladesh was the most important contributing community at the end of 2012, while five years later it fell to tenth place, then returned to first place in 2021 and fell back to twelfth place on 30 June 2023.

The number of women and girls among the UAM was always very low (less than 8%) until 2021. However, in 2022, the war in Ukraine led to an increase in the proportion of female UAM (13.4% on 30 June 2023). The composition of UAM by age shows a concentration close to the age of majority: on 30 June 2023, 17-year-olds accounted for 44.7%, while those under 15 accounted for 18.6%.

Over time, the characteristics of the UAM present in Italy have changed considerably (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2023). This is due to two factors. First, high turnover characterises the reception facilities: the UAM arrive close to the age of majority, which means they have a minimal period of shelter. Second, runaways have a significant impact, sometimes accounting for almost 50% of the outflows. However, there have been changes in the citizenship of the arrivals, which, as in the case of the Ukrainians, can be characterised as a temporary feature. This ongoing change makes continuous monitoring of the UAM's phenomenon all the more important. Furthermore, if it were possible to understand the impact of the different characteristics of UAM on reception pathways, it would be possible to anticipate UAM's needs, and guide reception policies when these characteristics change.

The region hosting the highest number of UAM is Sicily, the border region where almost all of the migrant landings occur; this is the primary manner of arrival in Italy. In recent years, Sicily has hosted between 20 and 30% of UAM accommodated in the country. In the first half of 2023, Lombardy ranked fourth among Italian regions in terms of arrivals; but it ranked second, behind Sicily, in the number of minors hosted at the end of the first semester of the year. Lombardy has a higher share of the UAM currently present, due to internal transfers after entry.

³ <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita-immigrazione/focus/rapporto-semestrale-msna-30-giugno>.

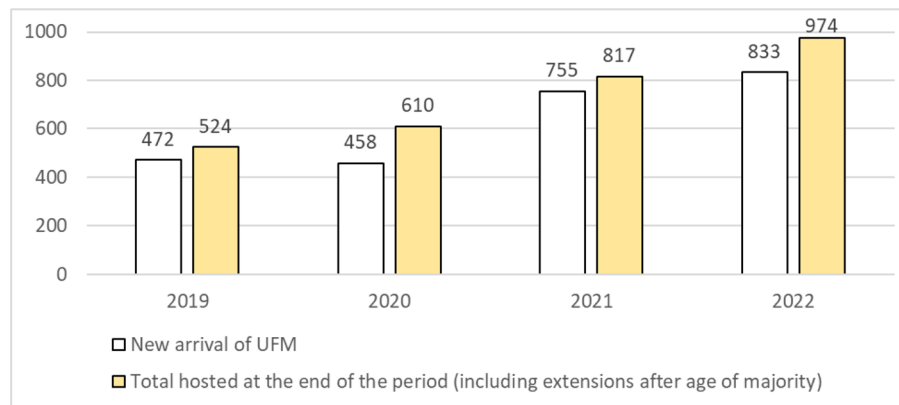


Fig. 1 UAM new arrivals and total hosted, Milan Municipality: Years 2019–2022*. *Data on UAM at the end of the year, including extensions after the age of majority. Source: Municipality of Milan, 2023

Milan plays a key role in making the Lombardy region attractive for UAM. In 2021, it took charge of 817 UAM and young adults with an extension⁴ (Fig. 1). In 2022, the increasing trend of UAM arrivals and their entry into the reception system continued in Milan. Milan was also characterised by changes in the main nationalities arriving, although migratory chains involve significant foreign communities such as the Egyptian and Albanian communities. Minors under the care of the Municipality of Milan represent 3.4% of the total minors accepted into the national territory (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2023). This is a higher ratio in Milan than the ratio of UAM to the total population resident in Italy (2.3%⁵), testifying to the attractiveness of the Municipality of Milan for UAM who independently access the services of the Municipality of Milan or are transferred by the relevant authorities.

Theoretical framework

Social workers play an important role in protecting the rights and welfare of UAM (Androff, et al., 2011; Menjívar and Perreira, 2017; Keles & Oppedal, 2022).

It is necessary to explain first the general role of social workers. The Order of Social Workers was established by Law 84/1993, according to which social workers act with technical-professional autonomy and judgement in all phases of intervention for the prevention, support and recovery of individuals, families, groups and communities in situations of need and distress. They may also carry out educational and training activities. The work of social workers is based on the latest code of ethics.⁶

The subsequent law 328/2000 placed a strong emphasis on the dimensions of social and health integration, networking (Moretti et al., 2012), and regionalisation of the system. In particular, since the 1990s, the organisation of social work has tended towards decentralisation processes that have led to the territorialisation of social and health policies, defining the new concept of the local unit. This process also calls into question the concept of the ‘local society’, which refers to the existence of specific social formations

⁴ The “Zampa law” provides that there may be extensions for individuals of up to 21 years of age (after they have reached the age of majority) in the hosted project (for simplicity, they too will be included in the acronym UAM.).

⁵ ISTAT: <https://demo.istat.it/>

⁶ <https://cnoas.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/il-nuovo-codice-deontologico-dellassistente-sociale.pdf>.

that differ not only geographically, but above all in terms of their particular economic, demographic, cultural and political characteristics (Maretti, 2008; Martelli, 2007; Rosignoli, 2018). In terms of working with minors, Law 328/2000 defines the responsibilities of a social worker towards minors, specifically in terms of interventions, both in terms of supporting family responsibilities and strengthening the rights of minors (Fiorini & Grossi, 2003).

