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Seen Only as a Threat: an analytical framework for violence affecting migrant and second-generation youth in Italy

Why a framework, and why now

In *The Architecture of Invisibility* I argued that systems built in sectoral silos cannot see problems that cross their boundaries. This follow-up turns the same lens on violence affecting migrant and second-generation adolescents in Italy, with a twist: these young people are largely invisible to the systems meant to protect them, and highly visible to those meant to control them. The public debate calls them *baby gang* or *maranza*, and since 2023 a sequence of penal measures has followed.

Italy is a safe country, by European standards and by its own past, that feels unsafe. My argument is that poverty, a broken social ladder and everyday rejection do not mainly produce violence. They produce **otherness**: anger, a sense of not (fully) belonging, and measurable harm to mental health. Otherness erodes social cohesion and, for a minority, draws young people towards groups that offer the belonging society withholds. The framework below is built to see that, and to be tested and rebuilt by young people themselves.



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The framework

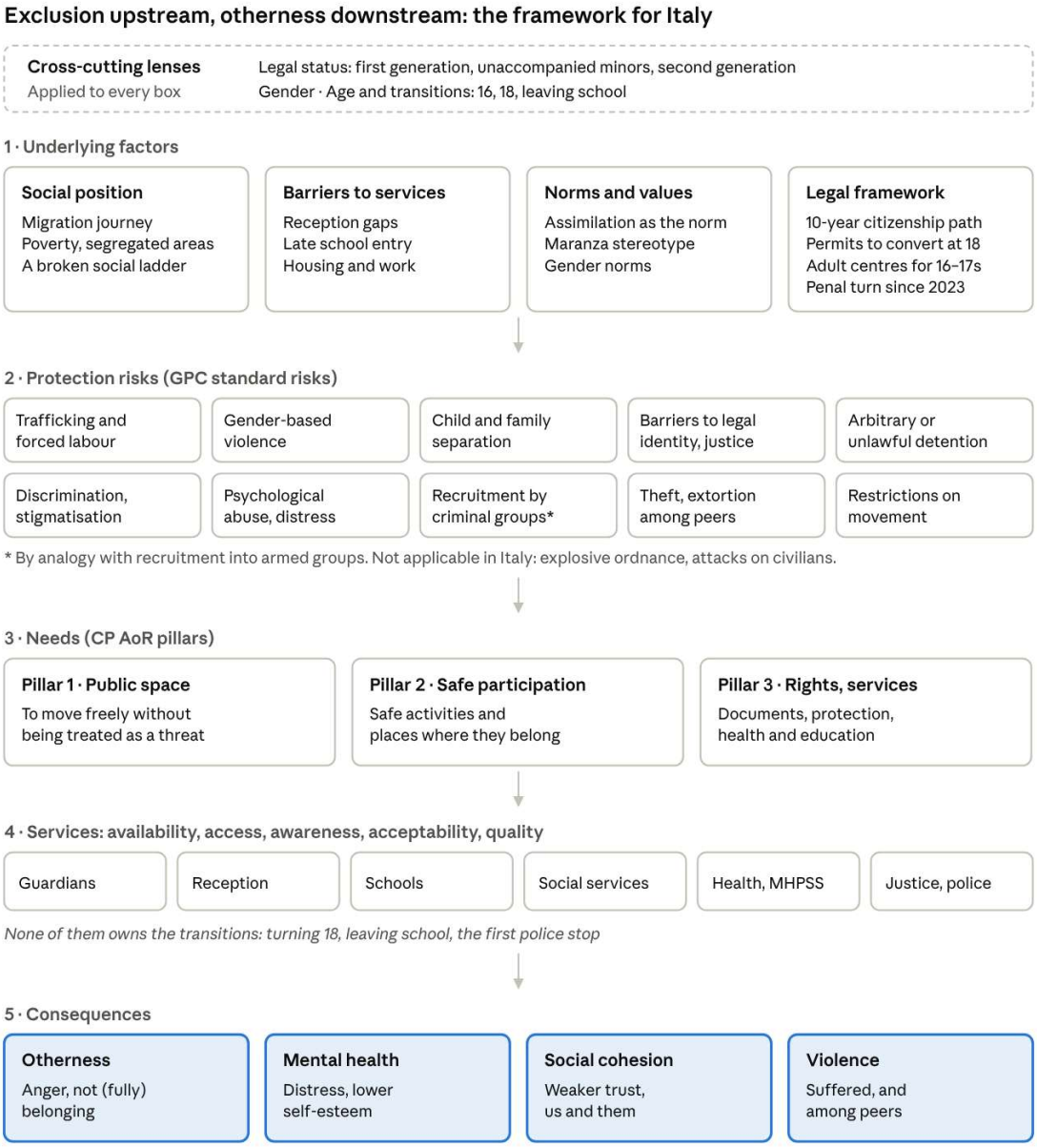


Figure 1. Protection analysis framework for violence affecting migrant and second-generation youth in Italy.

