



FROM BEING AGGRESSIVE TO RECEIVING PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT: MYTHS THAT LEAD TO MISINFORMATION ABOUT UNACCOMPANIED FOREIGN MINORS

[“Illegal immigrants in the Canary Islands steal motorcycles from food delivery workers after savagely assaulting them”](#) and [“35 unaccompanied foreign minors arrested for brutally raping 4 Ceuta youth after having apparently swum to shore in the city this afternoon”](#): these were two fake messages spread about violent acts allegedly committed in Spain by unaccompanied foreign minors. The first was published along with images of a robbery that had actually taken place in Italy, not Spain. The second began spreading following the entry of thousands of people on 17 May 2021 across the border between Ceuta and Morocco. The Spanish national police later reported that they had no record of this event happening or of the supposed arrests. Moreover, the account that posted this information did so through social media and deleted the content within hours of publishing it.

According to a survey conducted by [Atrevia for Maldita.es and Oxfam Intermón](#), [82% of the population](#) in Spain has heard statements that make a connection between unaccompanied foreign minors, regardless of where they are from, and a high propensity for violence. This survey, which analysed widespread messages on unaccompanied foreign minors and other migrant groups, also showed that the most frequent narratives about immigrants heard by the Spanish are also the most believed. In this case, 32% of the Spanish population believes there is a link between unaccompanied foreign minors and violence.

These fake messages directly affect unaccompanied minors who migrate to Spain. One such person is Ismail El Majdoubi, a 22-year-old Moroccan who came to Spain when he was just 16. He says he left Morocco to escape “the few available opportunities,” but what he





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El Majdouni, 22-year-old Moroccan who came to Spain when he was just 16.

found once he crossed the border was not easy, and his life in Spain has been difficult since he arrived. “From being called a *mena* (the acronym in Spanish for an unaccompanied foreign minor) to whatever else, people only say negative things”. One of his hardest experiences was living in several reception centres for minors for two years between 2015 and 2017, and where he felt even more singled out for migrating to Spain. “You are constantly singled out, questioned and treated like a criminal.”

But these centres were not the only place where he was treated this way. “There are groups on Facebook, Instagram, and other social media that sow hate, with constant attacks through lies, hoaxes, and very serious accusations toward migrant children. They take videos from Brazil, from other places, and say ‘look at the *menas*’,” he says.

One such video shows several children in a classroom pushing tables and chairs around and disobeying the teacher. These images were taken out of context and shared in June 2019 with messages like [“a school for immigrants, the savage behaviour of these menas. Watch the teacher”](#) or “we don’t want these people in our country”, and stating that it had happened in Granada. A few hours later, the video began being shared again, only having had occurred in different locations: Almería, Melilla and Catalonia. However, the images had been recorded at the María de Lourdes Teixeira school in the Carapicuíba area of São Paulo, Brazil, on 30 May 2019.

The use of the term *mena* itself is part of the problem, [according to bodies such as the ombudsman or UNICEF](#), which say that it objectifies and dehumanises this vulnerable group. In many cases, the term is used as shorthand to refer to minors from North Africa,

El comportamiento de los menas con la profesora. Esta gentuza no la queremos en nuestro país.



8:22 p. m. · 19 jun. 2020 · Twitter for Android

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Este video es de un colegio en España. Los jovenes menas no estan conformes con las reglas del colegio y no se adaptan y agreden a la profesora. No funciona ni funcionará este sistema y lo peor es que acabarán en la calle haciendo lo que si saben hacer...

1:32 28K views



12:54 AM · 10 Jun 2019

18 Retweets 11 Likes

9 18 11

says Blanca Garcés, a senior research fellow specialised in migration and the research coordinator at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB). “It ends up criminalising anyone who looks Moroccan, even people who are born here,” adds Garcés. Ismail El Majdoubi knows this all too well, not only because he was an unaccompanied minor from Morocco but also because of his experience with other minors

as a social mediator. “The image portrayed is clearly that of an aggressive delinquent. And it’s not about just any unaccompanied foreign minor – when they use the word mena as an insult, they mean minors from North Africa.”

