

European Crime Prevention Network

Good practice template

The European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN) serves as a conduit for good practices in crime prevention. These good practices rely on current evidence and other quality criteria that assist the target groups in selecting effective preventive action to address their own crime problem in their own context. It simultaneously facilitates efforts at knowledge synthesis across projects.

This template serves as a formal framework for extracting information on the nature of potential good practices. All questions are to be completed in English.

With this completed template, the applicant aims to

Share good practice for inclusion on the EUCPN's channels (Knowledge centre, newsletter, publications, etc.)

Participate at the European Crime Prevention Award (ECPA)¹

The applicant gives permission to publish this information and her/his contact details on the EUCPN's website.

General information

1. What is the name of the intervention?

Fakeshop-Finder

2. Country of application

Germany

3. Who is responsible for completing this template?

Organisation responsible for this application: Verbraucherzentrale NRW e.V.

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If different, please provide contact details to ask for additional information:

4. Timing

Start date of the intervention: 1/08/2022

Is the intervention still running: Yes No

If not, please provide the end date of the intervention: Click or tap to enter a date.

5. Where can we find more information about the intervention? Please provide links to the intervention's website or online reports or publications (preferably in English).

www.fakeshop-finder.de (in German)

6. Please give a **short summary** of the intervention (**Max. 600 words**).

The Fake Shop Finder is an AI-powered web tool that enables consumers to check the legitimacy of online shops in seconds. By entering a shop's URL, users receive an instant assessment of whether it is likely to be a fraudulent site. This helps citizens to protect themselves against goods or credit card fraud, as well as identity theft.

Launched in 2022, the Fake Shop Finder has become one of the most successful digital services run by Germany's consumer advice centres ("Verbraucherzentrale"), with around 415,000 checks carried out each month. Its database now contains over 82,800 confirmed fake shops, with an average of 1,468 new cases detected monthly.

The system relies on a network of crawlers that continually scan the internet for suspicious websites with a focus on German-language websites. These websites are analysed using machine learning to assess technical and content-based indicators of fraud. AI-driven cluster detection ensures that the tool becomes more accurate over time.

To date, more than 2.24 million websites have been examined. As of August 2025, the database contains over 82,800 fake shop domains and more than 60,000 "feeder" sites. Most providers of fake shops operate from outside the EU – often from China, Russia or Latin America – making law enforcement and the application of EU consumer rights extremely challenging. This is why prevention remains the most effective means of protection.

The Fake Shop Finder is jointly funded by several German federal states – in the field of consumer protection an unprecedented collaboration in the country's federal system. North Rhine-Westphalia's consumer advice centre ("Verbraucherzentrale NRW") leads the project, while the AI technology is developed by mindUp Web+Intelligence GmbH in Constance, Germany.

The Fake Shop Finder can be adapted to the legal frameworks and data sources of other EU countries. Its interface and output can be translated into any language, making it fully transferable across the EU.

Description of the crime problem(s) the activity wishes to address

7. What problem does the intervention wish to address? Please elaborate on its nature, scale, context, involved actors (offenders, victims, other involved parties), causes, risk and protective factors, etc. (**Max. 200 words**)

The Fake Shop Finder addresses the growing threat of fraudulent online shops ("fake shops") that deceive consumers into paying for non-existent goods or

services, often resulting in financial loss and identity theft. These sites frequently operate from outside the jurisdiction of the European Union, particularly in China, Russia, or Latin America, making law enforcement and consumer redress extremely difficult. The problem is significant in scale: hundreds of new fake shops appear every month, exploiting the rapid growth of e-commerce and consumers' trust in online transactions. Offenders are organised cybercriminals who use deceptive websites and feeder sites to lure victims. Victims are typically individual consumers purchasing goods online. The primary cause is the low cost and high profitability of running fraudulent websites, combined with limited prosecution success. Risk factors include lack of consumer awareness and cross-border jurisdictional barriers. Protective factors are early detection, timely consumer alerts, and accessible verification tools—gaps that the Fake Shop Finder is designed to fill.

8. Was the problem and its context analysed before the intervention was initiated and in what way (How, and by whom? Which data were used)? If so, in what way did this analysis inform the set-up and implementation of the intervention? (**Max. 150 words**)

In Germany, the consumer advice centres operate around 200 local offices in addition to providing online consultations and responding to thousands of email enquiries. This network of in-person and online support functions like a seismograph for challenges and risks in consumers' daily lives. Fraud by fake shops has played an increasingly significant role for many years. According to the BKA darkfield study 2022 (investigations of the National Crime Agency in Germany towards unreported or underrecorded criminal activity) online money fraud happens more often than bicycle thefts or infections with computer viruses. According to research by the BSI (Federal Office of Information Security in Germany) already 25% of consumers have lost money in online shopping. Unfortunately, no reliable statistical data exist on the financial losses incurred. However, the high number of advisory cases handled by the consumer advice centres, together with the high and steadily increasing usage figures of the Fake Shop Finder, demonstrate the measure's relevance for consumers.

