

## Protecting Child Victims and Children at Risk: A Victims' Rights, Risk Reduction and Resilience Approach

### Introduction

Children across Europe face a growing range of risks in both the physical and digital worlds, including violence, abuse, exploitation, trafficking, hate crime, online harms and recruitment into criminal activities. Protecting children from crime therefore requires a comprehensive, child-centred and rights-based approach that goes beyond criminal justice responses alone. The EU Action Plan presents an important opportunity to strengthen prevention, victim protection, early intervention and resilience-building by addressing the factors that increase vulnerability while reinforcing the protective environments that help children stay safe, recover from harm and thrive. Evidence gathered by VSE members in 2026 confirms the need for this broader approach. Across national contexts, children's victimisation appears not only as isolated criminal incidents, but as a pattern shaped by gender, age, family context, hidden violence, barriers to disclosure and the growing overlap between online and offline harms. Victim Support Europe welcomes this initiative and submits the following recommendations to support the development of an ambitious and effective European framework for protecting children against crime.

### Protecting Children from Crime: A Risk Reduction, Victims' Rights and Social Resilience Approach

The protection of children from crime should be framed not only as a criminal justice objective, but also as child protection, victims' rights, public health, risk reduction, and social resilience priority. Children can be affected by crime in multiple ways: as direct victims of violence, abuse, exploitation, trafficking, hate crime, online abuse or sexual violence; as witnesses of crime; through exposure to crime within their families or communities; through grooming, coercion or recruitment into harmful and criminal activities; and through a growing range of digital harms, including online sexual exploitation, image-based abuse, sextortion, scams and manipulation. Children may also face further harm when institutions fail to identify their needs and provide timely support. This broader understanding is reflected by VSE Member Input, where members reported that online and offline victimisation increasingly overlap, including grooming, sextortion, cyberbullying, stalking, image-based abuse and exposure to harmful content. This confirms that digital harm should not be treated separately from child protection, victim support and risk reduction policy.

The Action Plan should recognise that supporting child victims is not only a response after harm has occurred; it is also a powerful risk reduction strategy. Early identification, accessible reporting mechanisms, child-sensitive and trauma-informed support services, and coordinated multi-agency responses can reduce secondary victimisation, interrupt cycles of trauma and exploitation, strengthen recovery, and increase resilience to future victimisation. Protecting children from crime therefore requires a holistic approach that combines risk reduction, protection, support, participation, and recovery. The risk reduction value of support becomes particularly clear where victimisation is prolonged or hidden. In Portugal, APAV found

that continued victimisation affected 36.4% of girls and 37.5% of boys, with many continued cases lasting between two and six years before contact with specialist services. These figures show that support services are not only recovery mechanisms but also routes to earlier detection and interruption of harm.<sup>1</sup>

This approach is consistent with the evidence-based INSPIRE framework developed by WHO, UNICEF and international partners, which highlights the importance of integrated measures including effective laws, safe environments, parent and caregiver support, response and support services, education and life skills.<sup>2</sup> The EU Action Plan should build on these principles by promoting **coordinated action across justice, child protection, education, health, digital policy and victim support systems, placing the best interests of the child at the centre of all responses.**

## Understanding Vulnerability Factors, Root Causes and Support Factors

Child victimisation should not be viewed as an isolated incident detached from the child's wider environment. Vulnerability is shaped by a combination of individual, family, community, digital and societal factors that may increase a child's exposure to harm or limit their ability to seek protection and support. These factors include previous victimisation or trauma, exposure to domestic violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation, poverty and social exclusion, family instability, disability, migration status, care experience, discrimination, mental health difficulties, unsafe peer or online environments, limited digital literacy, and barriers to accessing services. Harmful gender stereotypes and the normalisation or romanticisation of violence and criminal behaviour may further increase children's vulnerability.

Evidence gathered through VSE Member Input confirms that family and close social environments are central to understanding both risk and protection. In Austria, respondents most often associated physical and psychological violence against children with the nuclear family, 52%, while sexual violence was most often associated with the wider family, 36%. In Greece, helpline data showed that parents were the most frequently reported perpetrators.<sup>3</sup> These findings show that child protection policies must move beyond a narrow focus on stranger danger and ensure that children have safe, trusted and accessible routes to disclose harm, including outside the immediate family environment.

The Action Plan should therefore adopt a holistic risk reduction approach that addresses both vulnerability factors and protective factors. Risk reduction cannot be limited to awareness-raising campaigns or institutional responses after harm has occurred. It must also strengthen the conditions that help children remain safe, seek help early, and build resilience. This includes trusted relationships with adults, safe and supportive family environments, inclusive schools, digital and victims' rights literacy, positive peer networks, accessible mental health services, community-based support, sports, arts and other positive developmental opportunities, as well as clear referral pathways to child protection and victim support services.

