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Thematic analysis of United Kingdom newspapers' coverage of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Benjamin Taylor

Abstract. In United Kingdom policy, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) are people assessed as under 18, and have applied for asylum, having arrived in the UK without parents or other responsible adults. As of 31st March 2024, there were 7380 of these young people in the UK. As with other immigration related topics, the care for, and conduct of UASC continues to be a subject for debate among policy makers, campaign groups, the general public, and in the media. This paper analyses the coverage of UASC in the UK's eight most read newspapers from 2020-2024. UASC are presented as vulnerable to different challenging circumstances, while also being at times, a threat to UK citizens, and lacking genuineness. It also concludes that there is variation in how different newspapers present UASC, which themes they focus on, and how they use language to imply characteristics and behaviours.

Introduction

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), according to England's Department for Education (2024) are people, assessed as being under 18 years old, who have applied for asylum in their own right, having arrived in England without a parent or any other responsible adult. Local authorities have a legal duty to accommodate these children, as part of that local authority's wider in care (or looked after) cohort. In many cases these young people arrive in England having had little or no formal education, and may have experienced exploitation, abuse or trauma in their home country. Of course, the journey to England, and the act of leaving friends and family may also have been distressing. Some children are not unaccompanied when they leave their home country but become separated from parents during the journey (Lenette and Cleland, 2016) which can cause further distress. Therefore, local authorities face significant challenges in supporting UASC because of a mixture of some, or all of these factors (Rivers, 2018). This task is increased by the number of young people arriving in England. In 2014, there were 2050 UASC in England. This has increased overall, though not always steadily, to 7380 as of 31st March 2024. Accommodation is therefore more complex for local authorities who may struggle to find foster carers or other appropriate placements for these children, and it is important to note that the number of children in care overall, has itself increased from 68790 to 83630 in the same ten-year period. Of course, this number needs to be seen in a global context, with 122.6 million people across the world forcibly displaced by mid-2024, having increased from 59 million at the end of 2014, and approximately 40% of these being children (UNCHR, 2024). These displacements are due to war, persecution, climate change, human rights violations and reductions in resources. Indeed, the United Kingdom (UK) government's (2017) Safeguarding Strategy for UASC acknowledges that these young people are vulnerable, citing exploitation, trafficking and the perilous journey to the UK. It also states that we must remember that they are children and should not be defined solely by their status as asylum-seekers or refugees, continuing by noting the UK's 'proud history of offering support to people fleeing persecution and war' (p. 4) and the generosity of the British people to help the most vulnerable. The strategy goes on to

outline how the care for UASC should be improved (e.g., increased fostering capacity, training for foster carers, additional funding). Rigby *et al*. (2021) in their analysis of the strategy, found the implication that UASC may *choose* whether to enter the country legally or illegally to be problematic and found there to be notions of validity implied, as if some children are more deserving of help than others. The references to the safeguarding and welfare of *all* the children in the UK, and sections on risk, suggested that some UASC may pose risks to themselves and others (Rigby *et al*., 2021).

Whether these specific policy elements impact on how UASC are perceived is unclear, but as this paper will identify, some of these perspectives are also found in the newspaper coverage in the UK. Indeed, Rosen and Crafter (2018) argue firstly that the media not only describes, but also shapes events, and second, that the UK has an exclusionary immigration regime. Similarly, Wilmot (2017) suggests that newspapers have significant impact on their readers' perceptions of reality, and it is clear that immigration generally, and UASC specifically have featured regularly in UK newspapers in recent years. This research analyses the UASC focused articles in the eight most widely read UK newspapers, between January 1st, 2020, and December 31st, 2024, their principal themes, and how these themes, and the children themselves, are presented and described.

Newspaper depictions of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Previous research into this area has focused on different elements of print media, including the words and their surface and implied meanings, the use of photographs, readers' letters, and quotations.