9. What is/are the objective(s) of the intervention? Please, if applicable, distinguish between main and sub-objectives.¹ (**Max. 150 words**)

¹ **Main objectives** define what changes you desire with respect to the previously defined problem and/or within the target group. In other words, if you achieve these strategic goals, then the project achieves its purpose of preventing and/or reducing crime or fear of crime.

The main objective is to protect consumers from fraudulent online shops through early detection and accessible, clear information. Sub-objectives are: to enable consumers to verify the legitimacy of an online shop instantly before making a purchase; to identify and catalogue fake shop domains and feeder sites as quickly as possible after their appearance on the web.

Description of the way in which the intervention addresses the identified problem(s) and why it is expected to be effective

10. What is the target of the intervention? Please motivate your answer (**Max. 150 words**)

- Universal prevention: the intervention targets potential offenders and victims in the general population, or general places or systems.
- Selective prevention: the intervention targets groups whose members have a higher risk of committing deviant behaviour or being victimised, or specific places or systems that are at an increased risk of becoming the scene of a crime.
- Indicated prevention: the intervention targets individuals who are already exhibiting problem behaviour, with the aim of preventing re-offending, or those systems or places that are the scene of crime.

Motivation: The intervention targets individual consumers in Germany and, potentially, across the EU, particularly those shopping online and at risk of encountering fraudulent e-commerce sites. Secondary targets include consumer protection agencies like German "Verbraucherzentrale" seeking effective prevention tools.

11. How is the intervention expected to achieve its goals on a practical level? In other words, what are the activities of the intervention, its outputs and its outcomes? If possible, you can describe the **Logic Model**² of the intervention here. (**Max. 200 words**)

Sub-objectives are more short-term and establish the objectives of specific actions. Achieving these goals is necessary to achieve the main objectives.

² A **Logic Model** represents the relationship between the project's key activities and the intended outcomes in a way that shows the underlying logic behind the project. It usually presents this relationship in a diagram that plots the resources that the intervention employs (i.e. inputs), the action designed to achieve the outcomes (i.e., activities), the expected and

The Fake Shop Finder operates as an AI-powered web application where users can enter an online shop's URL and receive an immediate fraud risk assessment (input). A network of automated crawlers scans the German-language internet for potential fake shops. Suspect websites are analysed using technical and content-based indicators, with machine learning algorithms calculating the probability of fraud. AI-driven cluster detection improves precision over time (activities).

Outcomes are an increased consumer awareness and prevention of financial losses through avoidance of fraudulent sites. By providing instant, intuitive results, the tool enables consumers to make informed choices before committing to purchases.

The achieved outputs include a continuously updated database of confirmed fake shops and feeder sites and a public-facing search interface.

12. How is the intervention expected to have an effect on the identified problem? In other words, is the intervention based on any particular **crime prevention/reduction mechanism(s)³ or principle(s)**? Please, also explain if and how the activation of this/these crime prevention mechanisms is dependent on the particular context of the intervention (**Max. 200 words**)

The Fake Shop Finder is based on the principle of disrupting criminal acts by stopping them before they are carried out. It empowers consumers to verify online shops instantly, preventing them from sending money to fraudulent sites. This reduces opportunities for victimisation and increases the perceived risk for offenders by shortening the lifespan of fake shops. Its effectiveness depends partly on context: it leverages Germany's network of consumer advice centres for trust and public reach, but beyond that, it functions as an intuitive, easily accessible web application requiring no specialised knowledge to use.

Description of outcome evaluation results or indications of theoretical plausibility

unexpected changes produced by the activities (i.e., outcomes), and the units of service or products (e.g., the number of workshops with young people to prevent juvenile delinquency, the number of talks with elderly people to prevent victimisation through fraud and theft, etc.) that the activities generate (i.e., outputs).

³ **Mechanisms** are how the intervention has its effects on a particular problem, within a specific context. For a list of potential mechanisms, see final page of this document.

