



Violence against children in the European Union

Current situation



IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

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This document offers an in-depth look at the problem of violence against children in the EU, with a focus on the unique vulnerability of children and their corresponding need for special protection. It examines both qualitative and quantitative definitions of violence, explores the root causes of violence, and discusses ways to prevent it. Additionally, it delves into the international child protection standards that serve as a reference point. Finally, the document outlines actions taken by the EU to assist Member States in their efforts to safeguard children from violence.

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Executive summary

Children are human beings with rights and dignity. Children's rights are human rights. Owing to their fragility and vulnerability, children also require specific protection, however, which involves providing them with an environment where they are safe from any situation that could potentially expose them to abuse.

Violence against children, as defined in Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, can take many forms (physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect) and can take place in different settings, such as at home, at school, in institutions, online, etc. Most child abusers are familiar to their victims. The short- and long-term consequences of abuse in terms of human, economic and social costs can be severe and extremely harmful. The extent of violence against children in the EU is difficult to assess, but current estimates give cause for great concern. The nature of the problem depends on various factors, including the personality profiles of victims and perpetrators as well as their surroundings. Certain categories of children, such as those with disabilities, those living in special institutions or those who are unaccompanied migrants, are particularly vulnerable. However, violence is avoidable and preventable. Effective policies to address this problem require a multi-sectoral approach involving different stakeholders at various levels.

At international level, the United Nations and the Council of Europe have taken a number of measures to safeguard the rights of children, and more specifically to protect them from violence. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is crucial in this effort. According to its Article 19, children are entitled to protection from all forms of violence, and Member States are required to take all appropriate measures to ensure this protection.

In recent years, the EU has been stepping up its measures to protect children. With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, child protection has been recognised as a specific EU goal. While Member States are primarily responsible for child protection systems, the EU also plays an important role, since it is required to promote initiatives to protect children's rights. Its actions directly influence the relevant laws and policies implemented by the Member States in this area.

Various parties are involved in raising awareness about violence against children, the importance of effective EU support for national child protection initiatives and the mainstreaming of child protection. Through its numerous initiatives, such as the continuously renewed EU strategy on the rights of the child and the 2024 Commission recommendation on integrated child protection systems, the EU continues to emphasise its commitment to protecting children and supporting Member States' actions and the exchange of best practice.

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1. Protection of children

1.1. Vulnerability, rights and protection

Children are some of the most vulnerable members of society. Lacking experience and physical and psychological maturity, they need protection to ensure that they can develop properly and that their rights are defended and upheld.

Children's rights are human rights. Human rights apply to all age groups and children have the same rights as adults. In essence, children's rights encompass the fundamental standards necessary for human survival and proper development. Children's rights are essentially human rights specifically adapted to children, taking into account the needs of their particular age group. The protection of children is a shared responsibility of families, society and governments. In this context, one of the primary rights that must be ensured is children's right to life, survival and development.¹ According to the United Nations (UN) Children's Fund, UNICEF, protecting children means placing them in environments where they are safe from any situations potentially leading to abuse. UNICEF also emphasises that child protection issues relate directly to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.²

United Nations' definition of a child

Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines a child as 'every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier'.

UNICEF definition of child protection

UNICEF defines 'child protection' as measures to prevent and combat violence, exploitation and abuse inflicted on children, including sexual exploitation for commercial purposes, trafficking in children, child labour and harmful traditions such as female genital mutilation and child marriage.

1.2. Child protection systems

While there is no single agreed upon international definition of child protection systems, various overlapping definitions have been formulated. According to UNICEF, child protection systems comprise seven elements: legal, regulatory and policy; governance; services; standards and oversight; resources; participation; and data.³ A report commissioned by UNICEF indicates that child protection systems have structures, functions, capacities and other components tailored to a set of child protection goals.⁴ They also operate at different levels (from formal to informal), exhibiting a nested structure involving various participants, including children, the family, the community and the state, and functioning simultaneously at one or more levels.⁵

Moreover, the European Commission has developed 10 principles for integrated child protection systems, which include guarantees for recognition, respect and protection, effective prevention and family support.⁶ While all national child protection systems are guided by these principles, the EU

¹ See Article 6 of the [UNCRC](#).

² UNICEF, [UNICEF Child protection strategy 2021-2030](#), 2021, p. 21.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴ UNICEF, [Child protection systems strengthening](#), 2021, p. 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶ European Commission, [10 Principles for integrated child protection systems](#), 2015.

Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) highlights that these systems have varying scopes, as their design is influenced by the resources allocated, as well as social and cultural factors.⁷

2. Violence: Omnipresent and multifaceted

The 2006 United Nations study on violence against children in the world,⁸ the first of its kind, revealed that the problem exists in all countries, societies and social groups. A 2020 report by the WHO reaffirmed the global prevalence of this problem, stating that one out of two children experiences violence each year.⁹

During a regional consultation between Europe and Central Asia, it was found that children in Europe are just as vulnerable to violence as those in any other region. Despite some countries having successful practices in place, a more comprehensive and consistent response to violence against children is needed to ensure effective prevention and service programmes, including strengthened legislative frameworks, increased funding, better data collection, and improved governance and coordination.¹⁰

Violence against children is a complex and multidimensional issue related to human rights, child protection and public health. Accordingly, the focus is on prevention, with the assumption that child abuse and its consequences can be avoided.

2.1. What is violence?

There are many different ways of defining violence. Ideas about what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable behaviour are influenced by cultural factors that are progressively adapted to the evolution of social values and standards. The World Health Organization (WHO) has adopted a broad definition of violence as 'the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person or against a group or community that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation'.¹¹ This definition includes many less obvious consequences of violence in terms of emotional deprivation, where well-being is compromised at the level of the individual, family and collective.

UNCRC definition of violence against children

Article 19 of the UNCRC defines violence as 'all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse'.

2.2. Definition of violence against children

The definition of violence against children used in the above UN study is the same as the one outlined in Article 19 of the UNCRC. It includes the exposure of children to violence both within and outside

⁷ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), [Mapping child protection systems in the EU](#), Update 2023, p. 6.

⁸ United Nations, [Report of the independent expert for the United Nations study on violence against children](#), 2006.

⁹ World Health Organization (WHO), [Global status report on preventing violence against children](#), 2020, p. 11

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

¹¹ WHO Prevention Unit: [Approach, objectives and activities](#), 2022-2026, p. 1.

the home. This definition covers not only acts of violence involving adults and children but also those occurring between children themselves.

The WHO definition of child maltreatment includes 'all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power'.¹²

2.2.1. Perpetrators of acts of violence against children

Most perpetrators of acts of violence against children are known to their victims and are in a position of trust. This includes parents, relatives, members of their immediate circle, boyfriends/girlfriends, schoolmates, teachers, employers or child carers, etc.¹³

2.2.2. Forms and contexts

The WHO¹⁴ distinguishes between six main types of interpersonal violence in the life of a child, as described below.

- **Maltreatment**, including violent punishment, involves physical, sexual and psychological violence, as well as neglect by parents and caregivers at home and in other settings.
- **Bullying**, including cyber-bullying, involves repeated physical, psychological or social harm by another child or group of children and often takes place in school or online.
- **Youth violence**, which may include gang violence, involves bullying and physical assaults among children and young people in community settings.
- **Intimate partner violence**, or domestic violence, involves physical, sexual and emotional violence by an intimate partner or ex-partner. It mostly affects girls, but it can also affect boys.
- **Sexual violence** involves non-consensual completed or attempted sexual contact, acts of a sexual nature not involving contact, acts of sexual trafficking, and online exploitation.
- **Emotional or psychological violence** involves restricting a child's movements, but also exposing a child to denigration, threats, discrimination and other non-physical forms of hostile treatment.

A 2007 UN global study on violence against children provides a detailed account of the various situations in which it occurs.¹⁵ Below are listed some of the most typical situations; children can be exposed to various forms of violence in more than one of the situations mentioned.