On the other hand, social and institutional professionals involved in reception programmes for asylum seekers and refugees have, over the years, identified two macro reception models for the attitudes and arrangements of reception and social integration programmes. The first is a model based mainly on control, and on social and physical separation from the rest of the population. The second is an integrated model, widespread in the reference territory (e.g. municipality or province), with the direct involvement of local authorities and the third sector (Marchetti, 2016; Vacchiano, 2005, 2011). In particular, as far as UAM are concerned, there are several social initiatives and interventions in Italy, some of which are related to mental health and psychosocial support. These interventions have been identified by UNICEF as innovative services, developing and providing support tailored to the specific needs of UAM and young refugees and migrants hosted in reception centres (UNICEF, 2022). However, the functions of social work services often appear to be affected by emergency conditions, high workloads and staff shortages. As a result, the interventions that are increasingly necessary are dealt with on a case-by-case basis rather than by taking a preventive and long-term view (Marchetti, 2016; Moretti et al., 2012; Rosignoli, 2018), and approaches such as those mapped by UNICEF remain rare.

Previous studies have highlighted that without effective and sensitive interventions, migrant children can face multiple risks (Jani et al., 2016). These include school drop-out (Adserà & Tienda, 2012; Yao & Hao, 2013), reduced economic well-being (Abrego, 2009), psychological vulnerability (Aguilera-Guzmán et al., 2006; Guo et al., 2012; Yin & Liu, 2013), lower occupational status as adults (Oort et al., 2007), deviance and problems with the law (Paalman et al., 2011), and an increased incidence of bullying and social exclusion (Hjem et al., 2013; Shi et al., 2009).

These risks can be mitigated by well-designed mental health and educational programmes that facilitate the integration of migrant children (Hjem et al., 2013; Margari et al., 2013; Säävälä, 2012; Wu et al., 2012; Yao & Hao, 2013). Such programmes should work on increasing empowerment, social competence, self-efficacy and self-esteem: if developed effectively, these yield positive results (Jani et al., 2015). Positive outcomes and the containment of risk factors promote social inclusion and ultimately determine positive outcomes for the pathways in the services provided by the reception process. Below, we provide the criteria identified in the literature to evaluate positive UAM outcomes.

The primary tools for promoting the social inclusion of UAM are considered to be acquisition of the host country's language and school integration. Learning the local language not only allows UAM access to education and employment but also eventually provides them with the opportunity to fully exercise their civil, political and social rights—that is, to be fully included in society (Di Rosa et al., 2019). Access to an educational pathway is, therefore, considered crucial for UAM to acquire the right to

participate in public life as new citizens of the country receiving them (Augelli et al., 2018). UAM need educational pathways that provide opportunities to interact with peers and promote the ability to set goals (Crea et al., 2017). These can serve as a protective factor (Sleijpen et al., 2016) and enhance psychosocial adjustment (McBrien, 2005). Kohli (2011) argues that education, although requiring a significant perseverance, is an integral part of positive outcomes for asylum-seeking youth. Educational attainment is an important predictor of economic success (Stone, 2009), facilitating employment opportunities and increasing human capital, self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and overall adaptation (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). However, UAM face significant barriers that hinder their education (Crea et al., 2017). These barriers result from different cultural norms (Anselme & Hands, 2010; Shakya et al., 2010) as well as peer conflict; native students may find it difficult to accept these new students, even to the point of bullying them. The consequent alienation of UAM students may cause them to drop out of education (Seker & Sirkeci, 2015). The difficulties of school integration could be exacerbated by the fact that UAM are placed in classes with younger children due to their delayed enrolment, as linguistic difficulties make it challenging for UAM to access secondary education (Brown et al., 2006; Cranitch, 2010). Research has shown that first-generation migrants attending school achieve lower results on average than students from a non-migrant background (Van den Berghe, 2022).

Crea et al. (2017), identified factors contributing to positive school results among UAM exiting foster care in the United States. These factors included the duration of stay in the reception programme, the country of origin and legal permanency. Kvestad et al. (2021) surveyed UAM in Bergen municipality to assess their satisfaction with the reception service, schooling, social support and activities after settlement, examining potential traumatic events, quality of life and mental well-being. A synthesis of all these aspects contributed to a measure of resilience, a fundamental concept in the lives of UAM. Keles et al. (2016) defined resilience as a positive developmental trajectory involving initially high levels of depressive symptoms followed by a reduction over a period of years.

Research has identified psychological and contextual factors that contribute to resilience in refugee children residing in high-income countries (Kvestad et al., 2023). According to Jani et al. (2015), resilience promotes UAM well-being, characterised by two main components: having concrete and achievable goals; and confidence in one's ability to achieve those goals (which in turn is connected to hope). Furthermore, this study found that these children were characterised by a high level of hope on the Children's Hope Scale, a scale validated in previous studies (Jani et al., 2015). In general, it is preferable to use standardised and validated scales for data collection to advance research opportunities and help understand the links between variables (Evans et al., 2022).

Marley and Mauki (2018) conducted a meta-analysis to investigate protective factors related to positive outcomes among refugee children after their migration to high-income countries, taking into account factors such as resilience, self-efficacy, self-esteem and quality of life. The authors reported several protective factors, including age, levels of self-efficacy, maintenance of cultural identity, social support from peers and family, a sense of belonging, safety at school and in the community, and innovative social services.

Jani et al. (2015) found that positive performance is linked to the concept of well-being, which can also be measured in a complementary manner by considering all the risks to which UAM are exposed and their success in avoiding them.