UASC and vulnerability

A recurring theme in the way that UASC are presented in the media, in terms of the language and images used, is vulnerability. Frequently the narrative around these young people focuses on their pain and suffering, and shows them as victims of great tragedy (Tuck and Yang, 2014). Of course, many UASC will have experienced hardship both before and during their journey to the UK, but their presentation in newspapers, often with photographs of many young people, not making eye contact with the camera implies that this victimhood is their only real characteristic (Wilmot, 2017). Elements that make up one's person, e.g., occupations, skills, traits are rarely featured. Indeed, imagery that focuses only on distress and vulnerability, such as those of the migrant camps in Calais, leads the reader to link UASC to primitiveness, disease and poverty. By extension, these concepts begin to be seen as things that mainly happen offshore and are then imported (Lenette and Cleland, 2016). Of course, there is significant poverty in the different parts of the UK, as there is in many other countries, which is not linked to immigration.

Frequently these children are shown in photographs without their parents. Rather than providing a range of explanations for this, the UK media has tended to present these children as being global orphans, abandoned (McLaughlin, 2017). This presents the British people as being kind, generous and caring, by stepping in to help these children, while simultaneously implying that the parents of these young people are neglectful (McLaughlin, 2017) and irresponsible (Anthony and Thomas, 2017), having made choices that resulted in these challenging outcomes. These depictions create sympathy amongst the public, within the concept of universal childhood that does not account for individual circumstances (Rigby *et al*., 2021) and with an expectation

that UASC should show gratitude for the help they receive (McLaughlin, 2017). Furthermore, this coverage does not acknowledge the children's individuality, rather presenting them as either being vulnerable or a threat (Rosen and Crafter, 2018) with little nuance. Indeed, Wilmot's (2017, p. 67) perspective is that the coverage shows these young people as either 'bare life...stripped of any rights or legal status...[or] a threat to security and identity'. Newspaper readers may then feel torn between sympathy for the UASC and an underlying anti-immigration sentiment (Pantti and Ojala, 2018).

UASC and threat

Anti-immigration by extension may become anti-immigrant; the UK media's presentation of this issue as a crisis of borders, threatening security, and people's identities, tends to reduce the understanding of, and consideration for the dangers that UASC face (Pruitt, 2019). Rather, they are perceived to be perpetrators of threat, and not those in danger, and the closer these young people get to the UK, the more concern about the threat they pose increases, while the focus shifts away from their protection (Rosen and Crafter, 2018). This impacts on readers' perceptions and priorities, as is demonstrated by Lynn and Lea's (2003) analysis of readers' letters, published in newspapers, in which the denial of UASC's freedoms was a recurring theme.

It is also evident that media coverage of these children is influenced by suspicion of their motives. Their genuineness as asylum seekers will be discussed shortly, but Rosen and Crafter (2018) note that the media seems to emphasise the importance of protecting the UK's innocent children, and in doing so, it is necessary to be suspicious of all asylum seekers who claim to be children. Freier (2017) recognises this also, noting that UASC are often portrayed as 'threatening male invaders' (p. 80), while their depiction in imagery, as males interacting with the police on arrival, or sometimes symbolically blocked from our view by the police, implies to readers that they need to be protected from them (Wilmot, 2017). Indeed, when stories about UASC are accompanied by images of adults or older young people, this reduces the sympathy for them amongst the public, instead linking UASC with issues like border policing, detention and deportation (McLaughlin, 2017). This approach presents, again without nuance, UASC as being either deserving or underserving of sympathy and support, but the use of stereotypes (e.g., criminals, abusers of the system) is persuasive (Rigby, *et al*., 2021).

UASC and genuineness

A factor in whether UASC are described as being deserving of the sympathy and hospitality that is offered to them by the UK public, is whether or not they are genuine migrants (Rosen and Crafter, 2018). Those that are genuine are expected to look vulnerable but there is a narrative when UASC do not look young and in need, that they may be perceived to be greedy, duplicitous, and lacking in integrity (Lynn and Lea, 2003). Indeed, the implication in some of the reporting around UASC is that genuine asylum seekers are actually rare, and to some extent irrelevant, when considered alongside those who are untrustworthy, criminal, and abusing the good will of indigenous people (Lynn and Lea, 2023; Rigby *et al*., 2021).

