

## The Author

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## Invisible newcomers: Experiences of unaccompanied children in Canada

My research on unaccompanied minors arriving as migrants examines how social and legal systems affect their lives in Canada, particularly in Ontario. Children travelling alone from one place to another is not a new phenomenon, nor is the problem confined to Canada. While a substantial body of literature is available on adult migrants and adult refugee claimants, little is known about the lives of unaccompanied minors in Canada, in particular how and what services are provided to them.

Data from the Peace Bridge Newcomer Centre in Fort Erie, Ontario shows that the number of unaccompanied minors at the Fort Erie port of entry was 38, 52 and 47 in 2007, 2008 and 2009 respectively (Living in Niagara, 2011). This largely invisible but important population of newcomers requires support and services upon their arrival, especially during an asylum-seeking process that could be challenging for them. Despite having the highest number of child asylum seekers, Ontario “has no arrangement with child welfare to place the children when this is necessary during the refugee determination process” (Grover, 2007, p. 353).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 18,700 asylum applications were lodged by unaccompanied and separated children in 71 countries in 2009 (UNHCR, 2009). Nevertheless, “collecting accurate and reliable statistics on this group poses a challenge due to lack of proper identification and registration mechanism in place in some countries” (UNHCR Statistical Yearbook, 2008, p. 48). Therefore, in spite of a systematic collection of data on unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) claiming asylum, “the global number of UASC who annually submit individual asylum claims remains unknown, largely because important destination countries such as Canada, South Africa and the United States of America do not provide this information” (UNHCR Statistical Yearbook, 2008, p. 48).

In order to address this issue, I examined how child welfare organizations and NGOs provide services to unaccompanied minors in Niagara region. I used a semi-structured individual interview method to gain a better understanding of the experience of unaccompanied minors. Interviews were conducted from December 2012 to February 2013 in the Niagara region with five unaccompanied minors and eight professionals from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide services to child and youth migrants. The five unaccompanied minors came to Ontario from Iraq, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Burundi and the Bahamas. Each of them had a different experience. Social and legal supports were made available to some of the unaccompanied minors, and one was deported.

Among these five youth, three were high school students, one was waiting for his asylum hearing and admission to high school, and one was a Brock University undergraduate student at the time of the interview. Among the first three, Jack (pseudonym), who came to Canada from the Bahamas in 2011 at the age of 16, was admitted to Niagara College. I interviewed him in January 2013 and

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was interested to follow up on his case as he had some legal issues. During mid-February 2013 I tried to reach him by telephone but my calls and texts remained unanswered. Finally, I tried to reach his friend Mitchel (pseudonym) who introduced me to Jack. Mitchel informed me that Jack had left, or was forced to leave, Canada that morning (19 February 2013).

Transitional homes in the Niagara region play an important role in providing services to unaccompanied minors in the post-arrival period. These are the Fort Erie Multicultural Centre, the YMCA, Folk Arts Multicultural Center Niagara, Casa El Norte - Fort Erie, Matthew House, Peace Bridge Newcomer Centre, and Family and Children's Services Niagara. These organizations provide services to support newcomers from their arrival in Canada through their long-term integration into local communities. Some organizations focus on providing concrete support to refugees at the crucial time when they are in transition from a shelter to independent housing while other groups emphasize supportive counselling and problem solving, translation, assistance with community orientation, immigration consultation and other services.

Recent changes in immigration laws have affected the ability of services providers to adequately address the needs of unaccompanied minors in Canada. While some of the NGO professionals state that the new system may not impact young migrants as much as adult migrants, others disagree. Some point out that the changes to the timeframe to submit documentation for a legal hearing as part of the refugee claimant process are particularly problematic. In the past, newcomers were given 28 days to prepare all of the required documents, apply for legal aid and find a lawyer. However, the new law has shortened the period to two weeks, which, according to some NGO professionals, is an inadequate timeline for newcomers to prepare documentation, let alone child and youth migrants. These proposed changes also create inconsistencies and challenges around the capacity of the workers who work with the newcomers.

Findings of this research suggest that it is important to have: (1) consensus on the definition of an unaccompanied minor; (2) improved data collection and record-keeping on the number of unaccompanied minors arriving in Canada; and (3) a structured mechanism to follow up on the situation of unaccompanied minors once they begin living independently at age 16. My study recommends that policy makers, service providers and scholars pay more attention to the experiences of unaccompanied minors to ensure that adequate social and legal services are offered in Canada.

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