This focus on protective factors is particularly important in relation to emerging online risks, exploitation, recruitment into criminal activities, and repeat victimisation. Building resilience, fostering belonging, and

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<sup>1</sup> APAV, Crianças e Jovens Vítimas de Crime e Violência, 2025 data, report published 2026

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, INSPIRE: Seven strategies for ending violence against children, <https://inspire-strategies.org/inspire-seven-strategies-ending-violence-against-children>

<sup>3</sup> Die möwe/Gallup Austria, Bewusstsein der österreichischen Bevölkerung für Gewalt an Kindern und Jugendlichen, 2025, <https://die-moewe.at/gewaltstudie-2025/>; The Smile of the Child, National Child Helpline SOS 1056, 2025, submitted data.

ensuring that children know where to turn for help are essential elements of prevention. Integrated cross-sector responses should therefore be encouraged, bringing together child protection, education, health, justice, victim support and community actors to address the root causes of vulnerability and strengthen the protective environments around children. Evidence from Germany further highlights the need for early detection beyond formal reporting systems: violence against children and adolescents often occurs in the immediate social environment and may remain in the “dark field” of unreported cases, while police crime statistics cited by the German partner indicate that “home” was recorded as the crime scene in 22% of violent crime cases.<sup>4</sup>

## Preventing Victimization, Secondary Victimization and Reducing Risks

Protecting children from crime requires action not only to prevent initial harm, but also to prevent further harm caused by institutional responses and reduce pertinent risks. Too often, children who come into contact with justice, child protection or other systems experience secondary victimisation when they are not believed, blamed, repeatedly questioned, denied age-appropriate information, left without support, exposed to unsafe procedures, or treated according to stereotypes about how a “real victim” should behave. Poor privacy and data protection practices can further undermine children's safety and trust in institutions. Criminal and judicial proceedings are often insufficiently victim sensitive. Victims may be reduced to the status of evidence, and access to psychotherapy may be delayed or denied because of concerns that treatment could affect testimony.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, strong emphasis should be placed on reducing both victimisation and secondary victimisation.

For child victims, justice cannot be measured solely by reporting rates, investigations, or prosecutions. It must also be measured by whether children can safely report abuse, receive clear and child-friendly information, access timely support services, be protected from intimidation and retaliation, have their privacy respected, and participate in proceedings in a safe, age-appropriate and trauma-informed manner. Every interaction with institutions should contribute to recovery, protection, and empowerment rather than creating additional harm.<sup>6</sup>

A child-centred and multidisciplinary approach is essential. The Council of Europe Guidelines on Child-Friendly Justice and the EU's child rights framework provide important foundations for ensuring that systems are designed around the needs and best interests of children. Practical models such as Barnahus demonstrate how justice, health, child protection and victim support services can work together to reduce repeated questioning, improve coordination, strengthen evidence gathering and support children's recovery. The wider implementation of integrated, trauma-informed and child-friendly approaches across the EU should be promoted, ensuring that children are protected not only from crime itself but also from the risks of secondary victimisation throughout their journey to safety, support and justice.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Germany WEISSER RING, 2025/2026, with suggested references to BKA police crime statistics and the BKA LeSuBiA study

<sup>5</sup> Germany, WEISSER RING, submitted material.

<sup>6</sup> VSE, Safe Justice for Victims of Crime, [https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files/mf/1677284356SafeJusticeforvictimsofCrime\\_compressed1.pdf](https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files/mf/1677284356SafeJusticeforvictimsofCrime_compressed1.pdf); FRA, Child-friendly justice: Perspectives and experiences of children involved in judicial proceedings as victims, witnesses or parties, [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2017-child-friendly-justice-children-s-perspective\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2017-child-friendly-justice-children-s-perspective_en.pdf); Council of Europe, Barnahus mapping, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/barnahus-mapping-launch-event>.

<sup>7</sup> Council of Europe, Guidelines on Child-Friendly Justice, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/child-friendly-justice>

## A Gender-Sensitive and Intersectional Approach to Child Victimization

The Action Plan should adopt a gender-sensitive and intersectional approach to understanding and responding to child victimization. Such an approach should move beyond prevalence figures and examine how boys and girls may experience different forms of victimization, disclose harm differently, be identified differently by professionals, and face distinct barriers to accessing support and recovery. Differences may arise in the nature of the victimization, the relationship with perpetrators, exposure to online and offline harms, reporting and disclosure patterns, experiences of shame and stigma, psychological and social impacts, access to services, and risks of secondary victimization. Recognizing these patterns is essential to ensure that support and protection measures are responsive to children's actual needs. VSE Member Input illustrates that gender differences are not uniform across age groups or forms of harm. In Greece, the National Child Helpline SOS 1056 recorded 1,410 reports of serious child abuse and neglect in 2025, concerning 2,674 children: 1,143 boys, 42.7%, 983 girls, 36.8%, and 548 children, 20.5%, whose sex and/or age was unknown. Boys were more represented among younger children, while girls were more represented among adolescents.