Part of this debate within the media is linked to what these young people look like, when compared with what might have been expected. David Davies, the Conservative MP tweeted in 2016 that 'These don't look like "children" to me. I hope British hospitality is not being abused' and this was the subsequently featured in articles in The Express and The Sun (e.g., Gutteridge and

Sheldrick, 2016; Tolhurst, 2016). This is likely to influence the readers of those newspapers, and give the idea that UASC should look and behave in a certain way (Freier, 2017). Young people arriving into the UK with facial hair and wearing hoodies may not be considered to be the sort of child migrants that people want or expect (Rigby *et al*., 2021) while images showing them arriving with adult men, implies to the reader that these UASC, even though are in their mid-teens are really coded as men, or nearly men. These reports frequently use terms like fake and bogus, while real may be used but in inverted commas, to demonstrate that their genuineness and integrity is debatable. Furthermore, even the language of childhood is presented similarly. Newspapers, rather than referring to them as children use terms like youths, lads and minors, again often in inverted commas, and alongside descriptions of their physicality (e.g., 'burly') (McLaughlin, 2017).

These approaches reduce the understanding that the UK public have for these children and reduces sympathy for their situation, while stereotyping and exaggeration positions them as being somewhere on a spectrum including characteristics such as unchildlike ungrateful, inauthentic, duplicitous, delinquent and criminal. This makes the consumers of these media feel like the UK public are the victims.

Methods and analysis

This research is a qualitative case study, analysing the coverage of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children travelling to, and living in, the United Kingdom, in UK newspapers. The aim was to present a comprehensive, balanced analysis, to capture the themes that are most evident in newspaper stories, and how these themes are presented. The case study can be described as intrinsic (Stake, 2005) because the case itself is of primary interest and because the study's main aim is to provide greater insight into a debated issue.

The sample for this study was articles published in the eight most widely read newspapers in the UK (The Telegraph, The Mail, The Times, The Guardian, The Express, The Independent, The Sun, and The Mirror), that included coverage of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Sunday editions of the newspapers were also included. Articles had to be available in full on the newspaper's website with a publication date between January 1st, 2020, and December 31st, 2024. For each newspaper, the website was searched via its own search facility and the following search terms were used: unaccompanied, asylum seeker, asylum-seeking, child, refugee, lone, minor. Different combinations of the words, and plurals, were also used. To be included in the research the article had to be news reports which included some coverage of UASC. Articles did not have to be solely about children; if the report was about asylum seekers or refugees in general, and included information about adults and children, then it met the criteria for inclusion. If the report did not mention children at all (or any term indicating childhood) then it was excluded. Articles also had to be specifically about the UK or about UASC who were travelling to the UK, or who may soon be travelling to the UK. For example, newspaper reports about children living in the migrant camps in Calais were included, but those about children claiming asylum in the USA from Central America were excluded. The following article types were excluded from this research: readers' letters, editorials, policy reports or policy briefs, opinion pieces, features in magazine supplements. In total, 110 articles met the inclusion criteria with the breakdown by newspaper as follows: The Mail – 23, The Times – 21, The Independent – 14, The Guardian – 11, The Sun – 11, The Telegraph – 12, The Express – 10, The Mirror – 8.

The articles they were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes were identified inductively, i.e., during the analysis as there was no intention to test an existing hypothesis (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). Working inductively was also appropriate as it was important to not assume which topics the articles would include, nor what their perspectives on them would be. During the initial analysis the following themes were identified:

The number of UASC crossing the English Channel;
UASC and misrepresentation of age;
UASC and terrorism;
UASC and the responses of Kent County Council;
The negatives of UASC for UK citizens;
UASC and the costs to the UK taxpayer;
The dangers of crossing the English Channel;
Risks to UASC;
UASC going missing;
Failing of the UK government, the Home Office and other services.