At home and in the family

Home and family are best geared to offer children protection as well as physical and emotional security. Unfortunately, home can also be a dangerous place for children, and the occurrence of violence against children by parents and other family members has been acknowledged in recent decades. It is perhaps within this 'private sphere' that it is hardest to eliminate abuse (whether

¹² WHO, [Child maltreatment](#), 2022.

¹³ K. Devries, L. Knight and M. Petzold, et al., '[Who perpetrates violence against children? A systematic analysis of age-specific and sex-specific data](#)', *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, 2018.

¹⁴ WHO, [Violence against children](#), factsheet, 2022.

¹⁵ United Nations, [Report of the independent expert for the United Nations study on violence against children](#), 2006.

physical or emotional), neglect or harmful practices such as female genital mutilation,¹⁶ forced marriage¹⁷ or 'honour' crimes.¹⁸ Violence against children within the family is often inflicted in the name of discipline and may take the form of cruel or humiliating physical punishments.¹⁹ Children may also witness domestic violence, which can potentially result in harmful short- and long-term effects, including mental health problems and drug abuse. Based on this, experts have concluded that witnessing domestic abuse is a form of child abuse.²⁰

At school and in the educational environment

Schools play a crucial role in protecting children from violence. However, the educational environment can sometimes inadvertently expose young people to violence and even teach them violent behaviours. Violence in schools can manifest in various forms, such as physical, psychological or sexual violence and bullying.²¹ Across the Member States, 13–29 % of 15-year old students have reported that they are being bullied frequently.²²

Within child protection institutions and the services of the judiciary

While the exact number of children in alternative care (residential institutions and detention centres) is unknown, recent data collection projects have estimated that approximately 758 000 children are in alternative care in the EU.²³ Violence inside these places can remain less visible, as they are frequently closed to the public. Not only are children living there suffering from family separation but they also face an increased risk of violence, abuse and long-term developmental damage.²⁴ In addition, they may suffer corporal punishment inflicted in the name of discipline, but also emotional or sexual abuse, or neglect. While comprehensive statistics on the number of children in judicial custody are lacking, a 2017 study by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) found that in the 14 Member States covered by the study, 180 children were kept in immigration detention.²⁵ This figure likely represents only a fraction of the actual cases, as data from other Member States is scarce and information on children in judicial services is generally lacking. The vulnerability of children in

¹⁶ Regarding female genital mutilation in the EU, see: European Commission, [Towards the eradication of female genital mutilation](#), COM (2013) 833 final, 25.11.2013, and R. Shreeves, [Zero tolerance for female genital mutilation](#), EPRS, European Parliament, February 2024.

¹⁷ See also R. Shreeves and M. Prpic, [Ending child, early and forced marriage](#), EPRS, European Parliament, 2015.

¹⁸ For more information on honour crimes, see M. Prpic, [Combating 'honour' crimes in the EU](#), EPRS, European Parliament, 2015.

¹⁹ Council of Europe human rights instruments have for years been denouncing the corporal punishment of children in Europe. See: Council of Europe, Children and corporal punishment: ['The right not to be hit, also a children's right'](#), 2009. The [End Corporal Punishment](#) site provides an insight into national legislation in this area in Europe and beyond (see the Section on 'Global Progress'), showing that certain EU Member States have banned corporal punishment in all contexts (home, school, detention centres and residential establishments).

²⁰ Barnardo's [Children affected by domestic abuse](#), Barnardo's platform; US Department of Health & Human Services, Office on Women's Health, [Effects of domestic violence on children](#). C.M. Forke et al., ['Intergenerational effects of witnessing domestic violence: Health of the witnesses and their children'](#), *Preventive Medicine Reports*, Vol. 15, 2019 concludes that children of parents who have witnessed domestic violence in their childhood suffer harmful effects on their health.

²¹ See, Behind the numbers: UNICEF, [Ending school violence and bullying](#), 2019; UNICEF, [School Violence and Bullying](#), Global status report, 2017.

²² European Commission, [The twin challenge of equity and excellence in basic skills in the EU – An EU comparative analysis of the PISA 2022 results](#), 2024.

²³ UNICEF and Eurochild, [Better data for better child protection systems in Europe](#), Technical report of the DataCare Project, 2021, p. 8; For different country profiles, see Eurochild, DataCare – [Country Overviews](#).

²⁴ UNICEF, [Data gaps on children in residential care leave the most vulnerable unaccounted for](#), 2017.

²⁵ FRA, European legal and policy framework on immigration detention of children, 2017, p. 13.

custody is further exacerbated when they are kept in the same premises as adults, where they face an increased risk of exposure to sexual and physical violence.²⁶

At the workplace

Under international law, children below the minimum required age may not work.²⁷ Furthermore, certain forms of employment, classified as 'worst forms of child labour', can be considered abuse.²⁸ This includes all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children,²⁹ forced or compulsory labour, or the use, procurement or offering of a child for prostitution, pornography or other illicit activities. Ultimately, whether legally or illegally employed, children are vulnerable to various forms of abuse.

Within the community

While the community offers a framework of solidarity and protection, it can also expose children to various forms of violence such as peer and gang violence, police brutality, physical and sexual abuse, abduction, trafficking and more. Children who find themselves relegated to the margins of society, including street children, are frequently targeted.

Moreover, children can experience violence in the context of leisure and recreational activities. This violence may arise from a lack of supervision, group dynamics in competitive environments or exposure to different age groups. The problem is also exacerbated by the media, which frequently downplay acts of violence, along with new information and communication technologies.

Internet-related risks

The internet exposes children to multiple threats, which are exacerbated by the fact that children spend so much time on it. Globally, one in three internet users is a child, with numbers expected to increase further.³⁰ Due to fear, stigma, shame and a lack of services to counteract it, online violence against children remains largely hidden. When browsing online, children may be exposed to hate speech, violent content, peer-to-peer violence and harmful actions, such as online child sexual abuse and violence, online grooming, cyberbullying and online stalking.³¹ Experts warn that severe child sexual abuse material online has more than doubled between 2020 and 2022.³²

The digital sphere has created new ways for perpetrators to access children, poses new risks and aggravates various forms of offline violence, for instance, by making it so easy to record and share instances of offline bullying. Cyber-bullying, which Eurochild – a network of organisations and individuals working with and for children in Europe³³ – has flagged as a major concern, is closely associated with harmful health consequences, such as chronic pain, depression, anxiety and

²⁶ UNICEF, [Data gaps on children in residential care leave the most vulnerable unaccounted for](#), 2017; Equal Justice Initiative, [Children in Adult Prison](#).

²⁷ [ILO Convention No 138 \(1973\)](#) stipulates that the minimum age for admission to employment should not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and in any case not less than 15 years.

²⁸ Under [ILO Convention No 182 \(1999\)](#).

²⁹ Child trafficking is a complex problem that can engender various forms of abuse: sexual exploitation, forced labour, forced marriage, removal of organs, etc. Like many other crimes, child trafficking is hard to quantify. The European Commission [states](#) that children in the EU represent around 23 % of those identified and presumed to be victims of human trafficking (75 % girls and 25 % boys).

³⁰ WHO, [Violence against Children Online](#), June 2022.

³¹ UNICEF, [Protecting children online](#) and [Tackling online violence against children](#).

³² Internet Watch Foundation, [Severe child sexual abuse material online has more than doubled since 2020](#), 2020.

³³ Eurochild, [Child safety and well-being online](#), February 2024.

aggression, and is likely to increase risk behaviours including substance abuse.³⁴ Notably, survivors of online sexual exploitation face a constant fear that their images would be used and posted online anew.

2.2.3. Consequences

While the consequences of violence may vary depending on its nature and severity, its impact on children and society as a whole can be serious and harmful in both the short- and the long term.