13. Has there been an outcome⁴ or impact⁵ evaluation? and what were the main results? Please, also describe which indicators were used to measure the effects of your intervention. (**Max. 300 words**)

No explicit outcome or impact evaluation has been carried out to date. We do measure the tool's success by its steadily increasing yearly usage figures: From 394 000 queries in 2022 (start in August), 1.5 Mio in 2023, 2.7 Mio in 2024, an estimated 5.4 Mio will be reached in 2025.

14. If applicable, please provide more information on the quality of the evaluation(s). For example: who conducted the evaluation (internally or externally?), what evaluation approach (pre-post-test design, randomised controlled trial, theory-based evaluation,...) was selected, what data and data collection method(s) were used, etc. (**Max. 150 words**)

N/A

15. If no outcome or impact evaluation has been conducted, are there any theoretical indications that the intervention might be successful? If applicable, please motivate these indications. (**Max. 150 words**)

The Fake Shop Finder applies proven situational crime prevention principles by disrupting criminal acts before they are carried out and reducing opportunities for victimisation. The steadily rising usage figures suggest growing consumer trust and demand, which are prerequisites for preventive impact. We assume that timely, accessible fraud warnings significantly decrease the likelihood of consumers completing risky transactions. Combined with the tool's ease of use and broad accessibility, these elements provide a strong basis for anticipating significant preventive effects.

16. Has a cost-benefit analysis⁶ been carried out? If so, describe the results of this analysis, including how and by whom it was carried out. (**Max. 150 words**)

⁴ **Outcome evaluation:** Measures the **direct effect** (i.e., extent of the changes) **of the intervention on the target group, population, or geographic area**. The information produced by the outcome evaluation determines at what level the **objectives were achieved**.

⁵ **Impact evaluation:** Measures **long-term effects** of the intervention on the target group, as well as **indirect effects** on the broader community. The information produced by the impact evaluation determines at what level the **ultimate goals** of the intervention were achieved.

⁶ **Cost-benefit analysis:** A type of economic evaluation that compares the direct and

No cost-benefit analysis has been carried out.

Description of the nature of the intervention, its original context, and its implementation

17. What are the costs of the intervention in terms of finances, material and human resources? If needed, please provide an adequate timeframe to contextualise the costs (e.g. cost per participant, cost per month of keeping the project running, cost including/excluding personnel costs) (**Max. 150 words**)

The ongoing operation of the Fake Shop Finder system requires an estimated €20,000 per month. This amount covers the continuous functioning of the crawler network, detection system, and database, as well as routine maintenance and personnel costs incurred by the technical partner, mindUp. It does not include expenditures for the development and implementation of additional modules to expand system functionality.

At the consumer advice centres, following the initial setup phase, the project is sustained with approximately 0.25 FTE dedicated to administration and communications. Occasional costs for specialised legal advice are incurred as needed.

18. Were external reviewers, evaluators or researchers involved in the evaluation, and if so, what was their role in the evaluation? (**Max. 150 words**)

No

19. Which partners or stakeholders are involved in the intervention and why? What is the level of their involvement? What was their role in the evaluation? How well does this partnership function in practice? (**Max. 200 words**)

The intervention is jointly implemented by nine German consumer advice centres ("Verbraucherzentralen") in their respective federal states. The Consumer Advice Centre of North Rhine-Westphalia (Verbraucherzentrale NRW) acts as the lead partner, coordinating

indirect cost of the resources employed in the intervention, with the equivalent economic value of the benefits. If no outcome evaluation has been conducted, a cost-benefit analysis is simply not possible.

the project, managing funding, and overseeing strategic direction. The technical partner and architect of the AI-based detection system is mindUp Web+Intelligence GmbH, based in Constance, Germany, which is responsible for system design, maintenance, and continuous improvement. All participating consumer advice centres contribute to public outreach, integrate the tool into their advisory work, and collect user feedback to inform further development. The partnership functions effectively in practice, facilitated by regular coordination, clearly defined roles, and a shared commitment to consumer protection.

20. Describe the implementation of the intervention's activities and its outputs⁷.

(Max.200 words)

The Fake Shop Finder is implemented as an AI-powered web application providing instant verification of online shops. A network of automated crawlers continuously scans the German-language internet for potentially fraudulent sites. Suspect websites are analysed against a set of technical and content-based indicators, with machine learning algorithms calculating the probability of fraud. AI-driven cluster detection links related sites and improves accuracy over time.

Fake shops are made searchable via a public, user-friendly interface. Consumers can enter a shop's URL and receive an immediate assessment, presented in clear, intuitive language. The nine participating consumer advice centres promote the tool through their websites, media channels, and in-person and online consultations, ensuring high public awareness.