Following a second review of the data, the themes were adapted and rationalised as follows:

The 'Kent Council' theme was removed and the data was recoded with other themes.

The 'dangers of crossing the channel' theme was removed and the data was moved to the 'risks to UASC' theme.

The 'misrepresentation of age' theme was changed to a broader theme to do with the age of UASC more generally; this includes the misrepresentation of age, but also age assessments.

The 'UASC going missing' and the 'risks to UASC' theme were combined because going missing is a risk in itself, and it is also linked to other risks, such as modern slavery and inadequate accommodation.

The 'failings of the UK government' theme was removed and the data was moved to other themes, principally, the 'risks to UASC', 'UASC and age', and 'UASC going missing' themes.

Inductive thematic analysis recognises that themes are linked to and entwined with others (Gallagher, 2024). These changes acknowledge that trying to analyse some of these themes in isolation would have been difficult or would have resulted in numerous repetitions and caveats. The final themes were therefore as follows:

The number of UASC
The age of UASC
UASC and terrorism
UASC and costs to the taxpayer
Risks to UASC

Ethics

In that this research draws solely on documentary data, there are no risks to participants. Furthermore, the articles are all in the public domain, so there are no ethical considerations related to accessing the data. However, documentary research relies on accurate representation from the researcher (Denscombe, 2021). Therefore, every effort has been made to precisely capture the content of the articles. Of course, newspapers do not just present facts, and in analysing

documents there is usually an element of inference, but there has been no intention to misrepresent what the articles have said. Where the meaning of an article is perhaps unclear, or where there may be an implication, this is indicated.

Limitations

The principal limitation of thematic analysis of documents is that the documents are context-related (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). The articles were not created for this research, but to present information to a specific audience. The context in which they were created influences the information that is included, the information that is omitted (whether intentionally or accidentally), and the specific vocabulary that is used to present the information. Newspapers may also have a political bias which influences how they communicate the story, which is why different newspapers may present the same story in different ways. Therefore, it would be unrealistic to expect newspapers to present just the bare facts; while this is part of their role, they also try to appeal to their readership in the way that these facts are presented, and the opinions that accompany them (Denscombe, 2021).

Thematic analysis is by definition, inferential (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012) and in the case of newspaper articles both the meanings of the authors, and the themes used to code the data, are inferred. Indeed, what the writers of these articles really mean is open to interpretation (Robinson, 2010), especially when using italics, inverted commas, quotes or specific language (e.g., the word 'youths' instead of 'children'). Therefore, a potential criticism is that researchers might favour articles that take up a particular position, or support a hypothesis. In this research the potential for this has been minimised by the adoption of an intrinsic case study that focuses on developing greater insight into the themes, and by including broadsheets and tabloids from a broad political spectrum.

Findings and discussion

Here the data from the 110 articles that met the inclusion criteria is presented and analysed. Each theme is addressed separately, though there are some links between themes and where one impacts on another it is acknowledged. The analysis focuses on how UASC are presented and described in relation to these themes, and extends beyond the semantic to include latent analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is important because word and phrase choices often imply a meaning, without stating it explicitly.

The number of UASC

The most commonly occurring theme is the high number of UASC either crossing the English Channel, or already living in the United Kingdom. This features in 55 articles, and in all of the newspapers. In 18 of these, the high numbers of UASC is the main story, often stating how many children have claimed asylum within a specific period, or making comparisons with previous years, where there has been an increase. These articles frequently include comments made by politicians or other interpretations. For example, one article in the Sun (Gaspar, 2020) about the rise in the number of UASC also includes a quote from Priti Patel, then the UK's Foreign Secretary, stating that European countries needed to do more to stop asylum seekers reaching Britain, that they are in safe countries already, who needed to ensure their asylum processes were effective. These comments are not buttressed with counterpoints, or specific details about asylum law, such

as the 1951 Refugee Convention which states that people do not have to claim asylum in the first safe country they arrive at. Instead, the article claims that Britain is now the number one destination for asylum seekers in Europe, referring to a report from the European Asylum Support Office, which states that in the previous year, the UK accommodated one fifth of the unaccompanied young people who claimed asylum in Europe. No other data is provided regarding other countries, nor any information about previous years, or trends. The implication here is that too many asylum seekers are coming to the UK, when they should claiming asylum in other countries, and that those countries should be supporting them to do so.