Evans et al. (2022), studying the US case, highlighted that the concept of self-sufficiency, which relates to the well-being and success of adult refugees, should also be applied to measure the integration of UAM who have been admitted to and discharged from reception programmes. Self-sufficiency, or self-reliance, is used by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)⁷ and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to measure the success and integration of refugees in their host countries. Among the confirmed variables that predicted the best levels of self-sufficiency as they entered adulthood were education, knowledge of the native language, and employment (Fix et al., 2017; Halpern, 2008).

The management of reception projects for UAM must take into account the complexity of UAM characteristics, as these can influence school outcomes. Research has shown that country of origin is a factor linked to educational results (Crea et al., 2017; Porcu et al., 2023) and is also related to the underlying reasons for migration (Bloch et al., 2011; Celikaksoy and Wadensjö, 2016). Clearly, if the reasons for migration are connected to the possibility of studying, they can motivate a positive integration into educational pathways for the UAM. Furthermore, the greater the number of years of study completed in the country of origin, the better the educational results in the destination country (Aleghfeli and Hunt, 2022). Finally, two further determining factors for positive integration into educational pathways are rapid learning of the local language (Augelli, 2020) and the duration of the reception process (Crea et al., 2017). More time spent in the reception process allows social workers to implement all the planned actions in the integration pathways, and if UAM spend more time in the reception centre without fleeing or abandoning the programme, it demonstrates commitment and a willingness to integrate into the destination country. However, this could be an example of selection bias: UAM who do not flee or prematurely abandon reception pathways are more easily observable in the evaluation of educational outcomes.

The reception system in Italy is not always adapted to the specific needs of UAM (Save the Children, 2020; Borderline, 2020; Segatto et al., 2018). UAM often arrive in Italy physically and psychologically scarred by traumatic experiences; too often, migration does not put an end to their problems, because their rights to protection are not respected (Barn, 2021). In this context, the recent ruling by the Strasbourg Court condemning Italy for the detention of four underage migrants in Taranto is significant: the court found inhuman and degrading conditions in the city's hotspot.⁸

UAM reception projects in Italy do not usually take into account the generally low level of UAM education upon arrival, or they concentrate solely on securing jobs that match the UAM's low level of education. However, there is no lack of innovative projects for the efficient and effective management of UAM in Italy (Pavesi & Valtolina, 2018).

⁷ Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR]. (2016). *Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program | The Administration for Children and Families* (hhs.gov); Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). (2019). Facts and data. *ORR Guide to Eligibility, Placement, and Services for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM): Sect. 1 | The Administration for Children and Families* (hhs.gov).

⁸ https://www.ansa.it/puglia/notizie/2023/11/29/strasburgo-condanna-litalia-per-minori-in-hotspot-taranto_75902a1c-26e5-4bf9-8039-9dfba8bf4b5a.html.

These projects have implemented interventions that have proven to be effective, such as peer education, semi-autonomous projects in flats with the constant support of multi-disciplinary teams, important leisure activities for integration in the social context, and the use of former UAM who have become adults as supervisors.

Data sources concerning UAM

There are two data sources for research on UAM. The first is archival information that can be derived through official statistics. An example of research using this type of source are the studies on labour market integration using information from the Statistics Sweden (SBC) register, administered by the Swedish Tax Agency, which includes detailed demographic and labour market information (Celikaksoy and Wadensjö, 2016). In Italy, data from institutional sources are incomplete and fragmented (Santagati & Barzaghi, 2021). Data collected within the SAI system,⁹ for example, lack information on minors who are not part of this system. The national CPIA¹⁰ register from the Ministry of Education records data on foreign students without specifying how many of them are also UAM or former UAM. In addition, strict data protection laws make it extremely difficult to work with official school and employment sources to link information from different sources.

The main alternative to official sources is to obtain information directly from the UAM themselves. Involving UAM as research partners, rather than treating them solely as objects of research, enables researchers to explore their complex stories and leads to more nuanced representations (Chase et al., 2020). This method requires interviewing UAM and is consequently more time-consuming and resource-intensive in terms of both human and financial resources during the data collection phase.

An intermediate solution is to acquire specific information about UAM from those who manage reception programmes. Clearly, information about the motivations and attitudes of UAM will be excluded, but objective data such as language proficiency, school attendance, school dropout rates and employment status can be collected. Furthermore, one can obtain evaluations of the reception process, such as the effectiveness of integration efforts in areas like language learning, education and employment. In Italy, the guidelines for receiving UAM specify the involvement of a multidisciplinary team that includes professional educators and social workers. The social workers interact directly with beneficiaries of the service. They are responsible for all material aspects of reception, managing socio-health factors and facilitating social, educational, vocational and housing integration (Barzaghi, 2020). The in-depth knowledge about UAM and pathways possessed by these professionals is documented in the PEI.¹¹ This document consists of an initial section detailing the minor's background history, followed by sections that provide detailed observations of the subject's psychological and emotional state (including relationships with family, culture of origin, relationships with peers and

⁹ The Sistema Accoglienza Integrazione (SAI) consists of a network of local authorities. These authorities participate in integrated reception projects using resources from the National Fund for asylum policies and services.

¹⁰ CPIA stands for "Centro Provinciale per l'Istruzione degli Adulti" (Provincial Centre for Adult Education). From the CPIA, it is possible to obtain the final certificate of the first cycle of education (equivalent to completing middle school), a certification of fulfilment of compulsory education, and a certification of knowledge of the Italian language at level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, developed by the Council of Europe.

¹¹ The PEI is the "Piano Educativo Individualizzato" (individualised educational plan), the document that outlines the individualised reception program.

adult reference figures), as well as aspects of social integration such as school, career guidance, and recreational and sports activities (Barzaghi, 2020). Therefore, the information held by social workers is valuable data recognised in the literature (Evans et al., 2018), which some studies have already attempted to leverage qualitatively through semi-structured interviews (Clements et al., 2020; Rania et al., 2018) and quantitatively with standardised questions related to the objective outcomes at the end of the reception programme (Evans et al., 2022).