Outputs include:

- A database containing over 82,000 confirmed fake shops, continuously updated.
- An intuitive, consumer-friendly web interface used approximately 415,000 times per month, with a rising trend.
- The ability to use the findings in media and public outreach to quickly warn the public about emerging fake shop scams.

These outputs directly support the intervention's preventive function, enabling consumers to identify and avoid fraudulent online shops before completing a transaction.

21. Has there been a process evaluation⁸ and what were the main results?

Please, also describe what indicators were used to measure the implementation of your intervention? **(Max. 300 words)**

⁷ **Outputs** refer to the units of service or products (e.g., the number of workshops with young people to prevent juvenile delinquency, the number of talks with elderly people to prevent victimisation through fraud and theft, etc.)

An explicit process evaluation has not been carried out to date.

22. If applicable, please provide more information on the quality of the evaluation(s). E.g., what data and data collection method(s) were used, what research methodology, etc. **(Max. 150 words)**

N/A

23. What, if any, contextual factors/circumstances may have caused this project succeed in your own country/region/locality that won't necessarily exist when practitioners in other places try to replicate it? If applicable, mention organisational, institutional, and socioeconomic contextual factors. **(Max. 150 words)**

The tool benefits greatly from the German public's trust in the "Verbraucherzentrale" brand and the associated reputation of the consumer advice centres as the "source" of the Fake Shop Finder's assessments. The funding by several German federal states signals that the tool itself is in public interest, which supports the user acceptance and increases its reputation.

In addition, the Fake Shop Finder has a high (though not perfect) accuracy rate in detecting fake shops, which further strengthens trust in the tool. Provided that there are consumer protection actors in other Member States who enjoy a similarly high level of public trust, and that sufficient time and resources are invested in adapting the Fake Shop Finder to the local legal framework and market conditions, we see no obstacles to its adoption in other Member States.

Additional ECPA questions

24. How is the intervention innovative in its methods and/or approaches? **(Max. 150 words)**

⁸ **Process evaluation:** A process evaluation documents **how the activities were implemented** in order to determine any deviations from the original planning. It facilitates finding explanations for when the results of the intervention are not as expected.

The Fake Shop Finder is innovative in combining AI-powered detection with the trusted public reach of Germany's consumer advice centres. Unlike static blacklists, it uses web crawlers, machine learning, and cluster detection to identify fraudulent shops in real time and adapt to evolving fraud patterns. Its intuitive web interface makes advanced technology accessible to all consumers, while its modular design allows quick adaptation to local laws, markets, and languages. This fusion of AI with a trusted consumer protection network delivers a novel, trustworthy and scalable solution to preventing cross-border online fraud.

25. How is the intervention relevant for other Member States? (**Max. 150 words**).

The Fake Shop Finder addresses a form of online fraud that is inherently cross-border: fake shops frequently operate from outside the EU and target consumers in every respective Member State. The underlying technical system is not limited to the German market — its detection routines can be adapted to the legal frameworks, languages, and data sources of other Member States. The public-facing interface and output can be translated into any language, allowing for seamless localisation.

Its preventive approach — disrupting criminal acts by stopping them before they are carried out — is universally applicable, as the challenges of online shopping fraud and the difficulty of prosecuting cross-border offenders are common across the EU.

List of potential crime prevention mechanisms⁹

- **Establishing and maintaining normative barriers to committing criminal acts**
 - e.g. 'Offenders, we are watching you' campaigns
- **Reducing recruitment** to criminal social environments and activities by eliminating or reducing the social and individual causes and processes that lead to criminality
 - e.g. social and financial support for disadvantaged families
- **Deterring** potential perpetrators from committing crimes through the threat of punishment
 - e.g. decreasing the time between arrest and punishment
- **Disrupting** criminal acts by stopping them before they are carried out
 - e.g. increasing police patrols in vulnerable areas
- **Protecting vulnerable targets** by reducing opportunities and make it more demanding to carry out criminal acts
 - e.g. placing locks and cameras
- **Reducing the harmful consequences** of criminal acts
 - e.g. initiatives to recover stolen goods
- **Reducing the rewards** from criminal acts
 - e.g. restorative justice programmes
- **Incapacitating** (or neutralising) perpetrators by denying them the ability (capacity) to carry out new criminal acts
 - e.g. imprisonment of key gang members
- **Encouraging** desistance from crime and rehabilitating former offenders so they are able to settle back into a normal life
 - e.g. prison rehabilitation programs



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⁹ T. Bjørgero, *Preventing Crime: A Holistic Approach*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.