The hoax of unaccompanied foreign minors receiving aid payments of 600 or 700 euros

Being linked to violence is not the only pejorative stereotype this group faces. According to the Barometer of Misinformation by *Maldita.es* and Oxfam Intermón, [70% of the population in Spain](#) has heard that minors receive substantial financial aid and are given preferential treatment over Spanish citizens. This false claim is reinforced with messages such as “*menas* get 600 or 664 euros while a widow receives a pension of 360 or 426 euros” or “monthly payments that *menas* receive mean they stay here for free. How many Spaniards get a free ride plus aid payments? This has to stop.”

But such messages are false, and unaccompanied foreign minors do not receive payments of 600 or 700 euros a month. Nor do they receive any type of aid different to that which a Spanish minor would receive under the same

conditions, that is to say, when they are wards of court. All the autonomous communities in Spain, which assume guardianship of unaccompanied foreign minors as well as Spanish wards, told *Maldita.es* that migrants do not receive that much money as a monthly payment. Furthermore, in 16 autonomous communities and in the autonomous city of Melilla, the reception centres for minors provide pocket money for good behaviour, regardless of nationality, in amounts that range from five to 30 euros a week, according to *Maldita.es*.

For example, officials from the Department of Citizenship and Social Rights in Aragón note that minors “receive a certain amount of money for recreational and transportation expenses” and say that “it is part of the educational programme for young

people”. They also explain that “it can be withdrawn or reduced if they have not followed the rules, or may be used to contribute to the costs of repairing items they deliberately damaged” and that “the concept of saving and responsible employment to pay for things they value (clothing, sports shoes, mobiles) is constantly reinforced.”



These children do not receive more resources simply because they are foreign

Iriana Santos, researcher at the University of Cantabria.



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According to the [Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia \(OBERAXE\)](#), under the authority of the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migrations, online hate speech against unaccompanied foreign minors rose in March and April 2021. Some 22% of the hate speech identified during those two months was related to unaccompanied foreign minors, says [the observatory](#). And according [to its latest report](#), hate content about unaccompanied foreign minors identified by OBERAXE accounted for up to 30% of all hate speech content in July and August 2021.

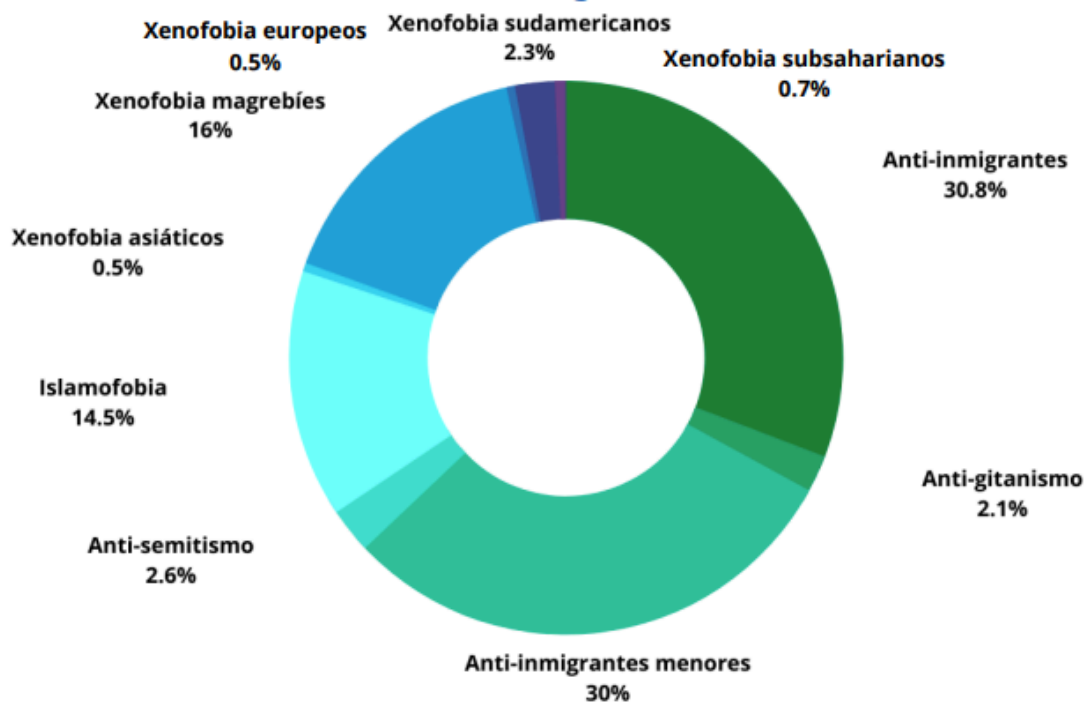
Iriana Santos, a researcher at the University of Cantabria who has analysed the wardship system of Spanish and foreign minors in the different autonomous communities, confirms that “these children do not receive more resources simply because they are foreign”. Santos explains that when it comes to the money spent on the wardship of unaccompanied foreign minors by the government, the amounts refer to compulsory expenditure on foster care: “It is mandatory and part of our obligations to take care of them.” This obligation is stipulated in Spain’s [Organic Law 1/1996](#) on the legal protection of minors, in the amendment to the Spanish civil code, and in the law on civil procedure, which

