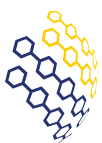




The prevention of child victimisation - online and offline

Policy paper



EUCPN
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK

“

The main recommendation of this policy paper is to use the internet as a crime-prevention tool. Policy-makers should realise that the internet is not necessarily a threat for minors and that it also offers opportunities in order to reach children.

”

PREFACE

This policy paper was written in tandem with the toolbox ‘Preventing the victimisation of minors in the digital age - awareness-raising and behavioural change’ and focusses on the main theme of the Romanian Presidency; child victimisation online and offline.

10 years earlier, the EUCPN had already focused on this topic once, during the Swedish presidency. At that time, Council Conclusions were adopted containing recommendations. In this policy paper, the EUCPN looks back at these recommendations to identify recommendations which are still valid and others who need an update. First, this paper discuss’ the prevention of victimisation of minors in general, after which the paper zooms in on the prevention efforts in the school environment and in cyberspace.

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Author

Febe Liagre, Strategy and Policy Officer, EUCPN Secretariat, Brussels, Belgium

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01 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we will focus on policy recommendations related to *preventing the victimisation of minors – online and offline*. This topic was chosen by the EU Presidency of Romania during their chairmanship of the EUCPN.

Children have always been an important target group for crime prevention.¹ Exactly 10 years earlier, the Swedish presidency of the EUCPN chose to focus on the topic: *preventing crime and victimisation among children and young people. Current and future challenges – school, cyberspace and recruitment to criminal groups*. In 2009, the Swedish presidency organised a Best Practice Conference and European Crime Prevention Award on this topic. This resulted in a recommendations paper which was presented to, and adopted by, the Council of the European Union in December 2009.²

Since 2009, the Council of the European Union has published two more Conclusions specifically focused on the protection of children in a digital world; the Council Conclusions on the protection of children in the digital world³ and the European strategy for a Better Internet for Children⁴, respectively published in 2011 and 2012. After these documents, there were no new major developments in the policy field until 2018, when the Council of Europe published its recommendation on Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment.⁵ This document gives a comprehensive overview of 124 recommendations for states to improve the safety of children online and, through this, prevent them from victimisation.

The current policy paper will focus on updating the Council Conclusions of 2009. We will summarise the recommendations of 2009 and analyse the aspects that are still valid 10 years later and those that need to be updated. The structure of the 2009 Council Conclusions will be maintained, although we will not focus on the recruitment of children and youth to criminal groups since this does not fit in with the scope of the topic of

the Romanian presidency. First, we will discuss the prevention of victimisation of minors in general, after which we will zoom in on the prevention efforts in the school environment and in cyberspace.

This policy paper is written in tandem with a toolbox⁶ focusing on awareness-raising and effective communication in the digital age for the sake of preventing the victimisation of minors. The toolbox firstly elaborates on the challenges of preventing the victimisation of minors

in the digital age. Secondly, it offers insights gained from the field of social marketing and lists recommendations for the successful implementation of digital and online communication strategies. Lastly, the toolbox lists 11 promising practices.

This policy paper is written in tandem with a toolbox focusing on awareness-raising and effective communication in the digital age for the sake of preventing the victimisation of minors.

02 PREVENTING THE VICTIMISATION OF MINORS IN GENERAL

The 2009 Council Conclusions emphasise the long-term return on investment of the prevention of youth crime and the victimisation of minors. It recommends to focus on high-risk children but to also include general awareness-raising activities to the wider group of lower-risk children and youth. Furthermore, the Conclusions recommend that “the views and experiences of children and young people themselves should be taken into consideration when designing and delivering preventive approaches and measures, in order to ensure that they are attractive to them”. In order to accomplish the prevention of minors, the Conclusions state “the need for approaches and measures focused on schools and cyberspace”. Additionally, parents and other guardians were identified as key players. Finally the Conclusions also mention innovative approaches, such as how discrimination can contribute to social exclusion and how computer games can be used to increase our understanding of the causes of crime.