Cost of violence in human terms

The cost of violence in terms of human pain and suffering for children and their families is incalculable. Scientific studies show that violence against children has numerous consequences for their physical and psychological health, provoking stress associated with brain damage, particularly in the early years but also during adolescence. Children exposed to violence, whether they are the direct victims or merely witnesses, are at risk of disorders affecting their nervous and immune systems, possibly causing cognitive disorders and leading to behaviours that are dangerous to their health both mentally and physically. Crucially, negative short-term effects can spread and provoke additional negative effects in various domains, constituting what is known as a developmental cascade.³⁵ Violence can therefore undermine the wellbeing of children, harm their ability to learn and develop, and prevent them from building normal social relationships, thereby sometimes permanently affecting their future adult lives.³⁶ Finally, children who are the victims or witnesses of acts of violence are more likely to regard the practice as normal and engage in violent behaviour themselves in later stages of their lives.³⁷ This trans-generational transmission of violence is qualified as the 'cycle of violence'.³⁸ Finally, it seems that exposure to multiple forms of violence along with other adverse experiences, such as household member substance abuse or parental incarceration, intensifies the impact on victims. This suggests a cumulative effect.³⁹

Economic and social costs

In addition to causing human suffering and affecting health, violence against children results in direct and indirect economic costs, including costs related to healthcare (hospitalisation, treatment, medical consultations and long-term healthcare⁴⁰), child protection services, criminal justice services and, not least, loss of productivity. Additionally, the immeasurable cost of lost lives must be taken into consideration as well. It is difficult to determine the precise economic cost of violence against children. According to the WHO, in 2017, the total costs associated with adverse childhood experiences reached approximately €540 billion in Europe and US\$748 billion in North America.⁴¹ A study conducted in 2021 further analysed the annual economic burden of adverse childhood

³⁴ Council of Europe, [The protection of children against online violence](#), Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, Doc. 15954, March 2024; WHO, [Violence against Children Online](#), June 2022.

³⁵ H. Lim et al., [Interpersonal Violence against Children and Youth](#), Rowman and Littlefield, 2022, p. 18.

³⁶ WHO, [Violence against children](#), factsheet, 2022.

³⁷ H. Lim et al., [Interpersonal Violence against Children and Youth](#), Rowman and Littlefield, 2022, p. 21.

³⁸ WHO, [European report on preventing child maltreatment](#), 2013, p. 3.

³⁹ K. Turney, [Cumulative adverse childhood experiences and children's health](#), *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 119, 2020.

⁴⁰ 'Strong evidence shows that violence experienced during childhood increases the risks of: injury; HIV and other sexually transmitted infections; mental health problems; delayed cognitive development; reproductive health problems including early pregnancy; and communicable and non-communicable diseases. See WHO, [Global status report on preventing violence against children 2020](#), p. 17.

⁴¹ WHO, [Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children 2020](#), p. 18.

experiences in 28 European countries, revealing costs of US\$16.8 billion in Spain, US\$38 billion in France and US\$129.4 billion in Germany.⁴² In all countries studied, the annual costs went above 1 % of their GDP.⁴³

2.2.4. Extent of the problem

Reliable information on the prevalence of violence against children is essential for developing effective policies to prevent and address the problem. However, it is difficult to assess the true extent of the problem for a number of reasons.

On the one hand, while severe cases of violence may have been reported to national child protection authorities, the problem also takes less obvious forms that persist over long periods. Additionally, acts of violence may go unreported for a number of reasons.⁴⁴ Child victims and/or their parents may choose to remain silent out of fear, shame or lack of confidence. Furthermore, certain forms of violence, such as corporal punishment for the purposes of discipline and a number of traditional customs, may be socially accepted, making it harder to recognise and address.

On the other hand, a UN study has identified various obstacles to accurately measuring the extent of the problem. These include inconsistent definitions of violence across different data sources, different methods for data collection, fragmentation of data collection, low quality of administrative data and limited resources for research and analysis.⁴⁵

The Council of Europe estimates that one in five children has experienced some form of sexual violence, such as rape, exploitation or online sexual extortion, and that in 70-85 % of cases, the perpetrator was known to the victim.⁴⁶

At the EU level, the FRA conducted a groundbreaking study on violence against women in the (then) 28 Member States. The study revealed that around 12 % of women reported experiencing some form of sexual abuse before the age of 15, while 27 % reported experiencing some form of physical abuse before the age of 15. Additionally, about 10 % of women indicated that they had experienced emotional abuse before the age of 15. The FRA emphasises the importance of the EU focusing on the prevalence of childhood abuse and unreported violence, to address the current and past consequences of violence against children.⁴⁷

⁴² For a comprehensive table including all 28 countries under review, see Prof. K. Hughes et al., '[Health and financial costs of adverse childhood experiences in 28 European countries: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#)', *Lancet Public Health*, Vol. 6(11), 2021, p. 854.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ For this reason, retrospective surveys among the adult population are also essential for assessing the extent of the problem.

⁴⁵ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, '[Statistics on Children – Spotlight on children exposed to violence, in alternative care, and with disabilities](#)', 2022.

⁴⁶ Council of Europe, '[About one in five children in Europe are victims of some form of sexual violence](#)', 2024.

⁴⁷ FRA, '[Violence against women: an EU-wide survey](#)', 2014, pp. 12-14 and pp. 32-34.

Table 1 – Child deaths in the EU resulting from interpersonal violence; deaths per 100 000 inhabitants, 2021

Country	1-4 years old	5-9 years old	10-14 years old	15-19 years old
Austria	0.44	0.36	0.39	-
Belgium	0.64	0.31	0.31	0.54
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-
Croatia	-	0.22	0.31	-
Cyprus	-	0.95	-	-
Czechia	-	-	-	0.49
Denmark	2.21	0.99	0.93	1.14
Estonia	-	0.01	0.69	-
Finland	-	0.04	0.06	0.37
France	0.59	0.38	0.33	0.68
Germany	0.55	0.47	0.05	0.69
Greece	0.40	-	-	-
Hungary	0.92	0.53	0.69	1.04
Ireland	-	0.20	0.13	0.29
Italy	-	0.09	-	-
Latvia	0.20	0.22	0.35	2.08
Lithuania	-	0.33	0.75	2.80
Luxembourg	0.26	0.35	0.24	0.54
Malta	-	-	-	0.31
Netherlands	0.23	-	0.14	-
Poland	-	-	-	-
Portugal	-	-	-	-
Romania	-	-	-	-
Slovakia	-	-	-	0.59
Slovenia	-	0.17	0.44	0.36
Spain	0.19	0.14	0.15	-
Sweden	-	-	-	1.83

Source: [The WHO Global Health Observatory; global health estimates: leading causes of death.](#)

NB: Data is from 2021; no number in the table (-) means that interpersonal violence was not among the top 10 causes of death and therefore was not shown in the available graphics.

UNICEF and WHO estimates

In its global health estimates for 2021, the WHO monitored the leading causes of death in each country, segregated by age. The findings demonstrate that, in 2021, interpersonal violence was among the top 10 causes of death for children aged 5 to 9 in 17 EU Member States and in 15 Member States for children aged 15 to 19.⁴⁸ Table 1 illustrates these rates. In Denmark, among children aged 1-4, there were 2.21 deaths per 100 000 inhabitants from interpersonal violence, representing the highest number of deaths from this cause in this age group in the EU.⁴⁹ Latvia and Lithuania show the highest number of deaths in the 15-19 age group, with 2.08 and 2.80 deaths per 100 000 inhabitants respectively.⁵⁰ The 2019 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) global study on homicide included further data on Europe, revealing that homicide rates among boys aged 0-14 decreased by almost 50 % between 2008 and 2017, with similar findings for girls in the same age group.⁵¹ Among the Member States listed in the study, Lithuania, Hungary, France and Germany had the highest homicide rates among children and adolescents aged 0-19, ranging from about 0.8 to almost 1.2 per 100 000 inhabitants.⁵² The study further revealed a significant gender disparity. While for male adolescents the highest risk of homicide was in the 18-19 age group, for females it was in the 15-19 age group and even more so in the 0-9 age group.⁵³

