

The Bus Treats Her As A Passenger

A child was moving through rooms, sidewalks, streets, borders, forums, and files before the platform named her a user.

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Lucía is not one child. She is a composite route through systems that usually describe young people from above: as minors, runaways, homeless youth, migrants, unaccompanied children, at-risk clients, cases, and users. Those words matter because they are not only descriptions. They are administrative handles. Each one tells a system how to see her, what to do with her, what to record, what to ignore, and where responsibility is supposed to move.

But before any of those names attach to her, she is sitting in a bus seat with a bag under her legs, a phone in her hand, and a ticket that says she may remain there for now.

The bus does not ask whether she has a stable home. It does not ask whether she is safe. It does not ask whether the last adult who offered help was trustworthy. It does not ask whether she is a child, a young adult, a problem, a survivor, a runaway, a migrant, or a future statistic. The bus treats her as a passenger.

Other people get on with clearer stories. A man in work boots sleeps like someone who knows where he is going. A mother lifts a child into the seat beside her and becomes legible as care before anyone asks her name. Two teenagers laugh too loudly until the driver looks in the mirror. A woman keeps papers in a plastic folder on her lap. Someone speaks Spanish into a phone near the back.

The bus holds all of them briefly without solving any of them.

That is what makes it useful. It is not justice. It is not shelter. It is not protection. It is only a temporary room where classification has not yet fully caught up.

Every system outside the bus tries to decide what kind of person Lucía is.

Greyhound's own rules already show how unstable the categories are. Travelers aged sixteen and up qualify as adults when traveling, while children fifteen and under must be accompanied by a parent, legal guardian, or another passenger at least sixteen. The bus company has one threshold. The law has others. The person in the seat is the same person. The category changes around her. [1]

This is not a story about a girl running away. That would be too small. It is not a full map of childhood across the Americas either. That would be too large for one article. It is a route through several systems that keep renaming young people before they are ever understood as users.

The claim is narrower and harder:

adults removed too many places to be, then acted surprised when the feed became one of the remaining rooms.

I. The Seat

The bus from Atlanta, Georgia to Birmingham, Alabama is useful because it is ordinary. It is not a cinematic border crossing or a dramatic escape route. It is a real intercity route, short enough to feel mundane and long enough to move a young person from one legal atmosphere into another. Greyhound lists the route as a short interstate trip, with an average trip duration under two hours and a quickest trip around one hour and twenty minutes. [2]

That short distance matters. In Georgia, the age of legal majority is eighteen. Until that age, people are minors. In Alabama, the age of majority is nineteen. A person can therefore be old enough to be read as legally adult in one state and not yet fully adult in the next. [3][4]

Imagine Lucía is eighteen. She leaves Atlanta as someone the law can read one way. She arrives in Birmingham under a different legal threshold. She has not become younger. She has not changed her mind. She has not lost a year of development somewhere between exits. The file changed around her.

That is the first design fact. In America, adulthood can be territorial. A young person can cross a state line by bus and become differently legible before the next stop.

The birthday does not transform the child. It transforms the file.

II. The Room And The Sidewalk

The article should not begin with the phone. That is the usual mistake. Adults keep asking what the feed is doing to children. The harder question is what adults removed before the feed became the room.

Before Lucía becomes a user, she needs somewhere to be. Not a platform. Not a content stream. Not a moderated account. A room.

A room does not only mean shelter. It means permission to exist without constantly performing usefulness. It is a place where a young person is not automatically a customer, a patient, a student, a suspect, a liability, a trespasser, or a problem waiting for an adult system to classify.

But the room is not the only missing space.

Through the bus window, the country explains itself in fragments: gas stations separated from housing by roads too wide to cross comfortably, bus stops without shade, sidewalks that begin and end without warning, parking lots larger than the buildings they serve, fast-food signs visible long before any safe pedestrian crossing appears.

The Federal Highway Administration's pedestrian and bicyclist safety guidance describes the same basic infrastructure problem in official language: communities may lack sidewalks, curb ramps, safe crossing space, connected paths, or pedestrian accommodation near bus stops. [5]

This is not only architecture. It is a theory of childhood.

A young person without a car is not simply less mobile. She is less invited. The built environment tells her where she may pass, where she may wait, and where she becomes suspicious by standing still.

A room gives permission to remain.

A sidewalk gives permission to move.

When both are missing, the phone becomes more than entertainment. It becomes map, waiting room, warning system, and temporary world.