Currently, children are still an important target group for prevention. This is evident from the fact that 2 EUCPN toolboxes on cybercrime (2016) and cybersafety (2018) specifically focus on children and the majority of the prevention initiatives described centre around minors.⁷

Furthermore, more than 25% of the good practices in the database of the EUCPN have youth as their target group.⁸ Additionally, the EU Youth Strategy, first adopted in 2010 and updated in 2019, acknowledges youth’s immense potential and argues that the youth should be given as many opportunities to develop as possible.⁹

Even though children remain a target group for prevention, **the world they live and interact in has changed beyond recognition.**

Internet access has become widely available. In 2007, only 55% of households in the EU Member States had internet access. By 2018, this had already increased to 89%.¹⁰ Additionally, in 2018, 95% of Europeans aged 16 to 19 used the internet on a daily basis, compared to 76 % of the general population.¹¹ Furthermore, according to the 2014 EU Kids Online report, 55% of those aged 9 to 16 had daily access to the internet¹² and the average European child owns a smartphone from

the age of eight.¹³ This change in the world of children has to be reflected in the policies adopted for them.

The Conclusions of 2009 already stated that prevention initiatives should engage with children and young people in order to make the initiatives attractive. Even though launching prevention initiatives which consider the views of your target group is still the preferred method, it can be stated that this does not go far enough anymore.

Policy initiatives should not only pander to the children’s wishes but should actively seek participation of children and youth.

Policy initiatives should not only pander to the children's wishes but **should actively seek participation of children and youth**.¹⁴ Already in 2014, the EU better internet for kids initiative stated that beside parents, industry, media, educators and government, children and youth themselves are key players. Policy should encourage children and young people to maximise the benefits that the internet offers whilst realising their shared responsibility for online safety and welfare of others, especially related to conduct-related risks, such as online bullying and receiving hurtful and nasty messages. Policy measures should be designed to encourage children and young people to respect age limits, to review their online privacy settings and to develop proactive coping strategies, such as deleting messages.

As stated above, in the 2009 Conclusions, while parents and other guardians were identified as key players, when discussing internet security of minors, it is now a well-established fact that there are many more important players, although parents remain a key player. In 2013, the EU better internet for kids published¹⁵ a country classification focused on opportunities, risks, harm and parental mediation. The researchers identified 4 kinds of parental mediation: passive, restrictive mediation, all-rounders and active mediation. Active mediation was considered the preferred form by many stakeholders, since parents are more actively engaged in safeguarding their children's internet use and are more digitally skilled and aware of online risks themselves. This style of parenting does not lead to risk-free behaviour of children, but rather focuses on supporting children to develop in a digital environment where risks will be encountered. Parents are recommended to support their children's exploration of the internet and to focus on enhancing their opportunities. Parents should not be focused too much on risks but rather on positive content. Furthermore, they should communicate regularly with their children about possible problematic use online and be clear about expectations and rules.¹⁶ For policy officers, it is important to realise that **not only children's digital skills should be a priority but also of their parents**.¹⁷ In the next chapters, we will focus more extensively on schools and educators, industry and law enforcement agencies as key players.

When zooming in on innovation, obviously a lot has changed since 2009. Gamification is now a well-established term and almost all awareness-raising activities have an online component. Nevertheless, there is still room for improvement. The **internet is still seen too much as a space for crime rather than a space for**

crime prevention. Policy should realise that the internet is not necessarily a threat for minors and that it also offers opportunities in order to reach children; to communicate with them, to raise awareness and to even change their behaviour by using social marketing strategies. The XIII. UN Congress on crime prevention and criminal justice which took place in Doha (Qatar) between 12 and 19 April 2015 adopted the Doha Declaration stipulating, among others, the following priority: "To explore the potential for the use of traditional and new information and communication technologies in the development of policies and programmes to strengthen crime prevention and criminal justice". The recommendations of the Council of Europe specifically states that countries should provide a range of products for the educational and recreational benefit of children, including interactive and play-based tools that stimulate skills.¹⁸ In only two out of the 24 projects presented at the 2009 BPC, internet technology was used to reach children and adolescents. The toolbox published in tandem with this policy paper, focuses on exactly this innovation. The toolbox explains good practices and recommendations with a view to using the internet for crime prevention and communication with minors.

When we look at the general recommendations of the Council Conclusions of 2009, it can be stated that, overall, they still hold. However, many of the recommendations have been extended and elaborated upon. Since the internet is now more present than ever through the mobile internet revolution and by witnessing the breakthrough of Web 2.0, where users no longer only consume web content but also produce it, interact with it and each other, the world of children now looks very different than in 2009. It is up to policy makers and practitioners to take this into account when adopting policies to prevent the victimisation of minors. The next two chapters will follow the structure of the 2009 Conclusions and look at the school and cyberspace as two important areas for the prevention of victimisation of minors.