Although homicide rates among children have been continuously decreasing, for example, by 13.6 % between 2010 and 2015,⁵⁴ an estimated 629 homicides take place every year in Europe among children under 15 years of age.⁵⁵

Furthermore, a WHO study has shown that 9.6 % of children experience sexual abuse (13.4 % of girls and 5.7 % of boys), 22.9 % experience physical abuse and 29.1 % experience psychological abuse (with no significant differences between boys and girls for the last two). In other words, around 18 million children in Europe⁵⁶ experience sexual abuse, 44 million experience physical abuse and 55 million experience psychological abuse, resulting in the deaths of at least 850 children under the age of 15 each year.⁵⁷

Apart from the physical violence inflicted upon children and adolescents by others, the rate of child suicide sheds light on the additional burden on children's mental health and their experiences of violence. Suicide is the second most common cause of death (after traffic accidents) among children and adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 in the EU, accounting for about 17 % of deaths.⁵⁸ While suicide rates in the EU dropped by 20 % between 2001 and 2020, approximately 18 young lives were lost per week in 2020.⁵⁹ Male adolescents are more likely to commit suicide, accounting for

⁴⁸ WHO, [Global health estimates: Leading causes of death](#).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ UNODC, [Global study on homicide – Killing of children and young adults](#), 2019, p. 17.

⁵² Ibid., p. 20.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁴ European regional status report on preventing violence against children, 2020, p. 8.

⁵⁵ WHO, [European status report on preventing child maltreatment](#), 2021, p. 12.

⁵⁶ Including [53 countries](#) of which 28 are EU Member States.

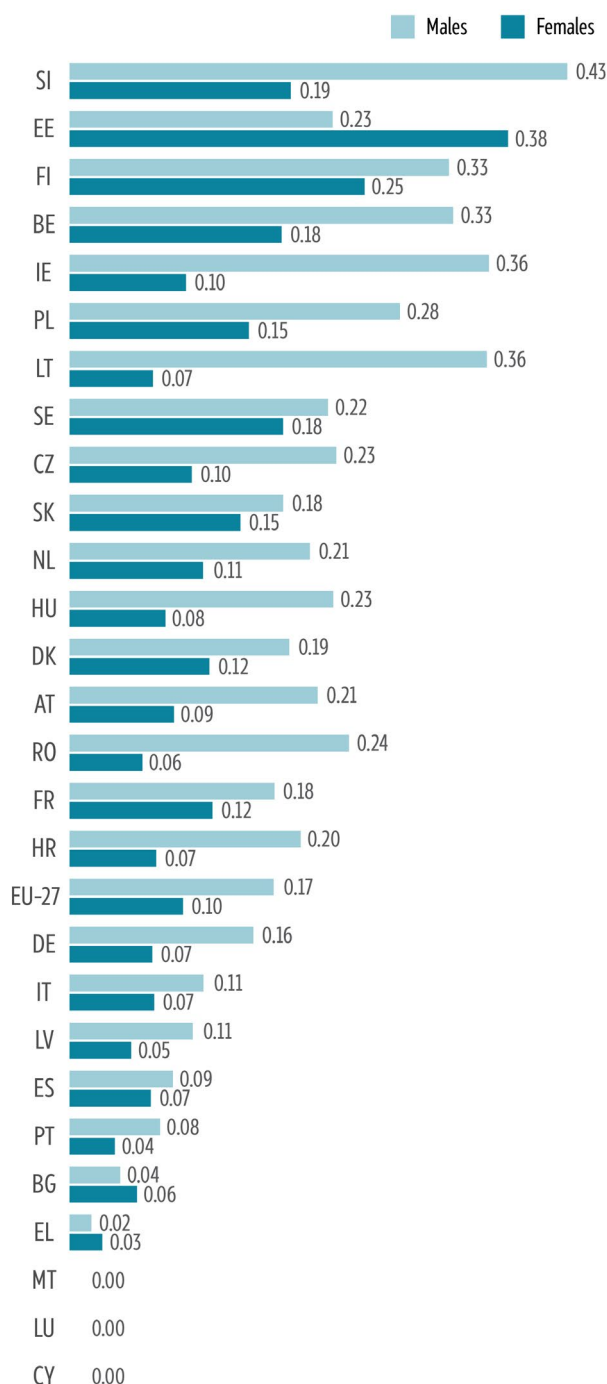
⁵⁷ These figures are based on data from a 2013 WHO report, with no subsequent updates available. In addition, a high level of neglect has been recorded, of which 16.3 % involving physical neglect and 18.4 % involving effective neglect, see WHO, [European status report on preventing child maltreatment](#), 2021, p. 13.

⁵⁸ UNICEF, Child and adolescent mental health, *The State of Children in the European Union 2024*, p. 3

⁵⁹ Ibid.

70 % of young people aged 15–19 who die from suicide in the EU.⁶⁰ In 2021, Slovenia, Estonia, Finland and Belgium reported the highest number of suicides in the EU, while Greece, Malta, Luxembourg and Cyprus reported the lowest (see Figure 1).⁶¹

Figure 1 – Sex-disaggregated data of child suicides by Member State, per 100 000 inhabitants, in 2021



Data source: Eurostat, [hlth_cd_aro, tps00001](#), 2021.

⁶⁰ However, the numbers for suicides of males are decreasing, while the numbers for females remain stable, as a result of which the gender gap is getting narrower, *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶¹ Eurostat, [Causes of death – deaths by country of residence and occurrence](#), 2024.

Child helplines and contact points

While health service data is incomplete, the WHO reports that more than 550 000 child protection contacts were registered in one year in 23 European reporting countries.⁶² On average, Child Helpline International reports that child helplines in Europe make around 1.2 million counselling contacts every year. Between 2019 and 2021, 100 000 of these contacts concerned different forms of sexual violence, representing about 20 % of all counselling contacts received, with a rising proportion of cases of online sexual exploitation.⁶³

2.3. The root causes of an avoidable problem

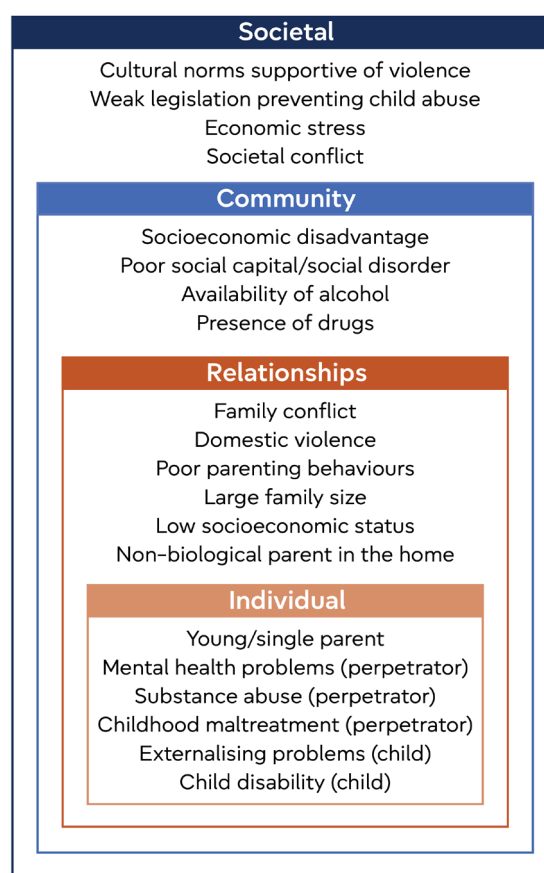
2.3.1. Risk factors

Child abuse depends on a range of specific factors ranging from the personality profiles of victims and perpetrators to their environment. According to the WHO, no single factor can fully explain why some individuals abuse others or why abuse is more prevalent in certain situations than in others. It is considered a complex interaction of factors related to individuals, human relations and social, cultural and environmental influences.