What remains largely unexplored in the literature is a quantitative analysis of the subjective evaluation of social workers regarding the progress of the UAM during their reception. A report by the ISMU Foundation on UAM's access to education (Santagati & Barzaghi, 2021) contains comprehensive data on the educational participation of UAM in Italy based on an overall evaluation of various dimensions of UAM educational participation by the responsible entities. However, the evaluations are only descriptive, and are not linked to protective or risk factors through multivariate statistical analysis.

Research questions

This study aims to enhance the information assets held by referral operators by having them compile in a structured and standardised form what is already noted in the PEI. Referring to their assessment to monitor the progress of the reception of UAM, we will be able to investigate the determinants of the pathways evaluated positively by the operators. Specifically, we aim to answer the following research questions.

First, given the lack of information available on the pathways of UAM, we want to explore whether the evaluations given by social workers who look after UAM in the reception programmes are a good proxy for the performances of these young people's integration pathways. If so, this would give a variable that is easier to obtain to study the phenomenon. Second, we want to know how different achievements are rated, and which aspects of the pathway significantly influence these ratings. As highlighted in the literature review, we assume that educational successes play a significant role, whereas we hypothesise that there are negative effects from problems with the law and drug use, and in cases where access to reception was not immediate after arrival in Italy.

Data and methods

Data

We collected the data through a survey of UAM hosted in reception facilities such as emergency shelters, educational communities and apartments under the responsibility of the Municipality of Milan on 31 December 2021.¹² The purpose of the survey was to deepen understanding of the characteristics of the pathways taken by UAM (Municipality of Milan, 2022). The data collection instrument was a standardised quantitative questionnaire agreed with the Milan Municipality. We conducted a pre-test in four reception facilities, after which we made some improvements to the questionnaire. The questionnaire covered the following thematic areas: socio-demographic and contextual information; migration to Italy; the reception process; educational activities; and intentions and

¹² The survey was initiated by the Department of Statistics and Quantitative Methods at the University of Milano-Bicocca, in collaboration with the Milan Municipality.

future plans. The questionnaires were completed by social workers from affiliated organisations in the first two months of 2022, with reference to December 31, 2021.

The survey has the dual advantages of gathering information from both UAM and social workers: UAM were interviewed by social workers to uncover the motivations behind their migration choices and their future intentions, while the social workers were asked to evaluate various areas related to the UAM reception process and to compile data on the courses undertaken and the characteristics of the cases they managed.

Before taking the survey, the social workers attended three training sessions to introduce them to the research aims and guide them through the questionnaire. The data collection phase concluded on February 28 2022. We identified a total of 96 reception facilities in 25 organisations that hosted a total of 598 UAM (Table 1). Only one out of 26 organisations declined to participate in the survey, making it close to a census. In the first days of January 2022, we extracted information on the 707 guests who were present on December 31 in the Municipality of Milan’s database. The number of the UAM actually hosted was 657. This number is lower than the 707 names extracted because of the lack of updates in the municipal databases, which included guests who had been discharged long before. The valid questionnaires collected for the purposes of the survey amounted to 566, representing 86% of the total received as of December 31, 2021. In addition to the unit that refused to participate, some interviews were lost due to the poor quality of the data collected by another reception unit.

More than half the reception facilities (52) had fewer than 5 occupied spaces, and 4 hosted at least 20 UAM. The majority of UAM were accommodated in small facilities: 52.4% were in reception facilities with fewer than 10 occupied spaces. UAM taken into the charge of the Milan Municipality social workers are not necessarily accommodated within the city of Milan. Over 70% of the UAM were hosted in reception facilities within the Municipality of Milan; 14% in other Lombardy municipalities, and another 14% in Liguria, Piemonte, Emilia-Romagna and Friuli-Venezia Giulia.

Table 1 Characteristics of facilities hosting UAM in agreement with the Municipality of Milan

Number of accommodation beds	Number of reception facilities	UAM (n)	UAM (%)
20–50	4	108	18.1
10–19	13	177	29.6
5–9	27	178	29.8
<5	52	135	22.6
Total UAM surveyed	96	598	100
Total UAM hosted ^a		657	
Total UAM Municipality Milan database		707	
% Overestimation Municipality Milan database			7.1
Valid interviews for the survey		566	
% of group included in the survey			86.1

^a Including the 59 UAM of the institution that refused to participate in the survey

Methods

The questionnaire contains a general question addressed to social workers regarding an overall evaluation of UAM pathways: “How is the UAM pathway going? Give a rating from the operator’s point of view (from 1 = very bad, to 5 = very good).” This question follows a matrix of questions about specific aspects of the UAM pathways. Eight questions cover the following areas: coexistence in hospitality (community, apartment or other); Italian learning; school placement; care and management of personal hygiene and clothing; participation in recreational activities; autonomy and punctuality in completing commitments; job search; and the search for accommodation after hospitality. We wish to emphasise that since the specific questions that preceded the general question cover many areas of reception and are numerous, there should be no ordering effect, and the evaluation made should be considered effectively general (Schuman & Kalton, 1985; Schuman & Presser, 1996).