How to read it. Underlying factors raise or lower protection risks; risks generate needs; whether needs are met depends on services; together they shape the consequences. Ten most relevant risks in Italy appear in the figure, one of them by analogy: recruitment by criminal groups rather than armed groups. Child marriage, denial of access to information and degrading treatment are monitored but sit outside the core of this analysis.

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Three lenses cut across every box. **Legal status** separates first-generation arrivals, unaccompanied minors and the second generation, whose rights differ sharply. **Gender** shapes which risks appear: boys are more exposed to labour exploitation, girls to sexual exploitation and to invisibility. **Age** matters because risk peaks at transitions: 16, when the law allows unaccompanied minors into adult centres; 18, when protection, guardianship and reception end at once; and leaving school.

Services treat children in silos: guardians, reception centres, schools, social and health services, justice and police each see one slice of the same young person. None of them owns the transitions where risk peaks. Like its model, this framework is descriptive: it shows what to look at, not why it happens. The causal layer follows.

Evidence notes

1 · Underlying factors

- 17,011 unaccompanied minors were in Italy at the end of 2025; nearly four in five of the boys were 16 or 17 (Ministry of Labour).
- Parents need ten years of legal residence to apply for citizenship. A 2025 referendum to halve that requirement failed for lack of quorum despite a clear majority of yes votes. Istat found that more than half of foreign students who arrived after age 10 feel foreign rather than Italian.
- Since 2023, unaccompanied 16- and 17-year-olds may be placed in adult centres for up to 90 days, extendable by 60 (DL 133/2023). ActionAid counted 823 such minors in November 2025, in some cases near free places in dedicated centres.
- The penal turn: the Caivano decree (2023) widened pre-trial custody for minors; a 2026 security decree followed; a bill approved in July 2026 would presume criminal capacity from 14; a further decree came in October 2026 after clashes in Milan.

2 · Protection risks

- In 2023 the European Court of Human Rights found that Italy had unlawfully held unaccompanied minors in the Taranto hotspot.
- Girls are just over one in ten registered unaccompanied minors. Many never enter identification and reception, often because trafficking networks keep them out of sight.
- Foreign students were more than twice as likely as Italian peers not to see schoolmates outside school (21.6% against 9.3% in lower secondary, Istat 2015). That the most recent national data are this old is itself a gap.
- 46 minors were reported for mafia-type association in the first half of 2025 alone (Save the Children).

3–4 · Needs and services

- Most youth gangs identified in Italy are small, loosely structured groups of 15–17 year olds whose victims are mostly other young people; marginality is common among members but not universal (Transcrime).
- Adolescents describe carrying knives to feel protected or respected, in a cycle where fear produces weapons and weapons produce fear (Save the Children, *(Dis)armati*, 2026).
- Juvenile prisons began to see overcrowding after the Caivano decree, for the first time (Antigone).

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5 · Consequences and context

- Italy's homicide rate reached a historic low of 0.56 per 100,000 in 2024, among the lowest in Europe; recorded crime is lower than in Germany, France and Spain for every major category except theft (Istat; OCPI).
- Police reports involving minors reached about 39,600 in 2025, roughly a third above 2019. Reports count offences attributed to minors, not individuals, and move with enforcement as well as behaviour (Cornelli).
- The share of families who see their own area at risk of crime is lower than in 2014 (Istat), yet more than a quarter of Italians name baby gangs among the threats they feel most (Ipsos, October 2026).
- Perceived discrimination is consistently associated with lower well-being, more strongly for children than adults, including in longitudinal studies (Schmitt et al., 2014).