03 PREVENTING CRIME AND VICTIMISATION AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN SCHOOL

In 2009, the Council Conclusions stated that schools are “a unique arena for the delivery of preventive measures focused on children and youth”. The school and the way pupils behave there were seen as important indicators as to the social health of students with links to risk and protective factors. Therefore, a recurring theme in the 2009 conference was “the need for respect for, and effective communication with, pupils”. Within the Conclusions, special attention is given to bullying and the risk of dropping out of school. Schools are pinpointed as the scene where bullying and minor offences occur. In 2009, policy makers were recommended that “systematic school-based programmes are effective in reducing both the number of pupils who engage in bullying and the number who fall victim to it”.¹⁹

In 2009, schools were seen as an important platform for delivering prevention messages because students spend several hours at school, at least five days a week, over a long period in their lives. While this is still the case 10 years later, as discussed above, the world which students live and interact in has changed dramatically. Nevertheless, **prevention initiatives targeting minors should not be limited to internet safety and crimes.** When the EUCPN good practice database of the last four years²⁰ is analysed, there is a variety of topics of

crime prevention initiatives such as: drugs/alcohol, domestic violence, trafficking in human beings, organised property crime, youth crime, child sexual exploitation and, of course, also cybercrime/safety. In many of these prevention initiatives, **schools are still seen as a portal to reach children and youth.**

When it comes to digital knowledge, however, students invariably know more than educators. The role of the school is not only focused on showing students how to use the internet, but how to use it responsibly. In a digital society, it is essential to improve students’ social skills, critical thinking and communication talent. **A secure, responsible and intelligent use of the internet should be part of any learning policy of schools.**²¹

Bullying is still a major problem among minors. About 20% of minors have been the victim to bullying. However, the method of bullying has changed, ‘traditional’ bullying typically took place within the school walls. Now, this is often accompanied by an online variation called cyberbullying. Both **‘traditional’ bullying and cyberbullying are often closely connected.** The difference between them is that cyberbullying does not end when the victim goes home, it outsteps the school walls. Therefore, cyberbullying has been identified as more invasive by

victims.²² Because 'traditional' bullying and cyberbullying go hand in hand, the prevention of them should be framed within the schools' general anti-bullying policy.

The anti-bullying policy needs to be focused on 5 pillars: the victims, the bullies, the bystanders, the parents and the school/organisation. **Open and respectful**

communication among pupils and towards the parents is still

important. EU Kids Online identified that speaking to someone, either at home or at school, brings emotional relief for victims and is the first step in finding a solution.²³

As in 2009, schools are still important players within, and portals for, crime prevention. It is, however, important not to leave the burden on schools to initiate prevention initiatives. Policy needs to be directed towards promoting stakeholder partnerships. Furthermore, schools should be encouraged to **draw on international best practices and relevant policy guidelines** as developed by NGOs, Safer Internet Centres, UNESCO, Council of Europe and OECD.²⁴ Combating harmful peer-to-peer behaviour should be paramount, e.g. by creating protocols to deal with instances of (digital) bullying and harassment.

A secure, responsible and intelligent use of the internet should be part of any learning policy of schools.

04 PREVENTING CRIME AND VICTIMISATION AMONG CHILDREN IN CYBERSPACE

The 2009 Conclusions describe the victimisations of children in cyberspace as relatively new phenomena. The first main recommendation was that there was a pressing need to raise awareness on these phenomena towards young people, teachers and parents. Secondly, innovative measures were recommended with a special focus on telephone helplines. In addition, the Conclusions highlight the importance of providing “education on internet safety as a means of empowering children and young people, by providing them with the knowledge and tools they need to assume control of their communication with other people”. The aim was to integrate information on the safe use of internet into schoolwork. The Conclusions then go on to state that the industry related to internet-based services needs to provide clear safety messages and information on privacy. Lastly, the Conclusions argue that there is a need for an active police presence on the internet to deter offenders and in order to prevent the internet from becoming a ‘free zone’.²⁵

The prevention of crime and victimisation among children in cyberspace has been a recurring theme in the chapters above. It is clear that cyber-related crimes are no longer new phenomena and terms such as grooming, sexting and cyberbullying are becoming increasingly familiar. The recommendations related to educational programmes and schoolwork were addressed in the previous chapter. In this chapter, we will mainly consider two key players; the industry and the law-enforcement agencies. Before looking into this, it needs to be stated that in 2009, the internet was seen as a space for crime rather than a space for crime prevention. Now, 10 years later, this is still too much the case, therefore the EUCPN

toolbox Preventing the Victimisation of Minors in the Digital Age: Awareness-Raising and Behavioural Change²⁶ shows what the internet has to offer in terms of communication to the youth about crime prevention initiatives, not just for cyber-related crimes but for all topics.