At the same time, children's experiences cannot be understood through gender alone. Victimization is often shaped by multiple and intersecting factors, including disability, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, migration status, poverty, care experience, family circumstances, previous trauma and social exclusion. These vulnerabilities can increase exposure to crime, create additional barriers to disclosure and support, and influence how children are treated by institutions. Policies and services should therefore avoid one-size-fits-all approaches and instead ensure flexible, tailored and child-centred responses. APAV's 2025 data from Portugal further shows why age, gender and migration-related factors should be considered together. Among 3,941 children and young victims supported, 2,297 were girls, 58.3%, and 1,644 were boys, 41.7%. Girls had a higher average age than boys when receiving support, 11 years compared with 9 years, while foreign victims represented 15.8% of girls and 14.1% of boys, most of whom were immigrants.<sup>8</sup> A gender-sensitive approach does not mean reinforcing stereotypes about boys and girls. Rather, it means recognising different patterns of risk, harm, and support needs, while ensuring that every child can be identified, protected and supported. To achieve this, the EU should invest in better age- and sex-disaggregated data collection and research, particularly in areas that remain underreported or poorly understood, including child hate crime, online victimization, boys' experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation, and forms of victimization linked to intersecting discrimination and vulnerabilities. Strengthening the evidence base will support more effective risk reduction, protection, support and recovery measures for all children affected by crime. German evidence highlights that boys' and young men's disclosure and help-seeking may be shaped by masculinity norms, shame, stigma and expectations of toughness. Also, WEISSER RING Germany service-use data indicating that female victims account for 75.89% of cases handled, which reinforces the need to improve outreach to boys while maintaining strong protection for girls.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> APAV, Crianças e Jovens Vítimas de Crime e Violência: Uma análise das desigualdades de género nos dados da APAV, 2025 data, report published 2026

<sup>9</sup> Germany, WEISSER RING, 2025/2026; suggested reference: Messerschmidt, Crime as Structured Action

## Child sexual abuse and exploitation as one of the most severe forms of victimisation

Child sexual abuse and exploitation remain among the most severe forms of child victimisation, causing profound and often lifelong consequences for mental health, wellbeing, trust, relationships, education and participation in society. Despite increased awareness and policy attention, the scale of the problem remains alarming. UNICEF's 2024 global estimates found that more than 370 million girls and women alive today, around one in eight, experienced rape or sexual assault before the age of 18. When non-contact forms of sexual violence are included, the figure rises to approximately 650 million, or one in five girls and women globally.<sup>10</sup> In Europe, the Council of Europe estimates that around one in five children experience some form of sexual violence during childhood, while between 70% and 85% of child victims know the perpetrator. These figures highlight that child sexual abuse is often perpetrated within relationships of trust, authority, dependency or familiarity, making identification, disclosure and protection particularly challenging.<sup>11</sup>

The different ways in which boys and girls may experience and respond to sexual abuse and exploitation should be recognised. Girls are more frequently identified as victims and may be disproportionately affected by sexual exploitation, grooming, image-based abuse, coercion, sexualised violence and online gender-based abuse. At the same time, boys remain significantly affected but often face additional barriers to identification and support, including shame, stigma, fear of not being believed, harmful stereotypes around masculinity and a lack of services that explicitly recognise boys as victims. Evidence suggests that younger children, boys and children who have not previously disclosed abuse are particularly likely to remain unidentified. A child-centred response must therefore move beyond assumptions about who is at risk and ensure that all children can safely disclose abuse and access support. In Greece, sexual abuse showed the largest gender disparity in helpline data: of 60 children reported as victims of sexual abuse, 48 were girls, 80%, 6 were boys, 10%, and 6 were of unknown sex. In Portugal, APAV recorded 1,206 occurrences of sexual crimes against girls compared with 215 against boys. These figures show both the clear visibility of girls in sexual violence data and the need to examine whether boys remain under-identified because of stigma, shame or gender norms.<sup>12</sup>

The long-term impacts of sexual abuse and exploitation can manifest in different ways. Research indicates that girls may be more likely to experience internalising responses such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms, while boys may more frequently exhibit externalising responses including aggression, behavioural difficulties or risk-taking behaviour. However, these patterns should not be viewed as fixed or universal. Professionals across child protection, justice, education, health and victim support systems should be trained to recognise the diverse ways trauma may present and to respond through trauma-informed, child-sensitive and gender-sensitive approaches.<sup>13</sup>

Given the increasing digitalisation of abuse, the Action Plan should also place particular emphasis on risk reduction and responding to online sexual exploitation, grooming, image-based abuse, livestreaming of

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<sup>10</sup> UNICEF Data, Sexual violence against children, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/sexual-violence/>

<sup>11</sup> Council of Europe, One in Five campaign materials, <https://human-rights-channel.coe.int/stop-child-sexual-abuse-in-sport-en.html>.

<sup>12</sup> The Smile of the Child, National Child Helpline SOS 1056, 2025; APAV, Crianças e Jovens Vítimas de Crime e Violência, 2025 data

<sup>13</sup> Hébert, M., Langevin, R., & Oussaïd, E. (2018). *Cumulative childhood trauma, emotion regulation, dissociation, and behaviour problems in school-aged sexual abuse victims*. Journal of Affective Disorders, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5770207/>

abuse, sextortion and AI-enabled forms of sexual victimisation. Effective responses require a combination of risk reduction, digital literacy, early identification, accessible reporting mechanisms, specialised support services and strong cooperation between child protection authorities, victim support organisations, law enforcement, education providers and online platforms. Ensuring that every child victim can access timely, integrated and high-quality support is essential both for recovery and for preventing further victimisation.