This is why older traditions of youth power matter. In Denmark, the 1973 documentary *Børnemagt* described a movement in which children and young people between eight and eighteen spoke about their struggle against adult dominance. That detail matters because it starts from a different assumption: children and young people are not only people to be protected; they can also be people with political voice, cultural force, and collective agency. [6]

The United States has its own historical parallels. The Youth Liberation Organization in Ann Arbor was founded in 1970 and described its goal as maximum freedom and self-determination for young people. Its archive frames young people as actors who should have a voice in decision-making, not merely as objects of adult management. [7]

Those traditions do not solve Lucía's situation. They were not built for a child crossing state lines with a bus ticket, unstable housing, and no reliable adult system waiting at the other end. *Børnemagt* and Ann Arbor Youth Liberation were largely northern, organized traditions with their own limits, their own exclusions, and their own social conditions. They matter here not because they fully represent Lucía, but because they preserve an older possibility: that young people can be understood as political subjects, not only as risks to be managed.

A closer line would have to run through youth-led and lived-experience work around homelessness, migration, and survival. That is not fully mapped in this article. But the principle is already visible enough to keep in view: protection is not enough if the young person has no voice in the system built around them.

The point is not that Lucía needs a youth movement before she needs a bed. The point is that protection without voice has already accepted too much adult control.

The point is not to romanticize youth autonomy. The point is to refuse a model where adults first remove space, then remove power, then call the remaining child vulnerable.

III. The Station

A bus station is not a room. It only imitates one. It has seats, lights, toilets, signs, vending machines, cameras, announcements, security, charging points if you are lucky, and people trying not to look as stranded as they are.

The station is what a city offers when it has no room for you but has not yet removed you.

Lucía can wait there for a while. But waiting in public has a different meaning depending on who waits. A business traveler waits. A student waits. A tourist waits. A child alone waits differently. An unhoused teenager waits under suspicion.

The same body in the same chair can become a different social fact after midnight.

The mother with the small child is asked if she needs help. Lucía is asked where she is going. The difference is not only age. It is legibility. A baby makes care visible. A teenager traveling alone makes adults uncertain whether they are seeing independence, danger, disobedience, poverty, survival, or a story they do not want to enter.

This is where public space becomes political. The adult city often allows young people to move through space more easily than it allows them to remain in space. Buy something. Go somewhere. Be enrolled. Be supervised. Be useful. Be expected. But do not simply be here.

The first punishment is not always arrest. Sometimes it is having nowhere to stand without explanation.

IV. The Bed

For some young people, “the room” is already too optimistic. The bed disappeared first.

Youth homelessness is difficult to count because it is often hidden. It does not always look like sleeping on the sidewalk. It can look like rotating between friends, sleeping in cars, staying with unsafe adults, couch surfing, motel rooms, shelters, school instability, bus stations, or one bad offer away from danger.

The official numbers show the problem from different angles. HUD’s 2024 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report uses a point-in-time method and includes categories for unaccompanied children under eighteen and unaccompanied youth aged eighteen to twenty-four. A point-in-time count is useful, but it is also narrow by design. [8]

Other systems see what a one-night count can miss. Public schools identified 1,548,191 students experiencing homelessness in the 2023–2024 school year, according to SchoolHouse Connection’s summary of federal education data. That figure is not the same kind of number as HUD’s point-in-time count. It measures a different layer of instability across an academic year. [9]

Those numbers should not be collapsed into one dramatic total. They measure different things. HUD counts visible and service-connected homelessness at a specific moment. Schools identify housing instability over time. Both are incomplete. Both matter.

The gap between them is part of the story. A child can be homeless without looking like the public image of homelessness. A child can be in school and still have no stable room. A child can be “housed” tonight in a place that is not safe tomorrow.

Homelessness does not always begin on the sidewalk. Sometimes it begins as a rotation of unsafe rooms.

V. The Street

Now the street enters the article. Not as romance. Not as grit. Not as a place where suffering becomes aesthetic. As a system.

The street has rules. Some are legal. Some are informal. Some are predatory. Some are protective. Some are invented by people who were left there too long.

Street papers reveal something important here. The International Network of Street Papers describes street papers as newspapers or magazines sold by people experiencing poverty, homelessness, or marginalisation, giving people an immediate, dignified, and legitimate way to earn money while also addressing poverty and homelessness through journalism and advocacy. [10]

That is a lawful interface between poverty and the public. A person stands in public space with a paper, a badge, a pitch, and a recognized role. Not always safely. Not always fairly. But legibly.

The Big Issue describes its vendor model as a kind of mini-business in which vendors buy and sell the magazine and keep the margin. Its support services include checking ID to ensure vendors are over eighteen, finding a pitch, giving initial copies, and allocating a vendor badge so the public knows the seller is legitimate. [11]

That age boundary matters. For adults, the street can sometimes be organized as work. For children, the street is organized as risk.

