

JOINT INPUT FOR THE REPORT OF THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON TRAFFICKING ON THE RIGHTS OF MIGRANT, REFUGEE, ASYLUM-SEEKING AND STATELESS CHILDREN WHO ARE VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING OR AT RISK OF TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

(January 2026)

Victim Support Europe (VSE) and Missing Children Europe (MCE) welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Special Rapporteur's report by sharing practice-based insights on the evolving risks, prevention challenges and protection gaps affecting migrant, refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children who are victims of trafficking or at risk of exploitation.

Current trends in forms and manifestations of trafficking affecting migrant, refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children

According to recent data, in 2024, the number of registered victims of trafficking in human beings in the EU was 9 678.¹ However this number is not representative of the scale of the issue and the reality of problem, as many victims remain unidentified. Traditional forms of trafficking in human beings persist, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, forced begging and domestic servitude. At the same time, the rapid expansion of digital technologies has significantly transformed both recruitment methods and forms of exploitation. These developments disproportionately affect migrant, refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children, who are often exposed to intersecting vulnerabilities linked to displacement, insecurity, poverty, disrupted family ties and social isolation.

Between 2021 and 2022, children represented almost one fifth of victims of trafficking registered in the EU.² Children in migration and displacement contexts increasingly rely on online spaces to cope with loneliness, trauma and separation from caregivers. Social media platforms, messaging applications and online gaming environments often become primary spaces for social interaction.³ Traffickers increasingly exploit this digital presence to approach and groom children, leading to disappearance. MCE's CESAGRAM project has demonstrated how online grooming can lead to children going missing, further exacerbating the risks and harms they have already experienced online.⁴ Online grooming has become one of the most prevalent recruitment methods, enabling perpetrators to operate across borders with limited physical proximity and reduced risk of detection.⁵

Technology has also reshaped the nature of exploitation. In addition to traditional forms of forced criminality, such as begging or drug distribution, children are increasingly coerced into technology-enabled criminal activities. Online fraud schemes, including phishing, identity theft and scam operations, are

¹ Eurostat (2026) - Trafficking in human beings statistics, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Trafficking_in_human_beings_statistics#Highlights

² European Commission (2025) - [Report on the progress made in the European Union in combatting trafficking in human beings](#)

³ Save the Children, Safeguarding migrant and displaced children in a digital world - <https://www.savethechildren.net/blog/safeguarding-migrant-and-displaced-children-digital-world>

⁴ Missing Children Europe (2024) - [Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors](#)

⁵ Victim Support Europe, DISRUPT Project, Manual on the use of digital evidence in combating child trafficking - https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files_mf/1745483228DISRUPTManual_January2025.pdf



expanding rapidly and are often organised through transnational criminal networks.⁶ Children with digital skills are deliberately targeted and compelled to participate, making technology-facilitated forced criminality an emerging form of child trafficking and forced labour. This development significantly increases the risk of misidentification and criminalisation of child victims in the absence of effective non-punishment safeguards. In addition, Evidence from recent years highlights the disproportionate vulnerability of migrant girls to trafficking for sexual exploitation.⁷ These developments underscore the need to recognise technology-enabled recruitment and exploitation as core trafficking risks for migrant and displaced children, alongside strengthened early detection, child-sensitive digital safeguarding and consistent application of the non-punishment principle.

Prevention of trafficking among unaccompanied, separated, migrant, refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children

Effective prevention must address the conditions that increase children's exposure to trafficking. Unaccompanied and separated children, as well as those living in precarious migration situations, face heightened risks due to disrupted care, insecure accommodation, limited access to education and services, and legal uncertainty. These factors are closely linked to an increased likelihood of children going missing from care or reception settings, which in turn significantly heightens exposure to trafficking and exploitation. Children who go missing often fall outside protection systems and become invisible to authorities and support services. Strengthening prevention therefore requires robust safeguards to prevent disappearances, ensure early risk identification, and activate rapid, child-centred responses when children go missing, including effective cross-border cooperation and information-sharing mechanisms.

Prevention efforts are strengthened through coordinated, system-level approaches that combine evidence-based research, capacity building, training of frontline professionals and operational cooperation across borders. Structured engagement with judicial authorities, law enforcement, child protection actors and civil society helps identify operational gaps and improve early identification of trafficking risks in migration contexts. Targeted trainings for prosecutors, judges and frontline professionals, together with strengthened guardianship systems, contribute to more consistent, child-sensitive responses.⁸ Well-trained and supported guardians play a critical role in reducing the risk of children going missing and being trafficked, by ensuring continuity of care, early detection of risks and trust-based relationships. The use of technological tools to identify risk patterns can further support prevention, provided that strong safeguards for data protection and children's rights are in place⁹

Prevention is inseparable from effective victim support. Children who have already experienced victimisation are at heightened risk of trafficking and re-trafficking if their needs are not adequately addressed.¹⁰ Timely access to specialised support services, avoidance of secondary victimisation and a focus on recovery and resilience are therefore essential preventive measures.