## Hate Crime, Targeted Victimisation and Identity-Based Harm

Children may experience hate crime, targeted victimisation and identity-based harm where multiple characteristics intersect, including ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, migration status, minority status and care status. These experiences often have distinct gender dimensions. Girls may be disproportionately exposed to sexualised harassment, misogynistic hate, online abuse and threats linked to their gender and identity, while boys may be more likely to experience intimidation, physical violence, group-based targeting and pressures to respond through violence or silence. Beyond the immediate harm, hate crime can profoundly affect a child's sense of identity, belonging, safety and trust in institutions, while undermining participation in education, community life and online spaces. It may also reduce willingness to report future victimisation and seek support. Dutch evidence submitted by VS Netherlands points to online hate speech, discrimination, threats, intimidation, image-based abuse and online violence among young people.

The Action Plan should recognise that significant gaps remain in EU-wide, child-specific, age- and sex-disaggregated data on hate crime and identity-based victimisation. Addressing these evidence gaps should be a policy priority in itself, as children affected by intersecting forms of discrimination and hate often remain invisible in prevention, protection and support measures. A stronger understanding of these forms of victimisation would contribute to the objectives of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and support more targeted, inclusive and effective responses to violence against children.

## Cybercrime, Online Victimisation, AI-Enabled Abuse and Digital Exploitation

Digital environments have created new pathways into child victimisation and exploitation. Children may be exposed to grooming, luring, online sexual exploitation, image-based abuse, sextortion, cyberstalking, cyberbullying, scams, coercion, manipulation, recruitment into criminal activity, harmful online communities, and violent, misogynistic or exploitative content. These harms increasingly cut across online and offline environments and should therefore be addressed as part of child protection, victims' rights, public health and crime prevention policies, rather than as cybersecurity issues alone.

Children's exposure to online harms is shaped by age, gender, digital literacy, disability, social isolation, family support, previous trauma and other vulnerability factors. Girls may be disproportionately affected by online sexual exploitation, image-based abuse, cyberstalking and other forms of gender-based online violence, while boys may face heightened exposure to gaming-related harms, scams, cyber-enabled coercion, financial sexual extortion and online communities that exploit pressures linked to status, belonging or masculinity. However, all children can be affected by online abuse and exploitation, and responses should avoid rigid assumptions about who is at risk.

The Smile of the Child's 2025 online safety data illustrate this complexity. Girls represented 58% of children receiving support for online risks; 144 girls compared with 99 boys, and were more affected by sexting, grooming and cyberbullying. Boys were more represented in problematic internet use, while sextortion affected both girls and boys at similar levels, 35 girls and 32 boys. This supports a gender-sensitive approach that recognises different patterns of risk and harm while ensuring that all children can access protection, support and recovery.

The increasing scale and sophistication of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including through encrypted services, financial sexual extortion and AI-enabled tools, requires a comprehensive response combining prevention, digital literacy, child protection, victim support, mental health services, parental guidance, school-based education, law enforcement cooperation, platform accountability and accessible reporting mechanisms.

The Action Plan should explicitly address the growing risks posed by emerging technologies, including AI-generated child sexual abuse material, sexualised deepfakes, synthetic abuse imagery, identity manipulation, impersonation, harassment, coercion and other forms of AI-enabled exploitation. AI-generated child sexual abuse material should not be treated as harmless simply because some content may be synthetic. It can be created using real children's images, contribute to the revictimisation of known survivors, facilitate grooming and sexual extortion, normalise child sexual exploitation, lower barriers to offending, and create serious challenges for detection, investigation and victim identification. These harms can have profound psychological, social, and reputational consequences for children, affecting their sense of safety, trust, identity and participation in online and offline environments.

The EU response should combine risk reduction, protection, and accountability. This should include safety-by-design obligations, stronger platform accountability, effective detection and reporting mechanisms, rapid removal of harmful content, accessible and child-friendly reporting channels, specialised support pathways for affected children and families, robust privacy and data protection safeguards, and guidance for schools, parents and caregivers. Professionals across child protection, education, victim support and law enforcement should also be trained to identify and respond to AI-enabled and other technology-facilitated forms of abuse.

Digital platforms should be recognised as essential partners within the child protection ecosystem. As children increasingly interact, learn, socialise and access services online, platforms have a critical role in preventing victimisation, reducing risks before harm occurs, and responding effectively when harm is identified. Cooperation between public authorities, law enforcement, child protection services, victim support organisations, educators, parents, caregivers and technology companies should focus on preventing grooming, recruitment, exploitation and other forms of online harm, while ensuring that children can navigate digital environments safely.

Platform responses should not be limited to content moderation or account enforcement. When risks or harm are identified, children and their caregivers should, where appropriate, be connected to victim support services, child protection systems, and other sources of assistance. Greater transparency and accountability are also needed regarding how platforms identify, assess and mitigate risks affecting children, including grooming, sexual exploitation, image-based abuse, cyberbullying, online coercion and emerging forms of harm. At the same time, child protection measures must respect children's rights, privacy, and evolving capacities.

Protecting children in a digital environment requires a whole-of-society approach. The Action Plan should therefore encourage structured cooperation mechanisms that place children's safety, wellbeing and rights at the centre of digital governance and online safety efforts, while ensuring that digital policy is connected to prevention, reporting, support and recovery.