This does not mean children should simply be handed newspapers and sent onto corners. That would be a stupid conclusion. The point is sharper: society knows how to legalize visibility when it wants to. It can create badges, rules, contracts, pitches, vendor IDs, payment systems, and public legitimacy.

But when a young person is visible in the same street, the frame changes. Where are your parents? Are you safe? Are you working? Are you being exploited? Are you missing? Are you lying? Are you a case?

The adult street vendor shows that society can build a lawful interface between poverty and the public. The exploited child shows what happens when visibility exists without protection, power, or safe infrastructure.

Adults can be given a badge, a paper, and a pitch. Children are given a case file — or found by someone worse before the case file exists.

VI. The Offer

This is the dark part, and it should not be written loudly. No spectacle. No moral theater. No details that turn harm into content. Just the system consequence.

When a young person lacks a room, a bed, safe adults, stable money, documents, transport, and somewhere to go, help becomes dangerous. A ride can be help, but it can also become leverage. A couch can be help, but it can also become access. Food can be help, but it can also become debt. A phone charger can be help, but it can also become the beginning of dependence.

The man who offers help does not have to begin as a villain. That is the problem. The offer that sounds like kindness is not always lying. That is why it works.

The problem is not that every offer is evil. The problem is that survival negotiated privately creates a market around vulnerability.

This is why language matters. “Child prostitution” is the wrong frame. ECPAT warns that terms such as “child prostitute” or “child pornography” shift blame onto children and distort public understanding. The better language is sexual exploitation of children, or commercial sexual exploitation of children. A child is not a prostitute. A child is exploited. [12]

Covenant House’s research and data show that young people experiencing homelessness are especially vulnerable to human trafficking; its public material reports that nearly one in five Covenant House residents across U.S. and Canada sites are survivors of human trafficking. This should not be read as a claim about all homeless young people. It is a warning from a high-risk service-connected population. [13]

The street can become an economy, and children should not have to negotiate inside that economy. When survival has to be negotiated privately, help can become a doorway.

VII. The Border

Spanish moves through the aisle before the article reaches the border.

That matters because the bus route does not stop with Georgia and Alabama. That is only the clean American version of the problem.

The Americas are connected by child routes. This article cannot map all of them. It follows one pressure line: how housing instability, violence, migration, poverty, family separation, climate pressure, border enforcement, informal networks, shelters, detention, sponsorship, schools, phones, and platforms can turn a child into a moving administrative problem before anyone has built a stable room around her.

UNICEF estimated in May 2024 that 160,000 children and adolescents could cross the Darién Gap that year, up from 113,000 in 2023. It also reported that more than 30,000 children had crossed in the first four months of 2024, with nearly 2,000 unaccompanied or separated from their families. [14]

The route is not only a line on a map. It is a machine that changes names.

A child can become a migrant. A migrant can become unaccompanied. Unaccompanied can become processed. Processed can become released. Released can become sponsored. Sponsored can become missing. Enrolled can become unenrolled. Safe can become uncertain again.

At the border, the child is protected and processed at the same time.

That contradiction is not accidental. It is built into the administrative imagination. The child is vulnerable enough to justify intervention, but also recordable enough to become a file. The shelter bed becomes a data point. The phone becomes an address book, a map, a risk, a proof, a memory, a contact surface, and sometimes the only remaining room.

VIII. The Birthday

Lucía turns eighteen. Nothing visible happens. No magic. No clean transformation. No sudden maturity arrives at midnight. But the systems shift.

In one setting, she is old enough. In another, too young. In another, still a minor. In another, responsible. In another, protected. In another, punishable. In another, excluded from child systems. In another, not yet eligible for adult ones.

The United States does not have one adulthood. It has overlapping thresholds. Georgia uses eighteen for legal majority. Alabama uses nineteen. Alcohol purchase and public possession are generally tied to twenty-one through the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, tobacco sales are federally restricted under twenty-one, and many adult-use cannabis laws also use twenty-one as the adult threshold. [15][16]

This is not just trivia. It is a design problem.

The state knows eighteen is not fully adult when the risk is alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, or other controlled consumption. But it can still treat eighteen as adult enough when the risk is housing instability, street survival, institutional abandonment, or punishment.

That is the contradiction. Old enough to be responsible. Not always old enough to be trusted. Old enough to be outside child protection. Not always old enough to be safe inside adult systems.

The birthday does not transform the child. It transforms the file.

And vulnerable young people are forced to survive the transition before the transition has made them safe.

IX. The Forum

Now the internet enters. Not as the first layer, but as the layer young people use when the others fail.

The phone has been in Lucía's hand since the beginning. The article has not ignored it. It has delayed it.

That delay matters.

If official rooms fail, unofficial rooms appear: forums, hotlines, resource maps, shelter pages, Reddit threads, WhatsApp groups, TikTok fragments, search results, direct messages, screenshots, warnings, lists, and rumors.

