

# Trafficking in children

## SUMMARY

Trafficking in human beings is a serious crime and a violation of human rights. When it happens to children, it disrupts their childhood and exposes them to horrific exploitation and abuse, and a precarious future. Even though the true number of victims of human trafficking is not known, recent data reveal that the number of child victims has been on the increase. Awareness of children as victims of human trafficking has increased as well.

Just like adult victims, child victims can be trafficked for sexual exploitation, forced labour, forced criminality or organ removal. Recently, the EU has officially recognised new forms of exploitation, including surrogacy, forced marriage and illegal adoption. There are geographical differences in the recruitment of victims, with the vast majority of child victims originating from northern, southern and western Europe being girls (82.9 %) and 55.1 % of child victims from Africa and 77.6 % of child victims from southern Asia being boys. Female child victims are more likely to report sexual exploitation, while male child victims are more likely to be exploited through child labour. Forced criminality in the EU, although comparatively lower as a share of the total number of victims, is steadily increasing, with boys of migration background being the main targets.

The EU's anti-trafficking legislation was amended last year, resulting in legislation that identifies children as especially vulnerable to trafficking. The amendments also expanded the list of forms of exploitation to include those that particularly affect children and emphasised the importance of a victim-centred approach and prevention. Member States are therefore asked, inter alia, to promote and provide regular and specialised training for professionals who are likely to come into contact with such children. Another relevant directive, on victims' rights, is currently being revised to provide even more rights to victims, including child victims. The existing directive already prioritises the best interests of children when applying its provisions.



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## Introduction

Trafficking in human beings is not a new phenomenon, but it has evolved over the years and has been aided by globalisation and the development of information technology. The exact numbers of victims can only be surmised, as they tend not to seek help from the police. However, field reports indicate that the number of victims is on the rise, with the number of child victims rising even more steeply. Besides being trafficked for the same purposes as adults, children are trafficked for child-specific purposes, such as illegal adoption.

## What is human trafficking?

Article 3 of the United Nations (UN) Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children ([Palermo Protocol](#)) to the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime defines trafficking in human beings as

*...the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.*

Although trafficking for sexual exploitation has long been considered the main, and in some cases sole, purpose of human trafficking, the understanding of the phenomenon has evolved, helping to recognise other forms of exploitation as well. The Palermo Protocol therefore also mentions forced labour, slavery, practices similar to slavery, servitude and the removal of organs.

The EU's understanding of trafficking in human beings has followed the Palermo Protocol, but recently it has expanded through the inclusion and explicit naming of additional forms of exploitation, such as surrogacy, forced marriage and illegal adoption (see below).

## Children as victims

Unlike trafficking in adult victims, which requires force, fraud or coercion for exploitation to be considered human trafficking, trafficking in children does not require these elements. This is because children cannot give informed consent for their exploitation. It is difficult to establish the exact situation of children as victims of human trafficking, as a large proportion of child victims go undetected. [Few](#) of them come forward as victims because they are afraid of their traffickers, do not know what to do, or do not trust the authorities to act in their best interest. However, available data show that the number of children as victims of human trafficking has significantly increased in recent years. It is also important to note that awareness of children as victims of human trafficking has also increased.

## World data on children as victims of human trafficking

The [International Organization for Migration](#) (IOM) reported in 2023 that more than half of child trafficking victims were trafficked within their own countries. In their data set, 57.4 % of victims were female and 42.6 % male. However, their analysis showed that male victims were more likely to be trafficked as children. The most common age range of trafficked children was 13 to 17 years (46.6 %), with a significant percentage of victims (12.6 %) being aged 0 to 2 years, indicating they were likely born into trafficking. The vast majority of child victims originating from northern, southern and western Europe were girls (82.9 %). In contrast, 55.1 % of child victims from Africa and 77.6 % from southern Asia were male. 'Close to half of the child victims of trafficking were being trafficked for forced labour (mainly boys), in a wide range of industries, such as domestic work, begging and agriculture. Sexual exploitation, including through prostitution, pornography, and sexual servitude, is also prominent, affecting 20 per cent of trafficked children, predominantly girls.' According to the IOM report, those trafficked for sexual exploitation were mainly trafficked internationally. Family and friends were involved in the recruitment of more than half of all child victims.

The IOM analysis showed that female child victims were more likely to report sexual exploitation (30.3 %) than male child victims (7.3 %). The analysis also showed that 37.3 % of child victims from Europe and central Asia were trafficked for sexual exploitation. Children from Belarus (83.9 %), Romania (65.6 %) and Ukraine (23.5 %) particularly reported being trafficked for sexual exploitation. The report was based on data from approximately 69 000 victims of human trafficking from 156 nationalities, trafficked in 186 countries, who had registered with IOM in 113 countries where the organisation works. In the database, 18.3 % of the victims were children.