Another example of an article principally about the high numbers of UASC but supplemented by a particular narrative, is a piece in the Mail (Wright, 2021) which refers to asylum seekers 'making a dash' from France, which may be interpreted by readers as something that people do if they are trying to evade the authorities. This article also mentions an 'extraordinary surge' in migrant numbers, while others quote stakeholders with strong views, such as Nigel Farage, then leader of the Brexit Party who used the term 'invasion' (Cole, 2020), or Bella Sankey, director of Detention Action, who claimed the UK government's strategy was cruel and divisive (Carr, 2020). At times, even when more balance is provided, there remains an implied slant. For example, an article in the Daily Mail (Boyle, 2020), does include information about what happens when migrants arrive in the UK, and some quotes from Clare Moseley from Care4Calais, a refugee charity. However, this information is either found in a sidebar or at the bottom of the article. In contrast the information about the numbers of asylum seekers, images of them arriving and quotes from Nigel Farage feature in the headline, subtitle and the beginning of the article. Some articles present less emotive coverage, focus more on the numerical data, the situations of the young people, and the related challenges for the Home Office and Kent County Council (e.g., Savage (2024) in the Observer).

The remaining 37 articles that featured the high numbers of UASC contextualised this with other issues. Over 20 of these discussed issues that cause a concern for, or a risk to the young people, such as the dangers of crossing the English Channel, accommodation in hotels, and overcrowding in reception centres. All the newspapers published articles which mentioned the lack of capacity in Kent County Council, with some raising concerns about the lack of care and education placements. Again, there is sometimes selective use of quotes to emphasise particular elements of the story. For example, an article in the Mail on Sunday (Wilcock, Wright and Owen, 2021) includes a quote from Matt Dunkley, then Kent County Council's corporate director of children's services, which mentions KCC being at 'breaking point' because of the high numbers of UASC, and also describing it as 'a humanitarian crisis involving traumatised young people who deserve the best support'. From the quote, only the term 'breaking point' is included in the headline, and the subtitle, which also says that Kent 'bears the brunt' of what it refers to later as a 'spiralling crisis'. Other articles also mirror this presentation of UASC, because of their numbers, being a burden, such as Hymas (2021) in the Daily Telegraph, outlining how other local authorities are being forced to look after UASC because of the impact on Kent. A different approach is found in some articles, where a specific danger to asylum seekers is noted, and then linked to high numbers of UASC and those who might claim asylum in the future, e.g., potential deportation to Rwanda (Calvert, 2022, in The Independent on Sunday).

Eleven articles, rather than focusing on elements that might cause risk or concern for the young people, instead discuss how the influx of UASC might negatively impact British citizens.

This theme will be revisited later, but it is worth mentioning here because the stories discuss actual risks posed by a very small number of UASC, which may then be extrapolated more widely. For example, articles mainly about adult males posing as children (e.g., Godfrey (2024a) in the the Sun), or UASC potentially arriving with high rates of Covid-19 (e.g., Wilcock (2021) in the Mail), but also mentioning the high number of asylum seekers overall, imply that these risks might be prevalent in the wider UASC cohort.