The Council Conclusions of 2009 recommended innovative measures such as telephone helplines for youth. Helplines which provide information, advice and assistance to children, young people and parents on how to deal with harmful content, contact and conduct are now well established. The Insafe network linked to the Better Internet for Kids initiative groups the helplines in Europe. The helplines are actively promoted by Member States and the data from the helplines are used to detect trends and upcoming challenges. Currently helplines can be accessed via a variety of means, including telephone, e-mail, web forms, skype and online chat services.²⁷ Furthermore, specific hotlines linked to Child Sexual Exploitation have also grown in importance since 2009. The Inhope network linked to these hotlines report 24 countries having a Hotline in 2009, 16 of which are EU Member States. In 2019, the number of countries having a hotline has increased to 43 globally, including all EU Member States except Slovakia.²⁸

The industry

The recommendations towards the industry of 2009 revolved mainly on providing information on safety and the possibility to report abuse and block abusers. By 2011, the Council of the EU already recognised that “the use of technical systems (such as filtering, age verification

systems, parental control tools) [...] can be suitable means to provide the access of minors to content that is appropriate for their age". The document further encourages the industry to ensure a more widespread **use of 'privacy by default' settings** for minors, to further develop the self-regulatory measures and to take full account of the protection of minors in the design of their services and tools.²⁹ The Council Conclusions of 2012 on the EU strategy for a Better Internet for Children again invites the industry, amongst other things, to increase the implementation of privacy by default settings and to further develop self-regulatory initiatives, specifically on online advertisements, to make advertising or commercial communication clearly recognisable.³⁰

What started modestly in 2009 and became more pronounced in 2011 and 2012 has still not changed much. The 2018 recommendations of the Council of Europe still advocate the adoption of 'privacy by default and design'. The protection from commercial exploitation is still an issue and, now, the responsibility of the industry related to **age verification** has been added.³¹ Since the rise of social media and social network platforms in the 2000s, the tech industry has maintained a minimum age, usually 13 years old, for access to such platforms. The European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), however, set an age limit for data processing between 13 and 16 years, with 16 being the default age. As a result, there are now different ages of consent in the different Member States. The age verification systems that are supposed to enforce both the legal and industry-set age restrictions are easy to defy. This has led to a huge underbelly of social media users under the age of 13. Therefore, the cry for implementing effective age verifications is resounding ever louder. Especially because currently, there is a **mismatch between the law and reality**. Policy officers and practitioners need to be aware that they should also target a group that legally should not be there.

As stated above, helplines and hotlines are well established by now and present in EU Member States. Data shows that helplines are performing well and therefore remain highly relevant. It is, however, important to note the diversification of means by which they can be accessed. There is a need to look further than just telephone helplines. Platforms and apps which focus on youth as a target group should have **help buttons incorporated in the design**. This allows for a lower threshold to report unwanted content or contact.

There are many more measures the industry could take to help prevent victimisation of minors online. The 2018

recommendations of the Council of Europe give a good overview.³² The policy of different Member States and the EU should **give greater responsibility to the industry** to develop this role more prominently.

The law enforcement agencies

In 2009, the Council Conclusions declared the need for an active police presence on the internet to deter offenders and in order to prevent the internet from becoming a 'free zone'. This paper does not have the scope to go into the measures the law enforcement agencies have taken to try to prevent the internet from becoming a 'free zone' for offenders. More information on this can be found at the EC3 (European cybercrime centre) of Europol³³ and at the dedicated national cybercrime centre with law enforcement agencies.