## Education Systems as Risk Reduction, Detection and Referral Spaces

Schools and educational settings should be recognised as a core part of the child protection ecosystem. Children spend a significant portion of their lives in educational environments, making schools uniquely positioned to prevent victimisation, identify risks at an early stage, and connect children and families with appropriate support. Education systems should therefore be viewed not only as places of learning, but also as important spaces for prevention, protection, resilience-building and early intervention. This role is particularly important where the visibility of victimisation changes by age. Greek helpline data showed that boys were more represented among younger children, while girls were more represented among adolescents, suggesting that prevention, detection and referral pathways should be adapted across developmental stages rather than designed around a single model of child victimisation.

Education policies should equip children with the knowledge, skills and confidence to recognise risks and seek help when needed. Age-appropriate education should include topics such as consent, boundaries, healthy relationships, online safety, grooming, luring, manipulation, peer pressure, digital responsibility, help-seeking behaviours, non-violence, respect, equality and children's rights. As digital technologies continue to evolve, education systems must adapt to ensure that children can safely navigate online environments and recognise emerging forms of harm, including online exploitation, scams, image-based abuse and AI-enabled risks.

Teachers, school staff and other education professionals should receive specialised training to identify signs of victimisation, vulnerability, and distress. This includes recognising trauma symptoms, behavioural changes, grooming and coercion, online victimisation, bullying and hate-based harassment, sexual exploitation, family violence, neglect and mental health difficulties. Early identification is critical to ensuring that children receive timely support before harm escalates. Austria's 2025 survey shows strong public support for this direction: 66% of respondents supported mandatory training for all professionals working with children, while 57% supported more free psychological counselling.<sup>14</sup>

Effective support and protection also require strong referral mechanisms. Schools should have clear, accessible and well-understood pathways for cooperation with victim support services, child protection authorities, social services, healthcare and mental health providers, law enforcement agencies and civil society organisations. Multi-agency collaboration can help ensure that children receive coordinated, child-centred and trauma-informed support. The Action Plan should accordingly position education systems as key prevention and protection of actors, able to reduce children's exposure to harm, strengthen resilience, and create trusted pathways to support.

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<sup>14</sup> Die möwe/Gallup Austria, Bewusstsein der österreichischen Bevölkerung für Gewalt an Kindern und Jugendlichen, 2025, <https://die-moewe.at/gewaltstudie-2025/>.

## Supporting Parents, Families and Caregivers

Parents, families, and caregivers play a critical role in protecting children from crime and should be recognised as an essential part of the child protection ecosystem. As children increasingly navigate complex online and offline environments, families often serve as the first line of prevention, identification and support. The Action Plan should also support parents and caregivers with the knowledge, skills and resources needed to recognise risks, protect children, and respond safely when concerns arise. However, family-based measures must be carefully designed, recognising that the family environment may also be where victimisation occurs.

Families should be supported to recognise signs of grooming, exploitation, abuse and trauma; understand emerging online risks; communicate openly with children about digital behaviour and safety; identify harmful peer, criminal or online influences; respond appropriately to disclosures; and know where and how to seek help. Importantly, family support should not be framed primarily through surveillance or control. Instead, it should focus on empowerment, trust, communication, and strengthening protective relationships that help children feel safe seeking support when needed. Where the home is not safe, children must also have access to trusted adults and services outside the family.

At the same time, many families face challenges that may increase children's vulnerability to victimisation, including violence, trauma, addiction, poverty, social exclusion, mental health difficulties, parental imprisonment or migration-related vulnerabilities. Effective prevention therefore requires accessible family support services that address these underlying risk factors and strengthen family resilience. Supporting parents and caregivers can contribute not only to preventing victimisation but also to reducing the risk of re-victimisation, exploitation, and recruitment into criminal activities. The Action Plan should promote evidence-based parenting and caregiver support programmes, awareness-raising initiatives and accessible guidance on both online and offline risks.

## Mental Health, Trauma and Resilience

Mental health should be recognised as a core component of child protection, crime prevention, and victim support policies. The impact of crime on children often extends far beyond immediate incidents and can affect emotional wellbeing, development, relationships, educational attainment, and long-term participation in society. Child victims may require timely access to psychological support, trauma-informed care, safe spaces, stable relationships with trusted adults, and long-term recovery services that help rebuild confidence, identity, trust and social participation.

Trauma can manifest in many different ways. Some children may experience anxiety, depression, withdrawal, shame or difficulties trusting others, while others may display aggression, behavioural changes, risk-taking behaviour, educational difficulties, or problems regulating emotions. Responses must therefore avoid narrow assumptions about how trauma presents and ensures that professionals across justice, education, health and social services are trained to recognise a broad range of trauma responses.

Importantly, policies should avoid deterministic narratives suggesting that child victims inevitably become offenders. A more evidence-based approach recognises that unaddressed trauma, victimisation and adverse childhood experiences can increase vulnerability to further harm and negative outcomes, while early intervention, supportive relationships and access to appropriate services can strengthen resilience

and significantly reduce risks. Research on adverse childhood experiences consistently demonstrates associations between childhood maltreatment, trauma and later involvement in violence or offending, while also highlighting the important role of protective factors and supportive interventions in shaping outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

The Action Plan should therefore promote integrated, trauma-informed and resilience-building approaches that combine mental health support, victim assistance, family support, educational inclusion and community-based services. Strengthening resilience should be understood not merely as helping children cope with adversity, but as creating the conditions that enable them to recover, thrive, and participate safely in society. Investing early support for child victims is both a child protection measure and a long-term investment in safer, healthier and more resilient communities.