The age of UASC

Eighteen articles included discussion of the age of UASC, and in twelve of these the stories mentioned adult male asylum seekers, claiming to be children. Nine of these twelve were published in either the Mail or the Sun. A common narrative presented in these articles is that asylum seekers lie about their age (or are told to lie by people smugglers) in order to access better financial support and housing. Some articles include language intended to present UASC as purposefully deceitful, such as 'adults brazenly plotting', 'ruse', 'rumbled by officials' (Godfrey, 2024b), 'kids' in quote marks to emphasise that they are not children, 'tricksters' and 'fraudulent claims', (Godfrey, 2024a). Other than the possibility of receiving better support from social services, none of these articles suggested reasons why UASC may be reticent to be truthful, such as previous negative experiences with the authorities, being used to not being believed, and concerns about what might happen to them if they provide correct personal details (Ni Raghallaigh, 2014). Instead a number of the articles share concerns about the potential risks to UK citizens. Four articles suggest that this deceit on the part of the UASC might result in the safeguarding issue of adult males being in classrooms with children. Links are also made in some articles to outlier cases, such as a former Islamic State fighter, aged 42, who claimed to be a child (Sethi, 2023), and an asylum seeker aged 18, who claimed to be 14, and went on to commit murder (Tingle, 2024). These are important cases to report of course, but may give unfair impressions about other UASC, when they are presented in the context of a more general story about age assessments and young people not providing correct or complete information.

Age assessments also feature within a number of articles, with some giving statistics about the number of asylum seekers who had claimed to be children but were assessed to be adults. Sometimes this focuses on a specific case, while other articles may give a total number (e.g., 1317 (Godrey, 2024b), or present it as a fraction. Indeed, a story in the Express (Austen, 2022) had to publish a correction, having originally stated that two thirds of those who had claimed to be unaccompanied children were actually adults, when actually the two thirds related only to claimants that the Home Office believed to be over 18, not all UASC. It is important to note that while asylum seekers may sometimes claim to be younger than they are, the age assessment process can also make errors. Only five of the articles acknowledge this (three in the Guardian, one in the Mirror, and one in the Independent). Where the aforementioned articles raise concerns about the safety of UK children, these outline the potential risks to UASC of being incorrectly assessed as adults. This includes at least 1300 14-17 year olds housed unsupervised in adult accommodation (Burke, 2024a), and the risk of lone children being sent to Rwanda, having been deemed to be adults (Savage, 2024).

UASC and terrorism

Nine of the articles mentioned terrorism, usually referencing the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Taliban. Three of the articles, all in the Mail, focus specifically on the aforementioned asylum-seeker who murdered a man in England having claimed to be 14 when he was actually 18. Four more of the articles are not specifically about terrorism, but mention specific cases where people claiming to be children have gone on to commit crimes. For example, an article in the Express (Austin, 2022) about the age of UASC, includes a quote from Alp Mehmet (anti-immigration campaign group Migration Watch):

'Adults claiming to be children have long been given the benefit of the doubt... It is a costly and dangerous gap in our defences. Ahmed Hassan, the Parson's Green bomber, lied to stay here. And adults being placed among children doesn't bear thinking about.'

It has been reported that Ahmed Hassan lied about his early experiences in Iraq, and about his engagement with the Prevent programme (e.g., Harrison and Portal, 2018; White, 2018) but neither these reports, nor a published letter from Sir Philip Rutnam, then permanent secretary of the Home Office, to Yvette Cooper, then chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, stated that Ahmed Hassan had lied about his age, just that he claimed to be 16 when he arrived in the UK. Therefore, this was an odd example to highlight. No counterpoint is given to Alp's quote and so readers could infer that other UASC may do the same as Ahmed Hassan, even though in this one example, the person may not have lied about their age, which is the main theme of the article. Similarly, an article in the Sun (Godfrey, 2024b) also about asylum seekers lying about their age, includes a quote from Robert Jenrick, then a Conservative Party leadership contender, stating that people claiming asylum are known to UK security services, are threats to communities and have links to ISIS and al-Qaeda. The quote does not mention children, age assessments, or lying about age, even though that is the article's main theme. Therefore, again, there is an implied link, between UASC and terrorism which may not be warranted.