The concept of 'intersectionality' describes these complex interactions, highlighting that different factors such as poverty, gender, or histories of migration do not stand in isolation but rather mutually enforce each other, producing a particular and unique disadvantage. An intersectional approach to violence against children thus recognises the way in which personal characteristics intersect with systems and structures to shape a child's exposure and experience of violence.⁶⁴

The 'ecological' model, described in Figure 2, examines the relationship between individuals and their environment, and considers child abuse to be the result of risk factors influencing behaviour at multiple levels.⁶⁵

Figure 2 – Causes of child abuse, as illustrated by the 'ecological' model



Source: [European report on preventing child maltreatment](#), WHO, 2013, p. 35.

⁶² WHO, [European status report on preventing child maltreatment](#), 2021, p. 12.

⁶³ Child Helpline International, [The Role of Child Helplines in Protecting Children in Europe against Sexual Exploitation & Abuse](#), 2023.

⁶⁴ For an introduction to intersectionality, see UN Women, [Intersectionality resource guide and toolkit](#); Council of Europe [Intersectionality and Multiple Discrimination](#); United Nations, [General comment No 6 on equality and non-discrimination](#), Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2018; J. Dixon Weaver, 'Intersectionality and Children's Rights', in J. Todres and S.M. King (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Rights Law*, 2020.

⁶⁵ WHO, [European report on preventing child maltreatment](#), 2013, pp. 34-50.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding government responses substantially worsened numerous risk factors, exposing children – particularly those already living in violent or dysfunctional family situations – to a greater risk of experiencing or witnessing physical, psychological or sexual violence.⁶⁶ Additionally, public restrictions and lockdowns increased isolation, cut off access to school friends and teachers, and inhibited support services, thus limiting children's opportunities to seek help.⁶⁷ The pandemic also led to a spike in online child sexual exploitation and abuse, with some EU countries reporting a 50 % increase in online sexual abuse of children.⁶⁸

On the other hand, factors likely to reduce the risk of abuse include a healthy family environment, a supportive community, parental focus on child development and the emotional and social capacities of children themselves.⁶⁹

Certain categories of children are particularly at risk of abuse, including children with disabilities, children in care, abandoned and unaccompanied children, refugee children, children outside the law and children belonging to ethnic or other underrepresented minority groups.

Migrant and refugee children, especially if unaccompanied, face an increased risk of experiencing various forms of violence such as sexual violence, sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Their vulnerability is exacerbated by factors such as limited access to basic public services, social exclusion and discrimination. This is often coupled with mental health problems, further increasing their susceptibility to sexual exploitation.⁷⁰ Additionally, migrant children are more likely to be living in poverty and growing up in family environments marked by instability and past experiences of violence.⁷¹ The cumulative and intersectional effect of these factors makes them exceptionally vulnerable to violence.⁷²

2.3.2. Importance of prevention

It is possible to avoid violence against children from occurring; the extent and serious consequences of the problem highlight the importance of prevention. Research shows that the costs of preventive measures are significantly less than the combined total of short- and long-term costs resulting from child abuse and neglect to individuals, families and society.⁷³ However, research also shows that while many countries are taking some action, investment in prevention programmes is still insufficient.⁷⁴ The WHO therefore calls for a sustained, systematic, multidisciplinary and evidence-based approach to prevention. More specifically, it calls for a public health strategy based on solid facts and seeking to adopt a multi-sectoral approach to cost-effective prevention. This approach

⁶⁶ UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, [Leader's statement – Violence against children: A hidden crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), April 2020; WHO, [Addressing violence against children, women and older people during the covid-19 pandemic: Key actions](#), June 2020.

⁶⁷ WHO, [Violence against Children Online](#), June 2022.

⁶⁸ We Protect Global Alliance, [Global Threat Assessment 2021](#), p. 22f.; on the impact of COVID-19 measures on children, see also H. Špániková et al., [Intersectional evaluation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on different groups](#), Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, 2023.

⁶⁹ WHO, [European report on preventing child maltreatment](#), 2013, pp. 51–54.

⁷⁰ UNICEF, [The sale & sexual exploitation of children: Migration](#), 2020; See also: A. Radjenovic, [Vulnerability of unaccompanied and separated child migrants](#), EPRS, June 2024.

⁷¹ Eurostat, [Migrant integration statistics – at risk of poverty and social exclusion](#), 2023; UNICEF, [Uprooted](#), The Growing Crisis for Refugee and Migrant Children, 2016.

⁷² A. Radjenovic, [Vulnerability of unaccompanied and separated child migrants](#), EPRS, European Parliament, June 2024.

⁷³ UNICEF, [The Violence-Prevention Dividend – Why Preventing Violence against Children Makes Economic Sense](#), Office of the Special Representative on Violence against Children et al., 2022.

⁷⁴ WHO, [Global status report on preventing violence against children 2020](#), 2020.

should encompass education, social services and the legal system, and involve representatives of local authorities, caregivers and non-governmental organisations.⁷⁵

3. Principal international instruments and frameworks

Adopted in 1924 by the League of Nations, the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child⁷⁶ was the first international document to set out the human rights of children. Since then, many instruments have been adopted to safeguard children's rights, and more specifically to protect them from violence.⁷⁷

3.1. The United Nations framework

The 1959 UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child represented a consensus within the international community regarding the universal principles of children's rights. It highlighted the importance of ensuring that children enjoy special protection and safeguards.⁷⁸

3.1.1. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

Adopted in 1989, the UNCRC was the first legally binding international text to proclaim the entirety of children's fundamental rights. The numerous rights enshrined in the UNCRC include those aimed at protecting children from all forms of violence. In particular, Article 19 requires States Parties to take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence while in the care of parents, legal guardians or any other person who has care of them. These measures 'should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment ..., and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement'.

The UNCRC lays down strict standards of protection in both the public and private spheres. Children's right to be protected from violence is addressed in other UNCRC articles, not just Article 19. For example, Article 24(3) establishes the right of children to be protected from traditional practices that are harmful to their health. Similarly, Article 28(2) establishes the right of children to be protected from corporal punishment at school, while Articles 32 to 36 provide for children to be protected from all forms of economic or sexual exploitation. Other articles seek to ensure that children are protected against torture and cruel or degrading treatment. They also promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of children who are victims of violence.

In its General Comment No 13 (2011), entitled 'The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence', the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child outlined a broad range of measures necessary to create a protective environment for children in all settings. These measures include establishing laws that prohibit *all* forms of violence; implementing national strategies and action plans that involve all stakeholders; devising various social measures aimed at reducing risks and

⁷⁵ WHO, [European status report on preventing child maltreatment](#), Regional Office for Europe, 2018.

⁷⁶ League of Nations, [Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child](#), 1924.

⁷⁷ For a list of some of the relevant international treaties see: [Council of Europe Policy guidelines on integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence](#), Council of Europe, 2009, pp. 35-36; R. Shreeves, [Children's rights in the EU in the light of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), European Parliament, EPRS, 2022.

⁷⁸ United Nations, [Declaration of the Rights of the Child](#), 1959.

preventing violence; and developing educational measures that address attitudes, traditions, customs and behavioural practices that condone or promote violence against children. The committee emphasised the need for an integrated, cohesive and interdisciplinary system to protect children from violence, as well as the importance of child participation in the development, monitoring and evaluation of protection measures.⁷⁹

3.1.2. Additional protocols to the UNCRC

Two optional protocols to the UNCRC provide for the protection of children from certain forms of violence.

The Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography requires States Parties to enact legislation criminalising these offences, close premises used for such activities, and to seize or confiscate the proceeds of such activities and the instrumentalities used to facilitate them;

The Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict limits the recruitment of children in armed conflicts and requires States Parties to provide appropriate assistance for the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of children who have been involved in armed conflict.⁸⁰

A third optional protocol to the UNCRC, which entered into force in April 2024,⁸¹ represents a significant advance in children's rights as it allows children to individually lodge complaints against their countries before the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child for violations of their rights.