## Strengthening Risk Reduction Factors: Sports, Arts, Creativity and Belonging

Efforts to protect children from crime should not focus solely on risks, vulnerabilities and harms. Equally important is the creation of environments that strengthen resilience, foster healthy development and reduce the likelihood of victimisation. Child protection and crime prevention policies should therefore invest in the factors that help children feel safe, connected, valued and supported. This is particularly important where victimisation is prolonged or hidden. Protective environments can help children disclose earlier, access support sooner and avoid remaining isolated in harmful settings. This may include trusted relationships with adults, positive peer networks, safe school environments, mentoring opportunities, community-based programmes, access to mental health support, positive role models, and safe online and offline spaces. Opportunities for meaningful participation in sports, arts, culture, creativity and youth-led activities can also play an important role in promoting wellbeing and social inclusion.

Sports, arts and creative activities should not be viewed as stand-alone solutions to crime or victimisation. Their value lies in their ability to provide structure, belonging, emotional regulation, self-expression, confidence, life skills, and opportunities to build positive relationships with peers and trusted adults. These activities can offer children constructive alternatives to harmful environments and help strengthen the protective networks that support healthy development and resilience.

Attention should be given to ensuring that children facing social exclusion, discrimination, poverty, disability, migration-related challenges or previous victimisation have equal access to these opportunities. Participation should be inclusive, affordable, and accessible, recognising that protective environments are most effective when they reach children who may otherwise be isolated or at greater risk.

A balanced approach that combines risk reduction with resilience-building should be promoted. Supporting children's wellbeing, participation, creativity and sense of belonging is not only beneficial but also

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<sup>15</sup> References: Crouch, E., Radcliff, E., Strompolis, M., & Srivastav, A. (2023). *Adverse childhood experiences and violent behaviour in young adults*. BMC Public Health, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9852029/>; Malvaso, C. G., Delfabbro, P. H., & Day, A. (2021). *Adverse childhood experiences in children and young people who have offended: A systematic review*. Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33960233/>

contributes to stronger prevention outcomes, healthier communities, and safer environments for children.

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Civil society and victim support organisations are indispensable partners in protecting children from crime and strengthening child safety. They often serve as trusted and accessible entry points for children and families who may be reluctant to engage with authorities, providing early support, identifying risks, facilitating referrals, supporting recovery, and contributing to prevention and awareness-raising efforts. Their close connection to communities also enables them to bring valuable frontline knowledge into policymaking and service design. Importantly, support should be available regardless of whether a child reports a crime to the police, recognising that many children delay disclosure, disclose only partially, or never formally report their victimisation.

A comprehensive child protection response should therefore ensure access to both generic and specialised victim support services. Generic services can provide an accessible first point of contact, while specialised multidisciplinary responses may include psychological support, legal information, child protection services, healthcare, social support, family assistance, online safety support, and tailored services for children affected by sexual violence, trafficking, exploitation, hate crime, discrimination, or other forms of victimisation. Effective referral pathways between these services are essential to ensure continuity of care and timely support.

The EU framework on victims' rights recognises child victims as rights holders who must have access to information, support, protection and participation in a manner adapted to their age, maturity and individual circumstances. On this basis, the Action Plan should place strong, accessible, and community-based victim support systems at the centre of its approach. Civil society and victim support services can help identify risks at an early stage, reduce secondary victimisation, strengthen protective factors, and support children's long-term recovery. These efforts should be grounded in child-centred, trauma-informed and safe justice principles, ensuring that children can exercise their rights in a way that is safe, respectful, and empowering.

## Beyond the Offender Lens: Identifying and Protecting Exploited Children

Children involved in criminal activity should not automatically be viewed solely through an offender lens. In some cases, their involvement may be linked to trafficking, grooming, coercion, exploitation, threats, debt bondage, or manipulation by adults, organised criminal groups, or older peers. Effective child protection and justice responses therefore require mechanisms to identify indicators of victimisation at the earliest possible stage and to ensure that children are assessed and treated according to their individual circumstances.

The growing convergence between trafficking, organised crime, and child exploitation presents significant challenges for prevention, identification and protection efforts. Children may be recruited into criminal activities, forced begging, drug-related offences, online fraud schemes, or other forms of exploitation while remaining victims themselves. Applying child-sensitive, trauma-informed and victim-centred approaches is

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<sup>16</sup> UNODC, Sport and youth crime prevention policy guide, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/COMMSCPCS/SCORE\\_Policy\\_Guide\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_final.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/COMMSCPCS/SCORE_Policy_Guide_Executive_Summary_final.pdf).

therefore essential to avoid criminalising children who have been exploited and to ensure access to appropriate support, protection and recovery services.