The 2024 UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#) warned that child victims were increasingly being detected globally, with distinct patterns emerging for boys and girls. In 2022, the year covered in this report, global detections increased by 31 % compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2019. Girls showed a sharper increase (38 %) than boys, and an increasing number of them were detected in the Americas, Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, and North Africa and the Middle East. Boy victims were increasingly detected in Europe and North America, especially in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, out of all the victims detected during the recorded period, 38 % were children, 22 % girls and 16 % boys.

The report states that the majority of girl victims (60 %) were being trafficked for sexual exploitation, while 21 % were being trafficked for forced labour and 19 % for other forms of exploitation, including forced marriages and forced criminality. Boys, on the other hand, were being trafficked for forced labour (45 %) and other purposes (47 %), including forced criminality and forced begging.

## The situation in the EU

The 2025 [Fifth progress report on combating trafficking in human beings](#) in the EU gathered and analysed the data for the 2021–2022 period, in the most comprehensive and up-to-date manner to date. Regarding children, the report showed that in 2021–2022, 81 % of child victims were EU citizens (2 401 children) and 88 % of them were exploited in their own Member State. Child victims accounted for almost a fifth of all registered victims in the EU (19 %), a decrease from 22 % in the 2019–2020 period. This decrease may be a result of an increase in online sexual exploitation of children. Furthermore, some countries do not register child victims as victims of human trafficking, in order to provide them with the more comprehensive support they need. This means that the numbers of child victims may be underreported.

Children in the EU are trafficked for all forms of exploitation, mainly sexual exploitation, but also for forced criminality, forced begging, forced marriage and labour exploitation.

Digitalisation has led to an increase in cases of underage prostitution, which in turn leads to trafficking. The phenomenon of 'pocket money' exploitation emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, with young girls being lured online to supplement their pocket money through prostitution.

While forced criminality only accounted for 3 % of all registered victims in the EU in 2021–2022, some Member States reported an increase in this form of exploitation. They also reported a rise in the exploitation of children by criminal gangs for pickpocketing, robberies and for acting as drug mules. This mostly affects young boys, mainly with a migration background.

Several Member States reported cases of trafficking for forced and sham marriages, which affect ethnic minorities, such as Roma people and children (primarily girls) with a migration background. Forced marriages are often linked to other forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, labour exploitation and forced begging.

Child labour in the EU typically occurs within the family or in family businesses. Children are usually exploited in services within the hospitality, agriculture, construction and cleaning sectors or are used for caring for old or ill family members.

## Surrogacy and human trafficking

Surrogacy is an arrangement in which a woman agrees to bear a child and hand it over after birth to another party. It was included as a recognised form of exploitation in the 2024 recast of the Anti-trafficking Directive because it [can lead](#) to human trafficking and the sale of children. Commercial surrogacy is illegal in the EU, but some EU Member States [allow](#) altruistic surrogacy, while the majority have banned it. Even though the exploitation of surrogacy is now explicitly identified as a form of human trafficking, challenges remain because it is difficult to determine if a crime has been committed. It is also challenging to establish whether surrogate mothers are exploited and become victims of trafficking, and whether the children are subject to abuse or exploitation when they are given to the intended parents. Proposed solutions include working to increase public awareness and prevent the trafficking of surrogate mothers and the sale of children, adopting harmonised indicators on what constitutes exploitation and trafficking in international surrogacy, as well as adopting international standards related to cross-border surrogacy arrangements and ensuring exchanges between judicial practitioners.

## The identity and characteristics of victims

While any child may become a victim of human trafficking, some categories of children are more vulnerable than others. A Commission [report](#) from 2025 describes victims as typically having a troubled social and family background, low self-esteem and psychological problems. They often try drugs and may have short- and long-term physical, mental, psychological and other profound developmental problems. Children in residential or institutional care are identified as particularly vulnerable. Children (primarily girls) with a migration background are especially affected by trafficking for forced and sham marriages. Children who are very active on social networks and gaming sites may become victims of underage prostitution leading to trafficking. The Commission report also identifies mainly underage Romanians, Bulgarians, Slovaks and Hungarians, including from among the Roma, as victims of trafficking for forced begging.