Moreover, building upon the Millennium Development Goals, the UN developed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that set out specific objectives to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all, including children. While the SDGs are not legally binding on states, governments are expected to establish national frameworks for the achievement of these objectives. The European sustainable development report details yearly progress towards achieving these goals.⁸²

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and child protection

The SDGs set out 17 global objectives to help nations accomplish a just transition by 2030. Goal 16 promotes a peaceful and inclusive society, calling for the protection of children from abuse, exploitation, trafficking and violence. Moreover, the SDGs demand an end to poverty in all its forms (Goal 1), a healthy life and well-being for all ages (Goal 3), quality education (Goal 4) and gender equality (Goal 5), as well as the eradication of child labour (Goal 8).

3.2. Council of Europe standards

Although it does not explicitly refer to children's rights, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)⁸³ recognises the right to life (Article 2), the right to be protected from torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 3), the right to be free from slavery and forced labour (Article 4), the right to liberty and security (Article 5), the right to a fair trial (Article 6), and the right

⁷⁹ United Nations, [General comment No 13 – The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence](#), 2011.

⁸⁰ [Optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography](#), United Nations, 2001.

⁸¹ United Nations, [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure](#), 2012.

⁸² See [Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/2024](#).

⁸³ [European Convention on Human Rights](#), Council of Europe.

to respect for private and family life (Article 8) of everyone within the jurisdiction of the Council of Europe's member states, including children.

Additionally, the revised European Social Charter⁸⁴ lays down in Article 17 the right of children to be protected against negligence, violence or exploitation. Other relevant Council of Europe instruments are the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings,⁸⁵ the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse⁸⁶ and the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (also known as the Istanbul Convention).⁸⁷

The European Court of Human Rights has issued a number of judgments condemning violence against children based on the relevant ECHR articles.⁸⁸ In 2009, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted its 'Guidelines on integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence' in order to encourage the Council of Europe's member states to develop and implement comprehensive national frameworks aimed at safeguarding the rights of children and eliminating all forms of violence against them. The guidelines are founded on eight general principles related to children:

- protection against violence,
- right to life and maximum survival and development,
- non-discrimination,
- gender equality,
- participation,
- obligations of the state,
- obligations and participation of other players (institutions and professionals working for and with children, parents and extended family, the media, the private sector, religious communities and civil society)
- the best interests of the child.

Additionally, there are four operative principles emphasising that eradicating violence against children requires an integrated (systemic and holistic) and multi-stakeholder approach.⁸⁹

In addition to these international standards, in 2016 the WHO published its Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly report, endorsing the first ever WHO global plan of action to strengthen the role of the health system within a national multisectoral response to address interpersonal violence, in particular against women and girls, and against children.⁹⁰ Facilitated through collaboration with Member States and other partners, this plan sets out a shared commitment to:

- monitoring and documenting violence against children;
- maintaining an information system with data on the burden risk factors and consequences of such violence;
- developing and disseminating guidance material for prevention and response efforts;
- publishing periodic status reports on country efforts;

⁸⁴ [European Social Charter](#), Council of Europe.

⁸⁵ [Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings](#), Council of Europe.

⁸⁶ Council of Europe [Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#).

⁸⁷ Council of Europe [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#), (the term 'women', as used in this convention, includes girls under the age of 18).

⁸⁸ European Court of Human Rights, [Protection of minors: fact sheet](#), April 2024.

⁸⁹ [Council of Europe Policy guidelines on integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence](#), op. cit., pp. 9-13.

⁹⁰ [Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly](#), resolutions and decisions, May 2016, especially p. 109.

- supporting countries in strategy implementation;
- collaborating with international partners to reduce and eliminate violence against children globally.

Taken together, these regulations, standards and action plans call on states to prevent and respond to violence against children. Just as importantly, they also underline international legal obligations and maintain global and regional political pressure.

4. How the European Union addresses violence against children

Over the years, the EU has consistently worked to increase the protection afforded to children, chiefly by adopting a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to the issue.

4.1. Children's rights in the European Union

Before the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the EU addressed children's rights as part of its general obligation to respect fundamental rights.⁹¹ The EU introduced a variety of measures to safeguard and promote children's rights, including legal acts, guidelines, political dialogue and financial assistance.⁹² Some of these initiatives focused particularly on combating violence against children.⁹³

With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the protection of children's rights was explicitly recognised as one of the goals the EU had to pursue both internally and in its external relations. Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) states that the EU has an obligation to promote the protection of children's rights.⁹⁴ The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) also contains important provisions: Article 79 mandates the European Parliament and the Council to adopt measures to combat trafficking in persons, especially women and children. Along the same lines, Article 83 allows the two institutions to adopt minimum rules to combat trafficking and sexual exploitation of children, and Article 82 enables the establishment of minimum rules regarding the rights of individuals in criminal procedure and the rights of victims of crime.⁹⁵

Lastly, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union recognises in its Article 24 that 'children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being'. This Article goes on to say that '[i]n all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration'. The charter also establishes specific rights such as the right to education (Article 14), prohibits child labour, and imposes guarantees to protect young people at work (Article 32).⁹⁶

⁹¹ Introduced in 1992 by the Maastricht Treaty (see Article 6(2) of the [Treaty on European Union](#) (TEU), consolidated version 1997).

⁹² [EU Framework of Law for Children's Rights](#), op. cit., pp. 13-18.

⁹³ Commission staff working document accompanying the communication from the Commission: [Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child: Preliminary inventory of EU action affecting children's rights](#), SEC (2006) 889, p. 4 and pp. 17-21.

⁹⁴ [TEU](#) (consolidated version 2012).

⁹⁵ [TFEU](#) (consolidated version 2012).

⁹⁶ [EU Framework of Law for Children's Rights](#), op. cit., pp. 18-24 and pp. 44-45.

While the EU does not have specific powers to legislate on children's rights, the actions it takes in this regard⁹⁷ have a direct impact on the laws and policies introduced in this area by Member States.

4.2. Protecting children from violence

While the primary responsibility for protecting children in the EU from violence lies with the Member States, the EU also plays a key role in this area. This stems from its overarching objective to protect and promote the right of the child to a life free from any form of discrimination, recrimination or intimidation.

4.2.1. Political framework

In its strategic plan 2020–2024 on employment, social affairs and inclusion, the European Commission commits to promoting effective social protection systems for many vulnerable groups, including children.⁹⁸ The EU addresses this objective through various political instruments that prioritise the rights of the child.

EU strategy on the rights of the child (2021–2024)

On 24 March 2021, the European Commission adopted its EU strategy on the rights of the child.⁹⁹ The strategy builds on previous Commission communications,¹⁰⁰ incorporates input from over 10 000 children through a multi-stakeholder preparation process and is closely linked to the Council of Europe strategy for the rights of the child.¹⁰¹

The strategy puts forward a comprehensive approach through a proposed series of targeted actions divided into six thematic areas, including violence against children, socio-economic inclusion and safe access to digital environments. Under the 2021 strategy, the European Commission commits to introducing a legislative proposal to combat domestic violence, to table a recommendation on the prevention of harmful practices including female genital mutilation, and to support the development and strengthening of integrated child protective systems. Such systems require multi-disciplinary cooperation between relevant authorities and include effective prevention, early intervention and family support. The strategy further proposes the adoption and revision of the European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+, implemented in 2022) and aims to ensure the protection and empowerment of children in the digital sphere.¹⁰²

The Daphne programme

The Daphne programme was launched in 1997 with the aim of preventing and eradicating violence against children, young people and women. Through this programme the EU funds projects to raise awareness and to provide support to victims and civil society organisations working on the ground. It addresses all forms of violence, including domestic and sexual violence, female genital mutilation and online harassment. Since 2021, the programme has been one of the four pillars of the citizens, equality, rights and values (CERV) programme that will run until 2027. The Daphne programme, whose importance has been emphasised by Parliament and the Council, has been allocated a budget of €80 million for this period.