The causal layer

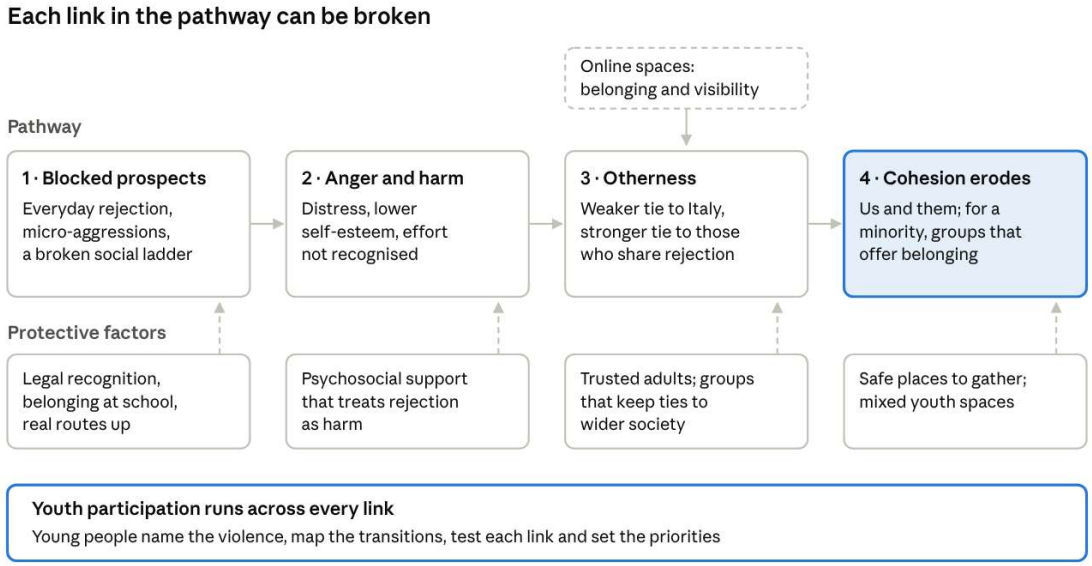


Figure 2. Causal pathway from rejection to the erosion of social cohesion, with protective factors · 4 links

Two bodies of literature anchor the pathway. **Segmented assimilation** (Portes and Zhou) shows how the children of immigrants follow different paths depending on how they are received: where upward routes are blocked and discrimination persists, adaptation can run downward. The **rejection-identification model** (Branscombe and colleagues) shows that perceiving discrimination as pervasive harms well-being directly and pushes people to identify more strongly with those who share the rejection. In-group identification protects mental health; the risk for cohesion lies in the other half of the movement, when belonging to the group comes at the cost of feeling part of the wider society. In my reading, this pathway erodes cohesion more than the cultural or religious differences that the *maranza* stereotype blames.

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Online spaces sit inside the pathway. Mainstream platforms filter most explicit violence; what travels is belonging: codes, music, neighbourhood names, recognition. One adolescent interviewed by Save the Children put the logic of visibility plainly: at least, if you scare people, "you are seen".

Violence enters at two points. Young people suffer it upstream, through exploitation, trafficking, discrimination and institutional violence. It appears downstream among peers, inside some of the groups that offer belonging, driven by status and fear more than by any project against society. Penal measures act only on this last link.

Young people as analysts

With youth advisory groups, mixed across migrant, second-generation and Italian adolescents, I would use the analytical framework in four steps: young people name what counts as violence, map the transitions where they fell between services, test the pathway against their own experience, and set priorities they own. Discovering that they fall through the same holes is itself a small act of social cohesion. Protection standards apply throughout: informed consent, confidentiality, and a referral pathway ready before each session.

A model for this already exists, though not in Europe. For three years I supported the African Movement of Working Children and Youth, founded in 1994 in Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire, by working children themselves and now present in 27 African countries. Its members are young people at the margins: domestic workers, apprentices, children working in the street. They organise in local groups, set their own priorities around twelve rights they defined, and negotiate with authorities. The movement reports very low levels of crime among its members, no violence and no recruitment into armed groups. Part of that may reflect who chooses to join, and the figures are the movement's own. But the mechanism fits the pathway above: the movement offers belonging, recognition and a role, the very things whose absence produces otherness. Participation is not an add-on in that model; it is the intervention.

The **EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027** points the same way. Participation is at its centre, its eleven European Youth Goals were drafted by young people, and three map directly onto this framework: *Inclusive Societies*, *Mental Health and Wellbeing*, and *Space and Participation for All*. It diverges in three respects. It is non-binding, in a field where the EU only supports national policy, so it cannot reach the security and justice measures at stake here. It says little about protection. And its channels tend to reach young people who are already organised and included. This framework treats participation from the margins as a condition, not an outcome.

What it implies

- **Make transitions the unit of intervention**: continuity of a trusted adult across the 18th birthday, using tools that already exist, such as the extension of support up to 21.
- **Treat safe places to gather as protective**, and weigh restrictions on gathering against that role.
- **Recognise rejection as harm** in psychosocial support.
- **Measure belonging and discrimination** regularly, so that policy follows incidence rather than perception.

Legal and social recognition sits beneath all four: of the protective factors in the framework, it is the one most clearly within public control. Here the system sees these young people clearly, but only as a threat.

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A protection framework asks what they are exposed to, what they lack, and how they can come to belong.

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