Evidence increasingly points to the scale of this challenge. The UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024 found that children account for 38% of detected trafficking victims globally, with girls representing 22% and boys 16%. The report also highlights emerging forms of exploitation, including forced criminality and online scam operations, demonstrating how organised criminal groups continue to adapt their recruitment methods and exploit children's vulnerabilities. These developments reinforce the need for stronger cooperation between child protection, victim support, law enforcement, education and social services, as well as for early identification mechanisms that can distinguish between children who offend and children who are being exploited. Protecting children from crime must therefore include protecting children from criminal exploitation itself, ensuring that victimisation is recognised and addressed before harm becomes entrenched.<sup>17</sup>

## Restorative Justice and Early Intervention for Child Protection and Recovery

Protecting children from crime requires not only responding after harm has occurred, but also intervening early to prevent further victimisation, escalation of harm, and future involvement in violence. Restorative justice can play a valuable role within this broader framework when it is used appropriately, safely and in the best interests of the child. Any restorative process involving children should be voluntary, trauma-informed, and child-sensitive, with robust safeguards to protect victims and prevent further harm. It should respect the child's safety, dignity and evolving capacities, involve appropriately trained professionals, include thorough risk assessments, and address potential power imbalances between participants. Restorative approaches should never be used to pressure children into participation, minimise serious forms of violence, or replace necessary protection and support measures. When properly designed, they can contribute to accountability, healing, understanding, and recovery while supporting children's participation in a manner that respects their rights and individual needs.

## Media, Public Awareness, Behavioural Change and Building a Culture of Support

Protecting children from crime requires more than legislation and enforcement; it also requires cultural change. Public narratives, media reporting and awareness campaigns play an important role in shaping attitudes, behaviours and social norms. Prevention efforts should challenge the romanticisation of crime, the normalisation of violence, misogynistic and harmful online content, victim-blaming attitudes, and narratives that portray exploitation, coercion or involvement in criminal activity as attractive, empowering or without consequences. Promoting a culture of respect, empathy, and accountability can help strengthen children's resilience and reduce vulnerability to victimisation and recruitment into harmful environments. Austrian survey evidence supports the need for public legal literacy and awareness. In prompted responses,

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<sup>17</sup> UNODC, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024\\_BOOK.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_BOOK.pdf).

66% supported more public knowledge about criminal acts, while 85% supported stricter laws and harsher penalties for violence against children and child abuse.<sup>18</sup>

Media reporting and awareness campaigns should be child-centred, responsible, and evidence-based. They should avoid sensationalism, protect children's dignity, privacy and safety, use age-appropriate language, encourage help-seeking behaviour, and provide realistic information about risks and available support. Awareness initiatives should also highlight positive alternatives, resilience-building opportunities and pathways to support and recovery. Where appropriate, children and young people should be involved in the design and delivery of campaigns to ensure that messages are relevant, accessible, and credible.

Importantly, responsibility for preventing child victimisation should not be placed on children alone. Awareness and prevention efforts must also target parents and caregivers, schools, community organisations, digital platforms, professionals, policymakers, and a wider society. Creating safer environments for children requires collective responsibility and coordinated action across all sectors that influence children's lives, both online and offline.

## Building an Evidence-Based Approach to Protecting Children from Crime

Effective policies to protect children from crime must be grounded in robust evidence and comprehensive data. To better understand risks, vulnerabilities and outcomes, data collection should capture factors such as age, sex, type of victimisation, relationship with the perpetrator, online or offline context, reporting behaviour, access to support services, experiences of secondary victimisation, outcomes for children, and intersecting vulnerabilities.

Significant knowledge gaps remain in several areas, including boys as victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, gender differences in disclosure and help-seeking, child hate crime, online victimisation across age and gender groups, the experiences of children with disabilities, migrant children, LGBTQI+ children, children in alternative care, and children trafficked or coerced into criminal activities. Greater research is also needed on the long-term impacts of victimisation and on the effectiveness of early intervention, prevention, risk reduction, and resilience-building programmes.

At the same time, policymakers should recognise the limitations of official statistics. Existing data often capture only identified victims, reported incidents, or cases that come to the attention of authorities. Many forms of child victimisation remain hidden due to shame, stigma, fear, dependency on perpetrators, language barriers, lack of trust in institutions, or the absence of safe and accessible disclosure mechanisms. Strengthening data collection, research and monitoring systems is therefore essential to ensure that policies reflect the full reality of children's experiences and support evidence-based, child-centred responses across the European Union.

## VSE Policy Recommendations

Protecting children from crime requires a comprehensive, child-centred and rights-based approach that addresses both the risks children face and the factors that help keep them safe. Risk reduction should not

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<sup>18</sup> Die möwe/Gallup Austria, Bewusstsein der österreichischen Bevölkerung für Gewalt an Kindern und Jugendlichen, 2025, <https://die-moewe.at/gewaltstudie-2025/>

be understood solely as reducing offending or strengthening law enforcement responses. It should also encompass victim protection, early intervention, resilience-building, child-friendly justice, digital safety, family and peer support, and access to high-quality support services. Children experience crime in diverse and evolving ways, both online and offline, and policies must reflect the complexity of these risks while ensuring that all children can access protection, support and recovery. The recommendations below are informed by evidence gathered from VSE members in Austria, Finland, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands and Portugal, which demonstrates the need for gender-sensitive and inclusive responses, early identification, support regardless of reporting status, family-focused safeguarding, integrated online and offline protection, and stronger disaggregated data.