Therefore, to answer the second research question, the “social workers’ overall evaluation” was used as the outcome variable. Considering the highly skewed distribution of responses towards higher values, the dependent variable was categorised as: 1, 2 and 3 = “low”; 4 = “medium”; and 5 = “high”. Explanatory variables were based on literature evidence: ‘Attended courses without interruptions’: no (reference category), yes (Adserà & Tienda, 2012; Yao & Hao, 2013); ‘Improvement in Italian language knowledge’: no (reference category), yes (Augelli et al., 2018; Di Rosa et al., 2019); ‘Years of study in the country of origin’ (Crea et al., 2017; Aleghfeli and Hunt, 2022); ‘Left country of origin for educational reasons’: no (reference category), yes (Kohli, 2011; Bloch et al., 2011; Celikaksoy and Wadensjö, 2016).

Furthermore, we took into consideration three variables regarding vulnerability and deviant behaviours: Psychological vulnerability: no (reference), yes; ‘Alcohol or drug addiction issues’: no (reference), yes; ‘Ongoing criminal proceedings or prior criminal records’: no (reference), yes. Furthermore, ‘Months spent in Italy before being taken into the care of the Municipality of Milan’, a variable that expresses whether the path to entry into reception was direct and immediate. The two control variables were: ‘Citizenship’: Egypt (reference), Albania, Tunisia, Bangladesh, or other countries; and ‘Duration of stay’, measured as the months spent in Italy. The percentage of missing values for the variables just described varies between 0% and 11.1%. For the two variables with the highest percentage of non-responses (Months spent in Italy before being taken in charge by the Municipality of Milan; Duration of stay in Italy in months), the non-responses were replaced by imputing the average by age and main citizenship.¹³ For the dependent variable ‘overall evaluation of social workers’, the non-responses were replaced by imputing the average of the evaluations of the different areas.¹⁴ All other variables had a non-response rate of less than 3% and were therefore not treated.

We used descriptive statistical analysis to show the social workers’ ratings for the UAM’s main characteristics, and we applied ordinal logistic regression to test the roles of covariates on the social workers’ evaluation. One of the assumptions of ordinal logistic

¹³ We used ‘Age’ and ‘Citizenship’ because the subgroups identified by these two variables have significantly different averages.

¹⁴ As described in the ‘Supplementary Material’, the dependent variable ‘social workers’ evaluation’ and the composite indicator, calculated as the average of the individual evaluations of the different areas, show a high level of correlation.

regression is that the relationship between each pair of outcomes is the same. We tested this proportional odds assumption (also called parallel regression assumption) using a Chi-square test to evaluate whether there were differences in the coefficients between models. The Chi-square test showed a p value of 0.471, meaning the null hypothesis was accepted, and the proportional odds assumption had not been violated.

Results

Social worker ratings

The social workers who completed the questionnaire were asked to rate a series of dimensions that characterise the UAM pathway during reception from 1 (worst situation) to 5 (excellent situation) (Fig. 2). The aspects most appreciated by the social workers were the “care and management of personal hygiene and clothing” (average 4 out of 5) and “coexistence in hospitality” (3.8 out of 5). The social workers’ overall evaluation average was 3.7 out of 5, a higher score than the average of the six areas investigated, whose primary criticalities are school placement (3.4 out of 5) and autonomy and punctuality in completing commitment (3.4 out of 5).

All areas have positive correlations between them; the strongest link is the correlation between “coexistence in hospitality” (0.78) and “autonomy and punctuality in completing commitments” (0.72). In other words, the areas mentioned above lead to greater overall satisfaction on the part of social operators regarding the UAM’s progress of reception. “Autonomy and punctuality in carrying out commitments” is the characteristic most correlated with the other areas (Table 2).

Robustness check

To examine whether a correlation exists between the social workers’ overall evaluation and the actual outcomes achieved regarding learning Italian and attendance at school and training courses, we compared the averages obtained after stratifying the sample based on the outcome variables (Table A2). After dividing the sample into two categories, we performed an independent t test; after dividing the sample into three categories, we performed an ANOVA test. In all cases, the averages were significantly different. A higher rating was given in the social workers’ overall evaluation to those who: obtained a certificate in Italian, obtained a CPIA diploma, attended courses (compared to those who interrupted their studies—who were, in turn, rated higher than those who did not attend any courses), improved their level of Italian¹⁵ and gained a B1 level (compared to those who have an A1/A2 level, who are in turn rated higher than those who have a pre-A1 level).

Descriptive results

The results of the descriptive analysis (Tables 3 and 4) show that the social workers’ evaluation rating increased with the average number of years of study in the country of origin, and decreased with the average number of months spent in Italy before being admitted to reception by the Municipality of Milan. We noted a monotonic trend as

¹⁵ We measured Italian proficiency in the survey using the six levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages scale (CEFR) developed by the Council of Europe. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>