One article in the Mirror (McKelvie, 2021) presents a different aspect, focusing on young people who come to the UK as UASC but are then returned to their home country when they turn 18. It focuses on one main example, where an asylum seeker was forced to join the Taliban for his own protection on being returned to Afghanistan. There is also some wider context provided about other potential challenges that people may encounter when they are returned home (e.g., finding work or education, mental health support), and about the asylum rules that may lead to these returns.

UASC and costs to the taxpayer

Nine articles included specific coverage of how much UASC cost, either in terms of the amounts paid to local authorities to look after the young people, or costs of accommodation. Many other articles referred to this indirectly via coverage of challenges faced by Kent County Council in accommodating UASC and associated topics, such as the National Transfer Scheme (a protocol for reallocation of UASC to different local authorities) and the reluctance of some authorities to receive these young people. Three of the stories highlighted the significant costs the UK government was paying to house asylum seekers in hotels. Of course, unaccompanied children would normally be looked after in foster care, but some lone children were accommodated in hotels, which will be discussed later. Indeed, one of these articles (Crew, 2022) explains that additional funding is paid to local authorities (£6000 per child over three months) to encourage

them to move children from hotels into their care. Another article (Duell and Barrett, 2021) outlines that £28million was paid to France by the Home Office to double their patrols and make the crossing unviable, adding that Home Office sources, that are unnamed, blame the French for not doing enough to stop these crossings. The implication there is that the UK taxpayer is not getting a satisfactory return on the payment, though the article does go on to explain that some crossings were prevented and returned to France.

Three of the articles, one in the Sun (Elsom, 2023), one in the Express (Lister, 2024) and one in the Mail (James, 2023), cover the provision of universal basic income (UBI) to UASC, as part of a pilot in Wales. A UBI of £1600 (before tax) is paid to care leavers in Wales to support them in transitioning to adult life. Because UASC are also looked after children, on turning 18 they become care leavers and so are eligible for UBI. The articles do explain this, in varying degrees of detail, within the body of the article, but the headlines highlight just the provision of the money and their asylum-seeking status, rather than their care leaver status, which is why they qualify for UBI. Indeed, the headline in the Express (Lister, 2024), 'Wales pays huge sum to 'illegal migrants' in 'nonsensical' Labour scheme' incorrectly refers to the young people as 'illegal' while subjectively describing the payment as 'huge'. The use of quote marks is important as they refer to quotes used later in the article from then Welsh Conservative leader Andrew RT Davies (who incorrectly described the young people as 'illegal migrants' and said that the policy was 'nonsensical'). It should be noted that a quote at the end of the article from a Welsh government spokesperson states that the young people are not illegal immigrants. The articles in the Daily Mail (James, 2023) and the Sun (Elsom, 2023) cover this story alongside the provision of free legal aid for UASC in relation to immigration, or 'taxpayer cash to fight deportation' (Elsom, 2023). Both articles quote James Roberts from the Tax Payer's Alliance, a low tax pressure group, who argues that 'illegal immigrants' should not receive this support, as legal aid is means tested. The conflation of these two issues (the legal aid and the UBI) is unhelpful as they are separate policies, and separate methods of supporting UASC.

Risks to UASC

73 articles, across all of the newspapers sampled, include coverage of the risks associated with being an unaccompanied asylum-seeker. Eleven of these discuss in detail the dangers of travelling to the UK, across the English Channel, or at least acknowledge the significant risks that migrants take. There is less coverage of the potential risks to UASC on leaving the UK, though McKelvie (2021) in the Mirror, explains that over 100 children who were taken in by the UK as children, were deported to Iraq and Afghanistan having turned 18. Three others (e.g., Calvert, 2022) explain that children could be deported to Rwanda, either before their age was assessed, or having been incorrectly assessed to be adults.

The most commonly reported risk to UASC is related to unsafe or inappropriate accommodation, or UASC being detained. 33 of the stories featured this. Some of these include details of specific situations, such as child victims of rape or torture being housed in hotels (Stevens, 2023) or children with diphtheria having to live in shipping containers (Burke, 2024b). Many of the articles provide data regarding how many children are living in unsuitable accommodation and for how long, and some also state that the Home Office and Kent County Council are acting unlawfully by using these settings for unaccompanied children. The principal

reason given for this is a lack of capacity in reception centres and foster care, though some of the stories suggest that incorrect age assessments result in children being treated as if they are adults.