A public forum such as r/runaway is not just "kids online." Its rules are revealing. The community forbids asking for rides, places to stay, jobs, or similar direct help from internet strangers because that can become trafficking risk; its wiki warns users not to accept offers for jobs, rides, money, or places to stay from people messaging them. It even warns that AI-generated information is often unreliable. [17]

That is important. The forum is not only disorder. It is informal safety infrastructure. The young people are not only "online too much." Some are trying to survive the failures of offline systems with the only tools that still answer.

But this research must be handled carefully. Public does not mean ethically free. Guidance on researching online forums warns that such work raises ethical issues around informed consent, privacy, and anonymity. That matters even when a page is technically visible. [18]

So the article should not mine vulnerable young people for quotes. No usernames. No screenshots. No direct extraction of crisis posts. No turning a child's fear into evidence for an adult's argument. Forums can show the shape of the system. They should not become another way to take from the people inside it.

X. The Feed Arrives Last

Only now should the feed appear.

Not at the beginning. Not as the master explanation. Not as the villain that caused everything. The feed arrives after the room is missing, after the sidewalk is broken, after the bed is unstable, after the street becomes dangerous, after the station becomes temporary shelter, after the border becomes a child route, after the birthday changes the file, and after the phone becomes map, ticket, hotline, proof, entertainment, danger, and room.

This is why the common adult question is too late. "What is social media doing to children?" is not useless, but it is incomplete. It asks about the layer adults can see most easily. It asks about the screen because the screen is visible, measurable, regulatable, and politically convenient.

But the child was already inside a system before the feed appeared.

danah boyd's distinction between risk and harm is useful here. She argues that people face risks in any social environment, including social media, and that many social media harms involve people using social environments to harm others. That does not make platforms innocent, but it does make the diagnosis more complicated than panic. [19]

A safer feed is not enough if the child has nowhere safe to go offline. Age checks are not enough if the child is age-checked into homelessness. Parental controls are not enough if the child is escaping the parent. Content moderation is not enough if the child's problem is hunger, a locked door, a threatening adult, a missing document, a state line, or a bus station at night.

The feed did not create the missing room. It became the room after the room was missing.

But safety without power is not justice. It is management.

A young person can be kept away from the feed and still left without a room. Removed from the street and still not given a home. Processed at the border and still not heard. Turn eighteen and still not have what adulthood requires.

The adult system often calls this care because it did something.

But doing something is not the same as building what was missing.

XI. What Lucía Shows

Lucía was never only a user. She was a passenger first, then a body in a station, then a young person watching a country without sidewalks move past the window, then maybe a student without stable housing, then maybe a minor, then maybe an adult, then maybe not fully adult, then maybe a case, a risk, a profile, a data point, and finally a feed.

The order matters.

If technology enters the analysis too early, the child disappears. The adult debate becomes a debate about platforms, harms, access, bans, moderation, and age verification. All of those can matter. But they are not the first layer.

The first layer is simpler and harder.

Where was she supposed to go?

That question is less convenient than “how do we make the feed safer?” It points away from the screen and back toward the world adults built, or failed to build: rooms, sidewalks, beds, youth power, street safety, real housing, non-predatory help, migration protection, legal continuity, actual listening, and actual places.

The bus treats her as a passenger. The law treats her as a threshold. The shelter treats her as eligibility. The street treats her as exposure. The border treats her as a file. The forum treats her as someone who needs warnings. The feed treats her as a user.

But none of those names answer the first question.

Where was she supposed to go?

XII. Final Note

Technology comes last here, not because it is irrelevant, but because it is too easy to blame when the deeper architecture is harder to face.

Lucía's phone did not create the housing crisis. Her account did not create the border. Her search history did not create the street economy. Her messages did not create age thresholds. Her screen did not create the absence of safe youth space. Her feed did not remove the sidewalk.

The feed is real. The risks are real. The harms can be real.

But the child was already moving through systems before the platform named her a user.

That is the order in this article: room, sidewalk, bed, street, offer, border, birthday, forum, feed.

If we reverse that order, we do not protect children. We only make the last layer responsible for everything adults failed to build before it.

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RELATION MEMORY

MATURES FROM [The Readable Mind](#) · Moves the context-collapse and interpretive-infrastructure question from psychological AI into administrative classification around young people before platforms name them users.

NEARBY [The Instrument Is Not the Identity](#) · Shares the same boundary discipline: a category, instrument, or surface can make someone legible without proving who they are.

NEARBY [Ideas Are Not Safe Inside The Window](#) · Connects the article to HR's wider rule that context must leave fragile rooms and become durable, reviewable structure.

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