However, as stated above, the internet could also be used as a means to prevent crimes from happening in the first place. To gain an understanding of the current situation, the EUCPN have sent out a questionnaire to the Member States to ask about their strategies regarding the prevention of youth victimisation online. Thirteen Member States responded to the questionnaire.³⁴ All but two of the responding Member States declared the presence of a strategy to prevent crime on minors or this objective being an integral part of different strategies. However, when asked if there is also a strategy available regarding methods to reach minors, then there was much less information, with only three Member States declaring the existence of specific guidelines or programmes. Nevertheless, besides schools, the police is identified as the main establishment that carries out activities to prevent the victimisation of minors. Furthermore, all 13 responding Member States attest to **a police presence online**. The main platforms which are mentioned are Facebook (12), twitter (10), Instagram (8), YouTube (6) and dedicated websites. Two Member States even reported the presence of a police app.

The questionnaire also focused on the kind of online police presence. Most Member States report contact pages and information websites without direct interaction. There are some exceptions, such as the Estonian web constables, who interact with children constantly, and Cyprus police being available on Facebook messenger until 10 p.m. Nevertheless, regarding crime prevention, the main focus of the online presence is on information campaigns via social media (11 Member States). Even though the police are much more present online, the questionnaire showed **low levels of training**

for police officers regarding online presence. Only five Member States mention specific training for police officers.³⁵

It is clear from the EUCPN questionnaire that the law-enforcement agencies are aware of the need to be present online. When designing an (awareness) prevention activity, it is important to keep the target group in mind. When trying to reach minors, it goes without saying that efforts are made to share this information

online. However, it is important to **choose the correct platform** to spread the preventive message. There are Member States where Facebook is still the most popular platform amongst the youth, while there are also Member States where the youngsters have traded Facebook in for Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube etc. Each law-enforcement agency should analyse the youths' online presence in order to direct their resources and activities cost-effectively.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this policy paper was to check if the recommendations from the 2009 Council Conclusions were still valid 10 years later. In general, it can be stated that this is the case. However, most recommendations need to be updated or further developed to reflect the current online reality of youth in Europe. The 2009 recommendations mainly focused on a traditional way to reach children. Because youngsters are now more online than ever, the main recommendation of this policy paper and the concomitant toolbox is **to use the internet as a crime-prevention tool**. Policy-makers should realise that the internet is not necessarily a threat for minors and that it also offers opportunities in order to reach children; to communicate with them, to raise awareness and to even change their behaviour by using social marketing strategies. Furthermore, **prevention initiatives targeting minors should not be limited to internet safety and crimes**. When using the internet as a crime-prevention tool, all criminal phenomena that young people come into contact with could be the focus of a prevention initiative online. Furthermore, an important development since 2009 is that prevention initiatives should not only pander to the children's wishes but **should actively seek participation of children and youth**.

Beside the internet as a gateway to reach youth for crime prevention purposes, schools and parents remain important players. The focus of school policy should not

only revolve around how to use the internet but also how to use it responsibly. A **secure, responsible and intelligent use of the internet** should be part of any learning policy of schools. Additionally, parents are recommended to support their children's exploration of the internet and to focus on enhancing their opportunities. For policy officers, it is important to realise that not only children's digital skills should be a priority, but also that of their parents. In general, all players should be encouraged to **draw on international best practices and relevant policy guidelines**.

The 2009 Conclusions describe the victimisation of children in cyberspace as a relatively new phenomenon. It is clear that cyber-related crimes are no longer new. The industry and the law-enforcement agencies were identified as two key players to create a more secure cyberspace for youth. The policy of the Member States and the EU should give the industry greater **responsibility** to develop their role more prominently. There are still some basic security settings, such as 'privacy by default', which have not been implemented thoroughly. Law-enforcement agencies have realised the need for their presence online and have acted accordingly. However, it remains important to follow the trends regarding youths' preferred online platforms. Furthermore, in order to optimise the use of the internet as a tool for crime prevention, training for police officers regarding their online presence is needed.

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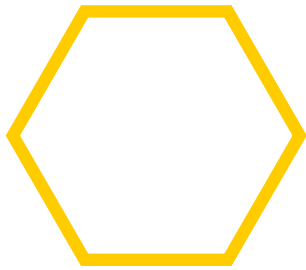
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- 35 Germany, Estonia, Greece, Spain and Portugal



CONTACT DETAILS

EUCPN Secretariat

Phone: +32 2 557 33 30

Email: eucpn@ibz.eu

Website: www.eucpn.org



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