

January 2022

**“LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY AND HOPE FOR A BETTER FUTURE”  
THE PSYCHOSOCIAL AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT OF UNACCOMPANIED REFUGEE MINORS  
LIVING IN LONG-TERM ACCOMMODATIONS IN GREECE**

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### **GOALS**

This study is part of the research project entitled “*Psychosocial support and mental health services for unaccompanied refugee minors living in long-term accommodation facilities in Greece.*” The overall study adopted a sequential mixed methodology. The first phase involved the collection of data through a structured online questionnaire aiming at the mapping of the mental health and psychosocial support services provided to UAMs and the perceived challenges encountered by field workers and community mental health professionals. The present study aimed to explore: (a) the perceived needs, stressors, manifestations of UAMs’ psychological distress and resilience, (b) the mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS) provided to them, and (c) the recommendations for the improvement of these services which are provided by NGOs responsible for UAMs accommodation, and by community mental health services to which minors are referred.

### **ETHICAL APPROVAL**

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Department of Nursing of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, while permission for UAMs’ participation was obtained from the prosecutors for minors in Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene.

### **DATA COLLECTION**

Purposive sampling was undertaken to identify mental health professionals and field workers directly involved in MHPSS service delivery, as well as UAMs who live in long-term accommodations. Through a segmentation process, four groups: (1) shelter coordinators, (2) shelter workers, (3) mental health professionals in community mental health services for children and adolescents, and (4) UAMs. A total of sixteen focus groups, comprising 79 participants, were conducted: 10 focus groups with shelter coordinators, field workers and community mental health professionals, and 6 focus groups with UAMs who lived in Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Data analysis involved (a) a thematic analysis of group discussions and (b) an analysis of group dynamics. To ensure the credibility of the data, three researchers participated in the analysis of collected data and one analyzed the group dynamics.

## **BRIEF SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

Some of the key findings are presented in the following five sections

### **UAM's needs**

These fall into three thematic categories: (a) a steady, safe, and supportive hosting environment, (b) the settling of their legal status, and (c) the realization of their personal goals which most often involved moving to their desired European country, reuniting with family members or getting a job to ensure their survival when they turn 18 years of age.

### **Psychological distress and Resilience**

Key stressors which negatively affected the UAMs' mental health involved: the prolonged delay in settling their legal issues; the challenges caused by the limited opportunities for education and employment for UAMs entering into adulthood; the exposure to xenophobic and racist behaviors in the school setting and wider society, with UAMs also referring to the unjustified verbal and physical violence by the police; the consequences of the restrictive measures imposed by the pandemic on their daily life; and unsafe living conditions in few accommodation settings. Protective factors which are perceived to contribute to UAMs' resilience included: optimism and hope; supportive relationships; benefits obtained from opportunities and stimuli provided by the hosting context; and religious beliefs and maintenance of cultural traditions. UAMs further identified as a significant resource, their commitment to realize their goals and the confidence that they will achieve them.

### **Psychosocial support services for UAMs**

The nature of the psychosocial support services, as described by field workers, include: accompanying minors in practical, legal and emotional issues; structuring their daily life and establishing a normality which provides them with a sense of security that counteracts their sense of uncertainty about their future; and fostering their resilience. Barriers to the provision of psychosocial support were discussed in detail, and suggestions to overcome them were offered.

### **Mental health services for UAMs**

The type of mental health services provided by mental health professionals, include: clinical assessment, which is often difficult to carry out due to incomplete information or translation difficulties, pharmacotherapy, supportive holding, and occasionally involuntary hospital admission. Participants described in detail the obstacles associated with the provision of mental health services and offered recommendations on how to overcome them.

### **Collaboration challenges between shelter and mental health workers**

Accounts of collaboration between shelter workers and mental health professionals revealed gaps and discontinuities, which undermine the quality of MHPSS. Challenges

include: the medicalization of UAMs' "difficult" behavior, when field workers cannot cope and refer minors to community mental health services; communication difficulties among service providers; difficulties with translation process; care discontinuity, problems with monitoring medication, and occasionally the abandonment of a UAM in a child psychiatric clinic due to the shelter's refusal to accept him back.

**Next steps:** The results of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the study will be used in the 3<sup>rd</sup> phase which aims to formulate an interpretive model that will identify the factors and processes involved in the development, provision and evaluation of psychosocial support and mental health services for unaccompanied minors.

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