- Place child victims and children at risk of victimisation at the centre of crime prevention policies, recognising that child protection, victim support and crime prevention are mutually reinforcing objectives.
- Recognise victim support as a core prevention measure, ensuring that timely, accessible and trauma-informed support reduces the risk of further harm, revictimisation and long-term negative outcomes.
- Invest in early intervention and protective environments, including child-sensitive support services, mental health care, family support, mentoring programmes and community-based prevention initiatives.
- Prevent secondary victimisation across all systems interacting with children, including justice, law enforcement, education, health and social care services, through child-friendly, trauma-informed and rights-based approaches.
- Strengthen child-friendly, accessible and gender-sensitive reporting and disclosure mechanisms, both online and offline, ensuring that children can safely seek help and access protection. This should include targeted outreach to boys and young men, where shame, stigma and masculinity norms may reduce disclosure and help-seeking.
- Guarantee access to support services regardless of reporting status, providing generic victim support as a first entry point and ensuring referral to specialised multidisciplinary services whenever required.
- Develop comprehensive digital literacy and online safety programmes for children, parents, caregivers, educators and professionals, focusing on prevention, resilience, critical thinking and help-seeking.
- Ensure education systems adapt to emerging technologies and evolving risks, integrating prevention, online safety, healthy relationships, consent, digital responsibility and victims' rights into educational frameworks.
- Strengthen cooperation with digital platforms and technology providers, including through improved reporting mechanisms, rapid content removal, transparency measures, referral pathways to support services and safety-by-design approaches.
- Recognise parents, caregivers and families as essential partners in child protection, providing practical guidance, resources and support to strengthen their protective role. At the same time, ensure safe external reporting and referral pathways where the family or home is the context of harm.
- Promote resilience-building opportunities for children and young people, including access to sports, arts, creativity, mentoring, youth participation initiatives and safe online and offline spaces that foster belonging and positive development.
- Improve the collection and use of age-, sex- and vulnerability-disaggregated data, including data on reporting, access to support, outcomes, secondary victimisation and emerging forms of online

harm. Data should also capture the victim-perpetrator relationship, the duration of victimisation, whether the harm occurred online or offline, and barriers to disclosure and support.

- Adopt an intersectional approach to child protection, recognising the impact of multiple and overlapping vulnerabilities and avoiding one-size-fits-all responses.
- Strengthen professional training across sectors to improve the identification of child victims, recognise diverse trauma responses and ensure appropriate referral and support pathways.
- Address harmful social norms and narratives, including the romanticisation of crime, victim-blaming attitudes, misogyny, hate-based narratives and the normalisation of violence and exploitation.
- Promote meaningful partnerships with communities, civil society organisations and victim support services, recognising their critical role in prevention, early identification, recovery and outreach to vulnerable children.
- Ensure that children involved in criminal activity are systematically assessed for indicators of victimisation, coercion, trafficking, exploitation or grooming, and that protection and support measures are activated where appropriate, in line with child rights and victim-centred approaches.

## From Protection to Prevention: Building a Europe Where Every Child Can Thrive

The EU Action Plan on the Protection of Children against Crime presents an opportunity to move beyond reactive responses and towards a truly preventive, child-centred and rights-based model of protection. Success should not be measured solely by the number of crimes detected, prosecutions secured or offenders punished. It should also be measured by the extent to which children are protected from harm before it occurs, supported when victimisation takes place, and empowered to recover, participate, and thrive.

Children should grow up surrounded by protective environments that strengthen resilience, foster trust, promote wellbeing, and reduce exposure to violence, exploitation, abuse, and criminal recruitment. This requires investment not only in law enforcement and criminal justice responses, but also in victim support, mental health services, education, family support, safe digital environments, community engagement, and early intervention. Supporting child victims and children at risk is not only a matter of protection; it is one of the most effective long-term investments in safer, more resilient and more inclusive societies.

The challenges facing children today are increasingly interconnected, spanning online and offline environments, emerging technologies, organised crime, exploitation, hate, violence, and social exclusion. The EU's response must therefore be equally interconnected. A modern child protection strategy should bring together victims' rights, child protection, digital safety, education, public health, mental health, platform responsibility, community resilience and safe justice within a coherent framework centred on the best interests of the child.

## Conclusion

Protecting children from crime requires a holistic and future-oriented approach that places children's rights, safety, and wellbeing at its centre. The EU Action Plan should move beyond reactive responses and recognise that effective prevention starts long before harm occurs, through strong families, supportive communities, safe digital environments, quality education, accessible victim support, early intervention and

child-friendly justice systems. By investing in resilience, addressing vulnerabilities, strengthening protective factors and ensuring that every child can access support and protection when needed, the European Union can build safer, more inclusive and more resilient societies where all children are protected from harm and empowered to thrive.

By placing children's rights, voices, safety and wellbeing at the heart of prevention efforts, the European Union can help build a future in which every child is not only protected from crime, but equipped with the support, opportunities and resilience needed to reach their full potential.

### *About Victim Support Europe*

Victim Support Europe (VSE) is the leading European umbrella organisation advocating on behalf of all victims of crime, no matter what the crime, no matter who the victim is. VSE represents 80 member organisations in 36 countries, providing support to around 3 million people affected by crime every year. Founded in 1990, VSE has been working for 35 years for a Europe, and a world, where all victims have strong victims' rights and services, whether they report the crime or not. We work towards this mission through advocacy to improve European and International laws, through research and knowledge development and through capacity building at national and local level.