⁹⁷ All the legislation and regulations on the rights of the child, the main policy documents and other documents referring specifically to children, can be found in the document: [EU action on the rights of the child](#) available on the website of the European Commission.

⁹⁸ European Commission, [Strategic Plan 2020–2024, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion](#).

⁹⁹ European Commission, EU strategy on the rights of the child, [COM\(2021\) 142 final](#).

¹⁰⁰ See for instance: European Commission, Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, [COM\(2006\) 367 final](#).

¹⁰¹ [Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2016–2021\)](#); see also [Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2022–2027\)](#).

¹⁰² European Commission, [A European strategy for a better internet for kids \(BIK+\)](#), website.

Since the adoption of the first EU strategy on the rights of the child in 2006,¹⁰³ the Commission has continuously renewed and extended the objectives and mechanisms promoted in the revised strategies. It is expected that a new strategy will be adopted after the current EU strategy on the rights of the child ends in 2024.

EU guidelines for the promotion and protection of the rights of the child (2017)

By adopting the 2017 EU guidelines for the promotion and protection of the rights of the child, the EU underscores the importance of international and EU legal instruments and standards. These guidelines provide practical guidance to EU institutions and Member States to strengthen their role in promoting and protecting of the rights of the child, especially in external relations.¹⁰⁴ To this end, the guidelines outline a systems-strengthening and rights-based approach that connects all relevant structures and players to protect the rights of the child. Specifically, the guidelines call for mainstreaming the rights of the child, i.e. their integration into all EU policies and action programmes. Priorities and suggested actions include promoting children's rights in partner countries through bilateral and multilateral cooperation, reviewing and revising legislation related to children's access to justice, working closely with civil society organisations and ensuring a more efficient allocation and use of resources.

EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse (2020–2025)

In 2020, the Commission adopted the EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse, to address the growing threat of child abuse online and offline.¹⁰⁵ The strategy outlines eight distinct initiatives that aim to establish a strong legal framework and highlight the importance of preventive measures and cross-border cooperation. The initiatives include fully implementing existing legal standards, such as the Directive on combating sexual abuse and exploitation of children, strengthening law enforcement efforts, identifying legislative gaps and best practices, and protecting children globally through multi-stakeholder cooperation. Another initiative aims to establish a European centre for preventing and countering child sexual abuse, which would focus on detecting and removing child sexual abuse material online and supporting Member States in their prevention efforts.¹⁰⁶

The European Child Guarantee,¹⁰⁷ the European Platform for Investing in Children¹⁰⁸ and the youth action plan in EU external action¹⁰⁹ are just some of the important initiatives introduced by the EU in recent years to achieve its political commitment to child protection.

Commission recommendation on integrated child protection systems

Demonstrating its commitment to the EU strategy on the rights of the child, the Commission adopted its recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interest of the child¹¹⁰ in April 2024. The recommendation promotes close collaboration between all levels of governance and civil society to ensure a coherent and systemic protection of children from violence. In the pursuit of this objective, the Commission sets out to put children at

¹⁰³ European Commission, Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, [COM\(2006\) 367 final](#).

¹⁰⁴ European Commission, [EU Guidelines for the promotion and protection of the rights of the child](#).

¹⁰⁵ European Commission, EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse, [COM\(2020\) 607 final](#).

¹⁰⁶ European Commission, [EU centre to prevent and combat child sexual abuse](#).

¹⁰⁷ [Council Recommendation \(EU\) 2021/1004](#), 14 June 2021.

¹⁰⁸ [Commission Recommendation \(2013/112/EU\)](#), 20 February 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Youth Action Plan (YAP) in EU external action 2022–2017, [JOIN\(2022\) 53 final](#).

¹¹⁰ European Commission, [Recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interest of the child](#), April 2024.

the centre of integrated child protection systems; to support Member States in their adaptation of the respective systems; to improve coordination and cooperation across sectors and authorities; to respond to children's safety needs both offline and online; to promote children's mental health; and to make better use of existing EU tools including laws, policies and funding support.

4.2.2. Key legislative measures

New EU legislation on the rights of the child has focused on child-friendly justice and the prevention and investigation of child sexual abuse. Below is a brief description of the legislation that is already in place. Furthermore, new and revised legislative instruments on sexual abuse and exploitation are soon to be expected, reflecting the EU's commitment to protecting children from violence.

The Directive on procedural safeguards for children who are suspects or accused persons in criminal proceedings¹¹¹ is a significant step towards establishing a system of child-friendly justice. It is dedicated to ensuring children's right to a fair trial, preventing the occurrence of new offences and promoting children's social integration. The directive highlights the importance of conducting individual assessments of children involved in criminal proceedings to identify any specific vulnerabilities they may have.

The Directive on combating sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children was adopted in 2011. It introduced uniform definitions of criminal offences related to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, and child pornography.¹¹² In 2024, the Commission proposed a recast of the directive in order to criminalise all forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation, including those facilitated by digitalisation, and to ensure effective national procedures to combat child sexual abuse.¹¹³

Moreover, the Commission has proposed a regulation laying down long-term rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse.¹¹⁴ The proposal includes responsibilities for interpersonal communication services to be proactive in identifying online child sexual abuse materials and similar activities. However, multiple stakeholders including the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) have voiced concerns regarding privacy and security.¹¹⁵ A scheduled vote in June 2024 to amend the proposal was cancelled because a required qualified majority was lacking in the Council. An existing interim regulation already provided for temporary derogation from part of the obligations under the e-Privacy Directive to protect the confidentiality of communications data.¹¹⁶ Shortly before its

EU guidelines for the protection of children

The EU has adopted various guidelines that aim to ensure the protection of children in the context of its external action. These include the EU guidelines on [children and armed conflict](#) (2008), on [violence against women and girls and combating all forms of discrimination against them](#) (2008) and on [promoting and protecting the enjoyment of all human rights by LGBTI persons](#) (2013).

¹¹¹ [Directive 2016/800/EU](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on procedural safeguards for children who are suspects or accused persons in criminal proceedings.

¹¹² [Directive 2011/92/EU](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography.

¹¹³ European Commission proposal, [COM\(2024\) 60 final](#), 6 February 2024.

¹¹⁴ European Commission proposal, [COM\(2022\) 209 final](#), 11 May 2022.

¹¹⁵ M. Negreiro, [Combating child sexual abuse online](#), EPRS, European Parliament, June 2023, p. 7.

¹¹⁶ [Regulation 2021/1232/EU](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 July 2021 on a temporary derogation from certain provisions of Directive 2002/58/EC as regards the use of technologies by providers of number-independent interpersonal communications services for the processing of personal and other data for the purpose of combating online child sexual abuse.

expiration in August 2024, this regulation was amended to establish a committee procedure and prolong the derogation period until April 2026.¹¹⁷

Furthermore, child protection is reinforced through regulatory actions in various related policy areas. The Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence,¹¹⁸ adopted in May 2024, includes a number of provisions aimed at protecting children. These address issues such as female genital mutilation, sexual exploitation of children and seek to ensure adequate support services for children. Additionally, the Victims' Rights Directive¹¹⁹ outlines special forms of protection for children who are victims of crime. It emphasises the importance of prioritising the child's best interests and identifies specific protection needs that are presumed for children.

4.2.3. The role of the European Parliament

In its role as a co-legislator, Parliament has significantly contributed to strengthening children's rights through the adoption of EU legislation aimed at eradicating the various forms of violence to which children are subjected, as described earlier in this document.