22 of the articles discussed the risks posed to UASC by criminal gangs, acknowledging that in some cases the young people are trafficked to the UK so that they can be kidnapped and exploited in, for example, modern slavery, the drug trade or sex work All the newspapers, except the Sun, outlined in detail the risks associated with gangs, and three stories in the Mail (e.g., Wilcock, 2021) explained that some councils are fearful of the impact on the wider local authorities of an increase in gang activity.

Many of the articles include more than one risk, in that one risk may lead to another. This is most evident in the link between inadequate accommodation and vulnerabilities to criminal gangs, which is highlighted in at least ten stories. Because there is a lack of supervision, inadequate safeguarding procedures, or because UASC may not feel safe alone in hotels, they may be more easily targeted by gangs, and then kidnapped, or they may leave willingly. This then links to another risk, described in 22 of the articles, that UASC are frequently going missing, usually from hotels (or similar) rather than foster care. This features in all of the newspapers, except the Sun and the Mail, usually with data to show how many UASC have gone missing, where from and how many have then been found, or have returned.

Other risks included in the articles, though less frequently include the overcrowded and unsanitary migrant camps in Calais that UASC may experience prior to coming to the UK, racism and violence directed towards them in the UK, and self-harm, suicide and depression linked to their prior experiences and unsuitable accommodation in the UK.

Conclusion

Returning to the initial themes identified in previous research, of vulnerability, threat and genuineness, they remain prevalent in newspapers' coverage of UASC, in the 2020-2024 period. They are positioned by many of the articles as vulnerable. They are at risk of harm during the journey to the UK, they suffer from trauma, depression and may even attempt suicide while they are in the UK, and they are vulnerable to further negative experiences if they are deported to their home, or another country. However, even more evident is their positioning is vulnerable to failings of services that should be there to support them (e.g., local authorities, the Home Office) and criminal gangs that intend to exploit and / or abuse them. In these situations they appear to lack the power to affect what happens to them. This vulnerability and lack of influence is then presented as affecting UK citizens, via increased gang presence, and the criminality of the UASC, even though this may be unwilling, forced upon them by others.

Threat is most clearly linked to UASC via stories about their engagement in terrorism, even though relatively few examples are reported. These are used, and associated with other more common characteristics, such as crossing the channel, or lying about age, to imply that the threat of UASC is significant. They are also presented as threats to the safety of UK children in schools, again drawing on few examples to raise questions about the wider cohort. Rhetorical, emotive language, often in headlines, may be inferred by readers as an indication that the threat is more acute than it actually is. A different sort of threat, that to taxpayers and the return they see, is also evident.

Genuineness features in many articles, in particular in stories about the age of UASC. Many more of these discuss UASC lying about their age, than being incorrectly assessed as

adults. None of the articles engaged in meaningful discussions about why UASC may decide to not provide full and accurate personal information, instead there is again significant rhetoric, positioning the UASC as deceitful abusers of the immigration system, with possibly sinister intentions.

It is important to note that the newspapers are not all the same in their approach to their coverage of UASC. For example, The Sun published four articles in the sample that included coverage of UASC lying about their age, while the Mirror (often perceived as an alternative to The Sun) did not publish any, while The Times published far more articles than any of the other newspapers regarding UASC and trafficking or exploitation by gangs. Similarly, the Mail and the Express more frequently appear to use quotes and emotive language in their headlines, which may influence readers' perceptions of UASC, especially if they do not read the full article. Colleagues working with and for UASC cannot change how the media presents events, nor how this shapes wider inference. However, if stakeholders understand what these perspectives are and where they come from, they can challenge incomplete information, overly emotive perspectives, and outlier examples, to present a more balanced narrative.

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