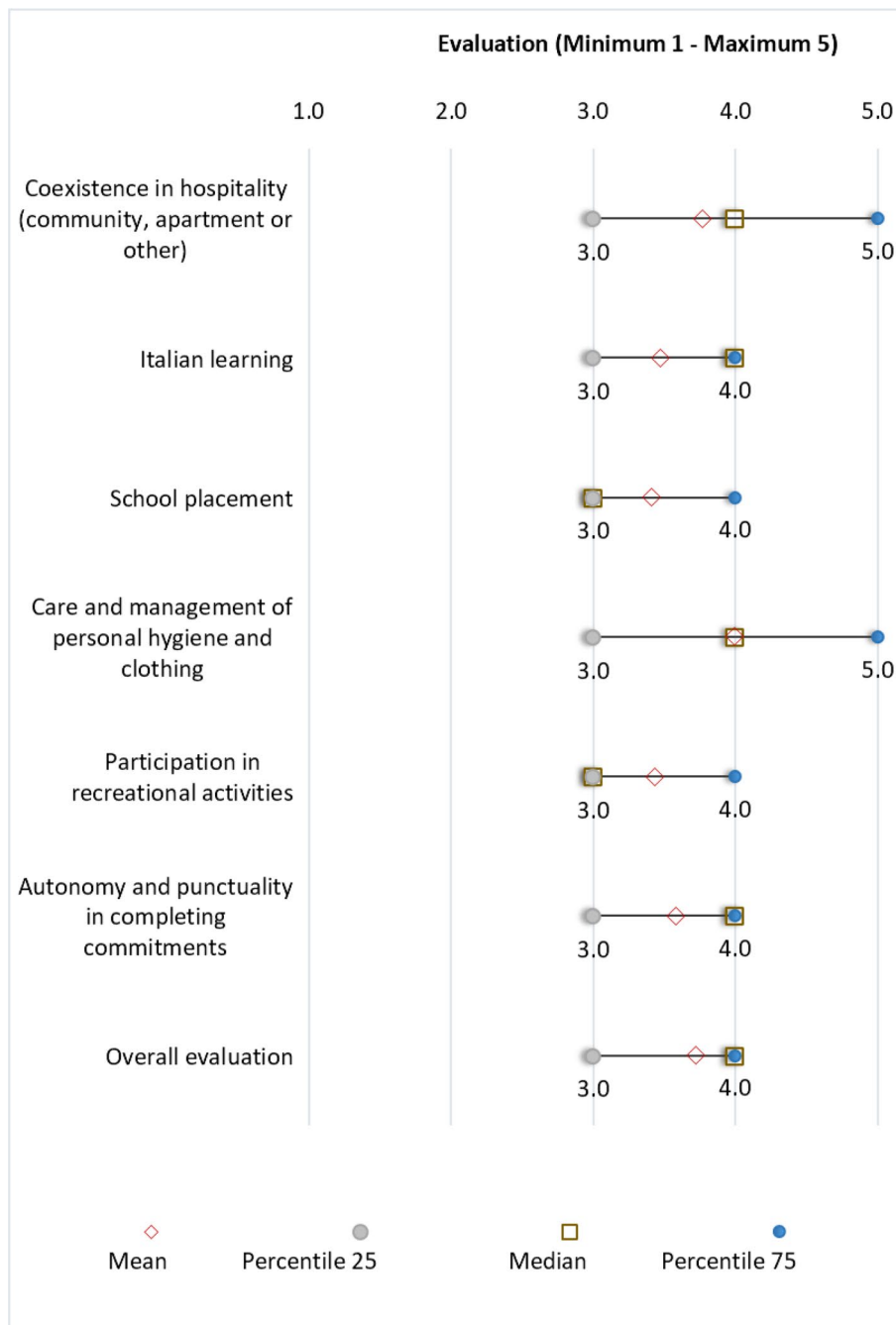


Fig. 2 Social Workers' evaluations of UAM pathways by area . In each area, there is at least one case that takes value 1 and one that takes value 5

the social workers' ratings increased for UAM who improved their Italian proficiency, attended courses without interruptions and departed from their country of origin for educational purposes. Lower ratings were given for UAM with alcohol or drug dependencies and those with a criminal record or issues with the justice system. Only in the case of psychological vulnerability was the trend not monotonic. The highest percentage

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients of social workers' evaluations on the UAM pathway by area

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Coexistence in hospitality (community, apartment or other)	3.77	0.97	—								
2. Italian learning	3.47	1.12	0.27	—							
3. School placement	3.41	1.03	0.47	0.59	—						
4. Job search	3.32	1.25	0.35	0.35	0.25	—					
5. Search for accommodation after hospitality	3.02	1.33	0.29	0.28	0.33	0.56	—				
6. Care and management of personal hygiene and clothing	3.99	0.98	0.49	0.42	0.43	0.29	0.35	—			
7. Participation in recreational activities	3.43	1.05	0.48	0.29	0.41	0.27	0.23	0.43	—		
8. Autonomy and punctuality in completing commitments	3.58	1.06	0.62	0.38	0.51	0.38	0.34	0.57	0.45	—	
9. Overall evaluation	3.71	0.85	0.78	0.43	0.59	0.42	0.40	0.59	0.57	0.72	—

Social workers' evaluations vary between 1 (very bad score) and 5 (excellent score). All correlations are significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 3 Descriptive statistics from social workers’ overall evaluation rating—categorical variables

	Social workers’ overall evaluation							
	Low		Medium		High		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Left country of origin for educational reasons								
No	192	92.3	215	81.7	69	74.2	476	84.4
Yes	16	7.7	48	18.3	24	25.8	88	15.6
Attended courses without interruptions								
No or dropped out	51	24.5	34	12.9	12	12.9	97	17.2
Yes	157	75.5	230	87.1	81	87.1	468	82.8
Improvement in Italian language knowledge								
No	56	27.2	46	17.9	5	5.7	107	19.5
Yes	150	72.8	211	82.1	82	94.3	443	80.5
Ongoing criminal proceedings or prior criminal records								
No	190	92.2	258	97.7	91	98.9	539	95.9
Yes	16	7.8	6	2.3	1	1.1	23	4.1
Alcohol or drug addiction issues								
No	194	93.3	258	98.1	92	100.0	544	96.6
Yes	14	6.7	5	1.9	0	0.0	19	3.4
Psychological vulnerability								
No	135	65.5	224	84.8	77	83.7	436	77.6
Yes	71	34.5	40	15.2	15	16.3	126	22.4
Citizenship								
Albania	24	11.5	39	14.8	24	25.8	87	15.4
Tunisia	30	14.4	32	12.1	6	6.5	68	12.0
Bangladesh	15	7.2	30	11.4	10	10.8	55	9.7
Egypt	100	48.1	117	44.3	31	33.3	248	43.9
Other Countries	39	18.8	46	17.4	22	23.7	107	18.9

Table 4 Descriptive statistics from social workers’ overall evaluation rating—continuous variables

	Social workers’ overall evaluation							
	Low		Medium		High		Total	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Years of study in the country of origin	6.3	2.7	7.1	2.6	8.0	2.9	6.9	2.8
Months spent in Italy before being taken in charge by the Municipality of Milan	2.4	5.9	1.4	3.2	1.4	4.1	1.8	4.5
Duration of stay in Italy (in months)	14.7	15.6	14.7	14.0	19.8	14.8	15.6	14.8

of UAM with psychological vulnerability is among those with the “low” rating (1, 2, and 3) and the lowest percentage is among those with “medium” ratings (equal to 4).