## Recruitment

The 2021 Europol report on organised crime, known as the Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment ([SOCTA](#)) report, delves deeper into issues related to child trafficking and exploitation. It describes these crimes as widespread across the entire EU, affecting both EU and non-EU children. The report goes on to say that criminal networks involved in child trafficking in the EU consist of both EU and non-EU nationals and fall into three main categories:

- criminal networks exploiting both adults and minors for sexual purposes;
- family clans abusing their own children or children from other families, forcing them into begging, criminal activities and sexual abuse;
- criminal groups that are mainly involved in other criminal activities but also use vulnerable children, often of non-EU origin, to commit crimes.

These trafficking networks are mainly composed of members sharing the same nationality as the victims. The 'lover boy' method is often used to lure underage victims into sexual exploitation.

The 2021 SOCTA report also emphasises the increasing use of online tools to recruit victims. This use of the [internet](#) could be seen, for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when criminals

### Is a child a victim of human trafficking?

Many victims of human trafficking remain undiscovered. Therefore, it is important to be vigilant for possible signs that a child has been trafficked. These may include [signs](#) that a child has been coached to talk to people or to allow someone else to speak for them. Other indicators include avoiding eye contact, unexplained absences from school, or being accompanied by a controlling or abusive adult. Physical signs may include appearing malnourished or unwell, having bruising, burns or fractures, poor hygiene, as well as forced pregnancies. These children may also carry false identification documents, work illegally or below minimum wage, move frequently between dwellings, or be reluctant to disclose where they live and have contact with known criminals or traffickers.

adapted to the restrictions and exploited those most vulnerable. Migrant smugglers and human traffickers were especially successful and abused 'social media platforms, mobile applications and encrypted communication tools to offer their illegal services, organise their logistics and secure their profits'.

A [2022 Europol report](#) describes criminal networks involved in trafficking human beings targeting underage male and female victims, nationals of both EU and non-EU countries. Underage female victims are usually exploited alongside adult victims in prostitution and forced marriages. These networks are also increasingly exploiting vulnerable children, often of non-EU origin, to commit crimes.

The report identifies European family clans as often trafficking and abusing their own children and other children in their communities. These children are mainly exploited for begging, pickpocketing, shoplifting and domestic servitude. Children are also trafficked and sold through illegal adoption schemes.

Furthermore, the report highlights online grooming as particularly concerning. Traffickers take advantage of personal information that children make accessible on the internet and use this information as a tactic to lure victims. In its Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment (IOCTA) [report](#) from 2024, Europol lists child sexual exploitation among the three most threatening manifestations of cybercrime in the EU in 2023. This has been corroborated by the latest [SOCTA report](#) from 2025, which dedicates an entire chapter to online sexual exploitation of children.

## EU action

### Conventions

The [2000 UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#) (Palermo Convention) includes a Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (UN Trafficking Protocol). The convention has been ratified by all EU Member States and provides the first globally accepted definition of trafficking in persons.

According to Article 35 of the 1990 [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), states parties, which include all EU Member States, are required to take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the trafficking of children for any purpose and in any form.

The 2005 [Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings](#) places victims' rights at its centre. It advocates for a child-sensitive approach and for each party to take specific measures to reduce children's vulnerability to trafficking. Child victims should be afforded special protection measures.

Article 5 of the [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) explicitly prohibits human trafficking, deeming it a violation of fundamental rights, while Article 32 also prohibits child labour. Article 83 of the [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) lists 'trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation of women and children' among the category of serious crimes with a cross-border dimension for which the EU can establish common minimum rules.

The main EU instrument for fighting trafficking in human beings is [Directive 2024/1712/EU](#), which amends [Directive 2011/36/EU](#) from 2011. Both directives build on the UN Trafficking Protocol and the Council of Europe's Convention on Human Trafficking. EU legislation adopts a victim-centred approach by not only including provisions on the prosecution of offenders but also addressing prevention and support. The current directive identifies children as especially vulnerable to trafficking and stipulates that assistance and support measures should take account of gender, disability and children's perspectives. Children placed in residential and closed-type institutions are recognised as particularly vulnerable, as are children with disabilities. Attention is also given to children who have been trafficked by criminal groups to be exploited for committing criminal activities. Member States are asked to promote or offer regular and specialised training for professionals who are likely to come into contact with such children, so that they can identify them

as victims. Member States are also encouraged to ensure that national child protection systems have plans to prevent trafficking in human beings. The new directive also expands the list of forms of exploitation by including surrogacy, forced marriage and illegal adoption, owing to the gravity of these offences.

[Directive 2009/52/EC](#) tackles the demand for labour of trafficked persons and provides for minimum standards on sanctions and measures against employers who know that the worker is a victim of trafficking in human beings.