⁶ UNODC, Global Report on Human Trafficking, p.95- https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_BOOK.pdf

⁷ European Commission (2025) - [Report on the progress made in the European Union in combatting trafficking in human beings](https://missingchildreneurope.eu/safeborders/)

⁸ Missing Children Europe, SafeBorders Project: <https://missingchildreneurope.eu/safeborders/>

⁹ Missing Children Europe, GUARD-UP project: <https://missingchildreneurope.eu/guard-up/>

¹⁰ UNODC, Global Report on Human Trafficking, p.102- https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_BOOK.pdf



Structural factors must also be addressed. Gaps in child protection systems, lack of accountability and corruption within relevant authorities create enabling environments for organised crime. Insecure or irregular migration status further exacerbates vulnerability, pushing children and families into invisibility and discouraging engagement with protection systems. Child-sensitive migration policies and regularisation measures (e.g. Spain¹¹) can significantly reduce these risks by improving access to services, protection and justice.

Legal frameworks, access to justice and the role of civil society

International, European and regional legal frameworks provide a strong normative basis for the protection of migrant, refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children who are victims of trafficking or at risk of exploitation. Persistent challenges lie primarily in implementation,¹² particularly where child protection obligations intersect with criminal justice and migration systems.

European instruments such as the Victims' Rights Directive and the Anti-Trafficking Directive require a child-centred and rights-based approach that recognises children as rights-holders with specific needs. In practice, safeguards related to early identification, individual needs assessments, non-punishment, access to support services and compensation are often weakened in migration and asylum contexts, where administrative and enforcement priorities prevail over protection considerations.

Effective implementation requires that child protection principles guide all decisions affecting children, including those taken within asylum and migration procedures. Legal uncertainty, restrictive policies and prolonged procedures increase exposure to trafficking and exploitation, particularly where children and their families are pushed into invisibility due to insecure or irregular status. Aligning migration and asylum frameworks with child protection obligations is essential to reducing vulnerability and ensuring access to residence, services and durable solutions based on protection needs rather than legal status.

International child rights and anti-trafficking standards reinforce these obligations by requiring that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration in all actions affecting them. This includes protection from detention, access to justice and remedies, recovery and reintegration support, and protection from criminalisation for acts committed as a direct consequence of trafficking, including forced criminality. Detention and punitive responses undermine recovery, erode trust in authorities and increase the risk of re-victimisation.

Access to justice remains a critical yet under-realised component of protection for child victims of trafficking. Child-friendly, trauma-informed procedures, timely access to legal assistance and representation, and safeguards against secondary victimisation are essential to ensure meaningful participation and accountability. Effective remedies and compensation must be accessible in practice and

¹¹ www.infomigrants.net, Spain: Mass regularization of migrants set to start (27.1.2026)
<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/69473/spain-mass-regularization-of-migrants-set-to-start>

¹² Victim Support Europe, BeneVict Project, Report On The Practical Implementation Of The Eu Victims' Rights Directive 2018-2024 - https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files_mf/1753275388ReportonthePracticalImplementationoftheEUVictimsRightsDirective20182024.pdf

should not be conditional on criminal convictions or cooperation with law enforcement. Remedies should address both material and non-material harm and support long-term recovery.

Civil society plays a central role in translating legal obligations into effective protection. Victim support and child protection organisations are often the first trusted actors to identify trafficking risks, respond to disappearances, and provide specialised assistance. In particular, 116 000 hotlines for missing children play a key role in prevention, cross-border cooperation, and victim support in cases of trafficking and child disappearance. Their accessibility, trust-based approach, and child-centred mandate make them essential actors within a whole-of-society response. Civil society organisations' proximity to affected children enables trust-building, disclosure and continuity of care, including across borders. Civil society also contributes to prevention through awareness raising, professional training, cross-border referrals and monitoring of implementation gaps.

Data, evidence and monitoring

Reliable and disaggregated data are essential to understanding trafficking risks affecting migrant, refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children and to designing effective prevention and protection measures. Significant gaps persist in the collection and analysis of data on child trafficking, technology-enabled exploitation and risk factors such as children going missing from care or reception settings.

Data on missing children is particularly relevant as an early warning and risk indicator for trafficking, rather than as a manifestation of the crime itself. Improved recording, information-sharing and follow-up mechanisms are needed to ensure that disappearances are treated as child protection emergencies and trigger rapid, coordinated responses.

Strengthening data collection should include age- and gender-disaggregated information, data on migration status, forms of exploitation and outcomes of protection measures. At the same time, data systems must fully respect children's rights, privacy and data protection standards. Enhanced cooperation between public authorities, civil society organisations and cross-border mechanisms is essential to improve data quality, support early detection and ensure accountability.¹³

Conclusion

Trafficking affecting migrant, refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children continues to evolve in response to digitalisation, displacement and structural gaps within migration and protection systems. While robust legal frameworks exist, their impact depends on child-centred implementation in practice, including early identification, protection from detention and criminalisation, access to justice and effective remedies, and sustained prevention through guardianship and child protection systems. Coordinated action across borders and sectors, supported by reliable data and strong civil society engagement, is essential to reduce vulnerability, prevent exploitation and ensure that the rights and best interests of the child remain central in all responses to trafficking.

¹³ Missing Children Europe, Data Missing Project- <https://missingchildreneurope.eu/data-missing/>