Furthermore, the results show that the proportion of Egyptians and Tunisians decreases as the rating increases, while the proportion of Albanians and Bengalis increases when moving from the UAM with the lowest ratings to the UAM with the highest ratings. Finally, the social workers’ evaluation increases with the time spent in Italy by the UAM, but at the same time, it decreases with the time spent in Italy before being taken over by the Municipality of Milan.

Table 5 Ordinal Logistic regression—dependent variable: social workers’ overall evaluation: low, medium, high

	Estimate	SE	Wald	Odds ratio	p
Threshold					
Social workers’ overall evaluation (low)	1.688	0.364	21.480		<0.001
Social workers’ overall evaluation (medium)	4.288	0.408	110.732		<0.001
Location					
Years of study in the country of origin	0.138	0.034	16.301	1.148	<0.001
Left country of origin for educational reasons	0.708	0.241	8.613	2.029	0.003
Attended courses without interruptions	0.820	0.243	11.379	2.270	0.001
Improvement in Italian language knowledge	0.594	0.245	5.895	1.811	0.015
Ongoing criminal proceedings or prior criminal records	-1.388	0.535	6.746	0.249	0.009
Alcohol or drug addiction issues	-1.459	0.612	5.673	0.233	0.017
Psychological vulnerability	-0.915	0.231	15.650	0.401	<0.001
Months spent in Italy before being taken in charge by the Municipality of Milan	-0.066	0.025	7.240	0.936	0.007
Duration of stay in Italy (in months)	0.027	0.008	13.146	1.028	<0.001
Citizenship (ref. Egypt)					
Albania	-0.044	0.272	0.026	0.957	0.871
Tunisia	-0.145	0.288	0.253	0.865	0.615
Bangladesh	0.598	0.299	4.002	1.819	0.045
Other Countries	0.163	0.253	0.416	1.178	0.519

Number of studies = 535; Percentage of cases excluded from the model: 5.5%

Model fitting Information: -2 Log Likelihood: Intercept: 1,058,772; Final: 938,315 (p value: <0,001)

Goodness-of-Fit: Pseudo R-Square Nagelkerke: 0.232

Test of Parallel Line: Chi Square: 12.956 (p value: 0.451)

Results of the multivariate model

Confirming the descriptive results, the longer the UAM had studied in their country of origin, the better the social workers’ evaluations (Table 5). Likewise, the two variables measuring performance in learning Italian and in attending school or training courses have a statistically significant association with the dependent variable: an improvement of even one level¹⁶ in Italian and in attending school and training courses without interruption leads to a more positive evaluation by the social workers. A variable connected to UAM motivation is ‘Left country of origin for educational reasons.’ The choice to leave the country of origin for study purposes is a factor that promotes the integration process and is highly rated by social workers.

Two other characteristics that also, as might be expected, affect social workers’ judgement are the presence of pending or previous criminal proceedings and alcohol and drug addiction. In the presence of such characteristics, the social workers’ judgement becomes more negative. Less obvious is the association with psychological vulnerability. In this case, a characteristic that has nothing to do with the motivational sphere of UAM leads to a more statistically significant severe evaluation by the social workers. Psychological difficulties, often linked to traumatic experiences that led to migration or that were experienced during the journey, thus limit the pathway to reception. In these cases, UAM do not seem to be able to compensate for their fragility using the resilience that

¹⁶ See previous footnote.

some research suggests they can bring (Accorinti, 2016; Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2016). In the same way, as the number of months UAM spent in Italy before being taken over by the Municipality of Milan increases, the social workers' rating decreases, while holding constant the duration of stay in Italy and other variables. In all likelihood, the months before the Municipality of Milan took over were months spent outside the reception circuits or in emergency situations, i.e., in difficult situations that did not favour the integration pathways that the social workers subsequently tried to implement.

With regard to the control variables, the results were similar to those found in the literature (Anselme & Hands, 2010; Crea et al., 2017; Porcu et al., 2023; Shakya et al., 2010). In terms of nationality, Bengali UAM were rated significantly better than Egyptians by social workers, while the other nationalities do not differ significantly from Egyptians. Therefore, taking into account the additional explanatory variables, the differences between the other nationalities and Egypt, which were more pronounced than those of the Bengalis in the descriptive analysis (Table 3), lose significance. In addition, although the incidence of Albanians in the 'high' rating category increased more than that of all other countries of origin compared to the 'low' rating category in the descriptive statistics, there are no statistically significant differences between Albania and Egypt in the model, as the rating of Albanians was increased by the fact that they are, on average, more educated.