states in its article 10 that “foreign minors in Spain have the right to education, healthcare and basic social services and benefits, under the same conditions as Spanish minors”.

cooperate with the autonomous communities, the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, and the town councils to “integrate unaccompanied foreign minors”.

Additionally, in [Organic Law 4/2000](#) on the rights and freedoms of foreigners in Spain and their social integration, article 2 stipulates that the general administration of the state shall

Figura 4. Contenidos de discurso de odio según motivo de discriminación



Hate speech identified by OBERAXE between July and August 2021.

Exclusion as a problem



We have been abandoned, and the system responsible for us does nothing about it.

El Majdouni, 22-year-old Moroccan who came to Spain when he was just 16.

In view of this singling out and linking of unaccompanied foreign minors to criminality and spurious advantages with regard to aid, El Majdoubi feels “worried and powerless” and believes that the hoaxes promote violence against other minors in the same position he previously was. This young Moroccan was not just once part of this group – he now works with other foreign minors as a social mediator. “All this affects the mental health of young people and their integration. We have been abandoned, and the system responsible for us does nothing about it,” he says.

“It’s not just a problem of racism and xenophobia. There is also a problem of social exclusion,” adds Garcés. For the CIDOB researcher, exclusion is both a cause and consequence of the situation of these minors in Spain. She says that it is a problem that will continue in the years to come and that the exclusion is worsened by the lack of protection they receive when they reach 18. “They cannot access work or housing, making it a problem for the future. This exclusion and lack of protection is not only affects them, but all of society as well.”

Iriana Santos says that some administrations have taken steps to try to counter such exclusion in the reception centres before minors reach 18. As Santos explains, some autonomous communities have tried to mix Spanish minors with migrants in the centres, although she says that it has not always been possible, “not because there are Spaniards who are unprotected but because there are other measures that are available to them, such as being taken in by a foster family. There is a greater chance that a child from Spain will go to a foster family than a child from Morocco.”

The solution to this issue, according to Garcés, is “better public policy to ensure a process of deinstitutionalisation as they get older and better public policy to address this social crisis.” The Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migrations has proposed a reform of foreign regulations that is still in the draft stage. In this proposal, [which has been published on the Ministry’s website](#), the validity of residency permits for unaccompanied foreign minors will be extended from one to two years, and from two to five years in the case of renewal of the residency permit. Moreover, foreign identity cards (known as the TIE) will include the explicit indication “allowed to work”.

The draft document also provides for the transition of unaccompanied foreign minors to majority age, whether they have a residency permit or not. In both cases, the residency permit will allow them to work. The draft royal decree eliminates the obligation to have a work contract for access to this

residency permit. Nevertheless, as of 28 September 2021, this royal decree was still in the draft stage.

In addition to public policies, Garcés says that the reality of exclusion and stigmatisation must be combated with alternative narratives “that do not spread criminalising or victimising, paternalistic discourse.”

“I think we have a lot to offer,” says Ismail El Majdoubi. “We are a silenced group, without a voice. We need to support each other.” From his perspective as a someone who migrated alone to Spain as a minor, the solution to this problem would be to have the reception centres work to get their young residents to participate in public life, such as in public spaces in the local neighbourhood.



[Draft project RD Rloex
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