Protection of victims is high on the EU's agenda. In this area, [Directive 2012/29/EU](#) (the Victims' Rights Directive) obliges Member States to ensure that victims of crime – including victims of human trafficking and child victims, who often require special support and protection because of the high risk of secondary and repeat victimisation, intimidation and retaliation – receive appropriate information, support and protection. The primary concern in applying the directive is the best interests of children, who are entitled to exercise their rights in a manner that takes into account their capacity to form their own views. The directive is currently being revised to provide victims, including child victims, with further rights and forms of protection.

[Directive 2004/81/EC](#) defines the conditions for granting residence permits to third-country victims of human trafficking who cooperate with the competent authorities. Article 3 allows, by way of derogation, Member States to apply this directive to minors under the conditions laid down in their national law. In this case, Article 10 makes sure that Member States take due account of the best interest of the child when applying the directive. Member States also need to ensure that minors have access to the educational system under the same conditions as the nationals. In the case of unaccompanied minors, Member States need to make every effort to locate their families and ensure legal representation in accordance with national law.

## Policy

EU action in this area is guided by the [EU strategy on combatting trafficking in human beings \(2021-2025\)](#). It adopts a gender-specific and child-sensitive approach and recognises that women and children account for most of the victims. Inter alia, it advocates for prevention and awareness-raising activities on the safe use of the internet and social media to help mitigate the risk of child trafficking. It also envisages funding for specialised shelters for victims of trafficking, including trafficked women and children, and invites Member States to promote gender-sensitive and child rights-based training for all practitioners likely to come into contact with victims.

The [EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator](#), currently Diane Schmitt, is responsible for improving coordination among EU institutions, agencies, Member States and international players and for developing existing and new EU policies to combat human trafficking. The Commission [Coordinator for the Rights of the Child](#), currently Marie-Cécile Rouillon, coordinates work among all the European Commission departments to ensure that children's rights are considered in all policies and actions, including those regarding human trafficking. Her counterpart in the European Parliament is the [Coordinator on Children's Rights](#), currently Ewa Kopacz.

Progress on combating human trafficking in the EU is monitored annually by progress reports. The Commission's [latest report, from 2025](#) (mentioned above), reveals, for example, that about €3.8 million was awarded under the EU's [Internal Security Fund](#) to five transnational campaigns aimed at breaking up the criminal business model of traffickers in human beings. These campaigns focus on strengthening law enforcement and judicial responses to trafficking in human beings, particularly in cases of children and labour exploitation.

The report also reveals that, in 2022-2025, as part of the [European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats](#) (EMPACT), 70 operational campaigns were carried out to implement strategic goals. These campaigns included joint investigations on labour and sexual exploitation, forced criminality, child trafficking, etc.

In October 2023, the Commission presented the [EU roadmap on the fight against drug trafficking and organised crime](#), which, inter alia, proposes measures to prevent young people and children from being recruited by criminal gangs. Furthermore, the renewed [Schengen Information System \(SIS\)](#) became operational on 7 March 2023, introducing new alert categories (for instance, alerts for vulnerable persons, including children, who need to be prevented from travelling). In case a child is at risk of being trafficked, their travel can be prevented, and they can be placed under protection.

On 23 April 2024, the Commission also adopted a [recommendation on integrated child protection systems](#), which, inter alia, aims to support Member States in adapting their child protection systems to the needs and best interests of children. The Commission's primary recommendation is that child protection players at various levels work together to protect children from any form of violence, including trafficking in human beings, in a coherent and systematic way.

## European Parliament's position

Parliament has been showing concern about human trafficking for a long time, adopting its first resolution on the issue in 1989. Since then, it has played a major role in developing policies against trafficking in the EU. Parliament's understanding of the particularly difficult position of children as victims, aligned with its efforts to mainstream the rights of children in all its activities, has been evidenced on multiple occasions. For example, in the 2016 [assessment](#) of the implementation of the Anti-trafficking Directive from a gender perspective, Parliament stressed that trafficking in children needed to be addressed with specific and tailored policy measures. The 2021 [resolution](#) on the implementation of the directive also addressed the increasing exploitation of children and, inter alia, mentioned the importance of taking into account the best interests of the child and implementing child-sensitive training programmes for all experts dealing with child trafficking cases and victims.

More specifically, Parliament also warned against the danger of online violence and its role in trafficking based on sexual exploitation of girls (in [2023](#)), called for greater protection of children fleeing the war in Ukraine (in [2022](#)) and had a debate on preventing the recruitment of minors for criminal acts (in [2024](#)). When the Anti-trafficking Directive was undergoing a [revision](#) in 2024, Parliament advocated, inter alia, for the inclusion of surrogacy for reproductive exploitation and exploitation of children in residential and closed-type institutions as recognised forms of exploitation in the revised directive.

## MAIN REFERENCES

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