Finally, there is a significant positive association between the social workers' evaluation and the duration of stay in Italy. UAM who are in reception and who have been in Italy for a longer period of time imply a greater willingness to pursue the same trajectory and have had more time to make a good impression on the operators. It should be borne in mind that this result is the result of self-selection by the population surveyed, who have not fled or migrated to other countries.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the validation of information held by the social workers in charge of UAM. We collected data from both the UAM and the social workers through a survey carried out in the reception centres, in agreement with the Municipality of Milan, up to 31 December 2021. We gathered data from UAM regarding the characteristics of their family in their country of origin, the journey they took to reach Italy, their reasons for migrating and their future plans. Meanwhile, we asked the social workers to assess various aspects pertaining to reception processes and the management of UAM, as well as providing a general evaluation rating and objective data on the paths taken by such minors from arrival to reception centre.

The paper obtained standardised and measurable information through the evaluations of the social workers to determine the viability of using social workers' evaluations as a proxy for UAM integration paths. The findings of the correlation analyses and the ordinal logistic regression underscored the positive effects that enhanced proficiency in the Italian language during the intake process, reduced drop-out and training programmes had on the assessment of social workers. This outcome is consistent with the existing literature (Augelli et al., 2018; Crea et al., 2017; Di Rosa et al., 2019) on the primary determinants shaping the integration trajectories of UAM. This aspect suggests a first useful element for the social work practice; in fact, a social worker's rating can therefore be

a proxy for measuring how effective the reception process is in terms of social inclusion and strengthening human capital. Therefore, the survey presented in this paper has helped to raise awareness of the need for the Municipality of Milan to equip itself with a standardised set of information for social workers to compile with Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) software. Although the managers and supervisors of the Municipality of Milan judged much of the information revealed by the survey very useful in guiding the work of the social workers, it was not available before the survey was conducted. Adopting a CRM implies administering training sessions for social workers in data entry and in reading and understanding the dashboard and reports generated by the CRM. It is also necessary to set aside time in team meetings for researchers skilled in managing processes related to UAM to present data, and not just to share it but to discuss it with social workers.

Second, the results show that educational background also appears to have a statistically significant effect on the evaluation by social workers, and each additional year of study in the country of origin favours positive evaluations by social workers. UAM who declare they have migrated for study reasons are judged more positively. However, alcohol or drug problems, as well as problems with the law and psychological vulnerability, are associated with more critical social worker ratings. This last result deserves further investigation since a more critical assessment by social workers means that it is not possible to intervene during the reception process in a way that compensates for the UAM's difficulties. In particular, to achieve an improvement in social work practice, social workers should be trained to take greater account of the vulnerability of UAM. The fact that they judge the pathways of UAM with mental distress more harshly may be a sign of expected outcomes comparable to those of UAM without mental distress, which should be checked in their assessments. From this point of view, the work of UNICEF (2022) highlights some possible aspects to be taken into account in UAM interventions involving UAM with psychic and psychological fragility: constant use of multidisciplinary technical expertise and a focus on developing tailored interventions for treating psychological distress.

Furthermore, a prolonged stay in Italy before entering the care of the Municipality of Milan is often spent in emergency shelters or without a home, which negatively impacts the UAM's subsequent performance in the more structured reception. This finding should be considered when drafting policy for UAM, with efforts made to secure reception for them promptly upon arrival to enhance the impact of the reception measures implemented by social workers. This means that we should move away from the model of first reception and limit the duration of emergency reception solutions as much as possible in favour of more structured solutions. Coordinated management should be strengthened at the local and national levels. It should be borne in mind that many UAM in first reception are not accompanied by social workers but only by educators. Therefore, more qualified staff are needed for the first reception, with multidisciplinary teams (Marchetti, 2016; Moretti et al., 2012; Rosignoli, 2018; UNICEF, 2022).

Finally, holding all other variables constant, the country of origin does not seem to influence the social workers' evaluation, with the exception of the Bangladeshi community, which receives the most positive assessments compared to other citizenships.

In conclusion, it can be assumed that a single item regarding social workers' evaluation of UAM can replace a matrix of questions on individual assessment areas and provide a good proxy for the performance of the UAM paths. Furthermore, the factors influencing this overall evaluation can be useful as a reference for gathering information on successful pathways and for identifying risks and strengths to guide reception policies.

Our study has some limitations, attributable mainly to the type of population studied. First, the duration of stay in Italy positively influences the overall evaluation of social workers. Presumably, the link identified can be attributed to the selection effect of UAM. Those who stayed in Italy (and therefore in reception) for a longer period displayed more determination to continue on their path by utilising the available training courses. This is in contrast to UAM whose reception process was interrupted because they did not intend to remain in Italy or lacked interest in the education and training opportunities provided by the Municipality of Milan. Second, there is a high turnover of UAM at the reception centres, resulting in significant alterations to the structural attributes. This may reduce the effectiveness of the results presented, as they are only valid for the population recorded on 31st December 2021, so it is important to keep in mind that the factors that promote the success of reception programmes persist over time. These include an improved fluency in the language of the host country and consistent attendance in school or training courses, as emphasised in existing literature (Kohli, 2011; Sleijpen et al., 2016; Stone, 2009).

Finally, our study focuses only on the reception centres under the purview of Milan's Municipal administration, so it has the limitation of being a survey at a local level, even though it is one of the municipalities receiving the greatest number of UAM. Consequently, the findings may not be universally applicable and are subject to influence by the specific characteristics and organisation of the centres under study.

However, a strength lies in the data used: they contain information provided directly by the social workers responsible for the UAM. We also include objective data on the reception paths taken, offering the advantage of being able to analyse together the aspects that are crucial for the reception paths of the UAM.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118-024-00228-x>.

Supplementary file 1.

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Author contributions

LT: conception, interpretation, drafting the manuscript, revision. PB: literature review, data management and analysis interpretation, drafting the manuscript, and revision. All authors approved the final version.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

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