Moreover, over the years, Parliament has sounded the alarm with regard to the problem of violence against children on numerous occasions and has insisted on the rights of the child being protected and promoted both within and outside the European Union. In this context, Parliament has called on all Member States to ensure the quality and accessibility of social services, health and education,¹²⁰ to integrate children's rights into internal and external policies,¹²¹ and to protect the rights of particularly vulnerable children, such as migrant and refugee children, as well as children with disabilities.¹²² Additionally, in its resolutions of 5 October 2023 and 14 December 2017, Parliament emphasised the necessity of eliminating online child abuse material and called on the Commission to develop a European strategy against cyberbullying.¹²³ Expressing concern over the lack of existing statistics, Parliament highlighted the necessity for disaggregated and comprehensive data on child poverty, sexual abuse and exploitation of children, and child marriage.¹²⁴

Since 1987, Parliament has also had a [Coordinator on Children's Rights](#), whose role has broadened over the years. Most recently, in November 2023, the Coordinator's mandate was further modified to recognise the Coordinator 'as a formal body representing Parliament on children's rights' and will 'strengthen Parliament's commitment and obligations in respect to the rights of the child for the

¹¹⁷ [Regulation 2024/1307/EU](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2024.

¹¹⁸ [Directive \(EU\) 2024/1385](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence.

¹¹⁹ [Directive 2012/29/EU](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA.

¹²⁰ European Parliament resolutions of 21 November 2023 on [reducing inequalities and promoting social inclusion in times of crisis for children and their families](#), 29 April 2021 on the [European Child Guarantee](#), and 11 March 2021 on [children's rights in view of the EU Strategy on the rights of the child](#).

¹²¹ European Parliament resolutions of 13 December 2023 on [the situation of children deprived of liberty in the world](#) and 11 March 2021 on [children's rights in view of the EU Strategy on the rights of the child](#).

¹²² European Parliament resolutions of 13 December 2023 on [the situation of children deprived of liberty in the world](#), 21 November 2023 on [reducing inequalities and promoting social inclusion in times of crisis for children and their families](#), 21 November 2023 on [strengthening the Child Guarantee](#), and 3 May 2018 on [the protection of children in migration](#).

¹²³ European Parliament resolutions of 5 October 2023 on [the new European Strategy for a better internet for kids \(BIK+\)](#) and of 29 April 2021 on [the European Child Guarantee](#).

¹²⁴ European Parliament resolutions of 21 November 2023 on [strengthening the Child Guarantee](#), 5 October 2023 on [the new European Strategy for a better internet for kids \(BIK+\)](#), and 5 April 2022 on [the protection of the rights of the child in civil, administrative and family law proceedings](#).

parliamentary term to come'. Parliament Vice-President Ewa Kopacz (EPP, Poland) has been the Coordinator on Children's Rights since 2019.

4.3. National approaches

The EU Member States are combating violence against children through a variety of legislative and political measures, as well as by improving the services they provide.¹²⁵ They are gradually aligning their national laws with international and EU standards in the area. For example, all Member States have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Council of Europe Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse,¹²⁶ and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention).¹²⁷

When it comes to prevention and protection policies, drawing comparisons between countries can be complex. Member States have implemented various initiatives to prevent violence, including all-purpose programmes (such as those addressing prevention of sexual abuse, awareness raising campaigns through the media, measures to reduce poverty, initiatives to prevent domestic violence, etc.) and targeted programmes (such as parental education initiatives, home visits, multi-component pre-school programmes, support groups, self-help groups, etc.). However, very few studies have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of these prevention initiatives.¹²⁸

In 2021, the WHO published its European regional status report on 'Preventing Violence against Children', which explores the progress of countries towards the UN SDG of ending violence against children.¹²⁹ The report includes comprehensive country profiles that display the implementation and enforcement of laws, relevant action plans and the funding and training afforded, among others, in support of child protection services, parents and caregivers, and mental health services for victims. At the time of the report, 16 Member States had national action plans on child maltreatment, sexual violence, and youth violence. While a high level of government support was demonstrated for the implementation and enforcement of laws (95 %) and the response and help services (76 %), support was significantly lower for income- and economic strengthening (37 %).¹³⁰

In response to the EU strategy on the rights of the child and the European child guarantee, all Member States have now adopted child guarantee national action plans.¹³¹ Additionally, national coordinators have been appointed to coordinate and monitor these plans. However, the national action plans mostly address general issues such as housing, education and mental health, with only Cyprus and Estonia specifically addressing the prevention of violence against, and sexual abuse of, children.

Moreover, in January 2024, the EU FRA published an update to its report on child protection systems in the EU, providing an overview of Member States' national systems and their development in

¹²⁵ The FRA's annual reports on the state of fundamental rights in the EU give specific examples of actions taken in individual countries. For the latest developments, see: FRA, [Fundamental rights report – 2023](#) (Chapter 8, pp. 198-219).

¹²⁶ [Status of the signature and ratification](#) of the Council of Europe Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.

¹²⁷ [Status of signature and ratification](#) of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

¹²⁸ WHO, [European status report on preventing child maltreatment](#), 2018.

¹²⁹ WHO, [European regional status report on preventing violence against children 2020](#), 2021.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹³¹ For an overview of the national action plans, see: Eurochild, [Child Guarantee National Action Plans at a glance](#), 2022.

recent years.¹³² The report found that while all Member States had legal provisions on child protection, not all of them had developed a single legal instrument. Furthermore, only 10 Member States had primary legislation in place in relation to national child protection.¹³³

The majority of Member States have established comprehensive national policies regarding general issues of child protection, as well as addressing specific problems faced by particular groups of children.¹³⁴ However, these policies are not always accompanied by quantifiable goals. Furthermore, regional laws within federal Member States are not consistently harmonised and thus result in disparities in access to support services. In Member States with a decentralised system, regional and national policies may coexist, as is the case in the Netherlands and Finland.¹³⁵

Despite 19 Member States having adopted comprehensive national policies, only half of the Member States have integrated child poverty into their strategic policy documents, and only seven Member States have implemented a digital programme.¹³⁶ The report also points out that while most Member States have reporting obligations for professionals working with children, many lack clearly structured procedures, with Germany, Hungary and the Netherlands having no reporting obligations at all.¹³⁷

As a result, disparities between Member States' policies and approaches to child protection remain. However, there has been continued progress towards the adoption of holistic policies and legislation. The EU has played a crucial role in this process by requiring Member States to develop and monitor the implementation of national action plans.

5. Outlook

Violence against children continues to persist in the EU Member States, owing not least to its structural causes and the emergence of online abuse and exploitation. Moving forward, addressing this pervasive issue involves different key dimensions.

The lack of internationally comparable and disaggregated data on violence against children hinders consistent EU-wide data collection. Standardised methodologies for data collection and reporting will allow for better comparability and analysis, providing deeper insights into the root causes and long-term effects of violence against children.

The continuous development and implementation of integrated child protection systems, as outlined in the Commission's 2024 recommendation, is considered essential for preventing and mitigating violence against children. These systems, along with the national action plans adopted by the Member States need periodic review to assess the relevance and impact of interventions and thereby to facilitate the identification and exchange of best practice.

The EU and its Member States have shown a strong commitment to the rights of the child and to creating a safer and more supportive environment through the adoption of numerous legal instruments, including recommendations, strategies and directives. Measures such as the adequate allocation of financial and human resources, enhanced cooperation between competent authorities,

¹³² FRA, [Mapping Child Protection Systems in the EU – Update 2023](#).

¹³³ Ibid., p. 13f.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

policy areas and Member States, and the exchange of best practice are expected to pave the way towards a safer world, online and offline, for all children.

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Violence against children takes various forms and occurs in different contexts. It can have serious, harmful consequences in both the short and long term, and estimates of the scale of the problem are alarming. Resulting from a complex interaction of various risk factors, this violence can nevertheless be avoided through effective prevention policies.

A number of international instruments have been adopted to safeguard and promote children's rights. The cornerstone in this framework of instruments is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 19 of which lays down the right of a child to be protected from all forms of violence and the obligation on states to take all appropriate measures to protect children. With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, protection of children's rights has been explicitly recognised as an objective that the EU has an obligation to pursue. While child protection systems fall mainly within the responsibility of the EU Member States, the EU itself plays an important role too. Its actions have a direct impact on laws and policies implemented at national level. Enhanced cooperation between all stakeholders and the exchange of best practice are the routes taken to address the issue.

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