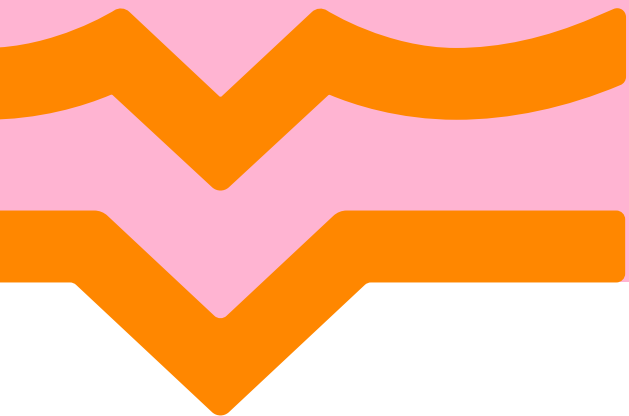
Children at Risk

Trafficking and Exploitation in Finland



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SafeBorders

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Key findings

FINLAND HAS established strong legislation and policies to combat human trafficking, including child trafficking, but practical implementation gaps persist. Following shortcomings were identified:

- **Child victims** of trafficking are still rarely identified, despite increased awareness, and many young adults only seek help years later for exploitation experienced as children. Many exploited children were in school or receiving public services at the time, indicating difficulties among professionals in recognising signs of abuse and children's reluctance or fear to disclose.
- **There are** inconsistencies in case law concerning trafficking in children. Courts interpret child trafficking elements inconsistently, partly due to limited judicial specialisation and insufficient understanding of trauma and psychological control.
- **Trafficking for** sexual exploitation is the most commonly identified form of child trafficking in Finland. Cases involving prolonged or commercial sexual exploitation are most likely to result in trafficking convictions, while forced labour and other forms often lead to acquittals due to evidentiary or conceptual challenges.
- **Emerging forms** of exploitation present new challenges for the law enforcement and criminal justice system. Criminal exploitation and cyber-facilitated trafficking remain particularly difficult for the criminal justice system to address.
- **Lack of** trust in authorities and fear of consequences prevent many young people from reporting experiences of exploitation to professionals.

There is a need to strengthen prevention efforts, empower and educate children on their rights, and further develop awareness among a wide range of professionals who encounter children in their daily work to enhance the work against child trafficking in Finland.

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1 Introduction

IN RECENT years, the awareness of and research in trafficking in children in Finland have increased. However, the number of identified child victims of trafficking in human beings remains low and the threshold for qualifying cases of exploitation of children as human trafficking remains high. Children are vulnerable to most forms of trafficking and the issue concerns both Finnish children as well as migrant children. Many stakeholders have increasingly identified the risks faced by runaway children, and particularly their exploitation for sexual purposes and involvement in criminal activities, as a growing concern.

This report aims to shed light on what is known about the issue of trafficking in children and young people in Finland based on previous research and on comprehensive qualitative data collection, in particular expert interviews. The report is an edited version of the 2025 Finnish country profile that was written for the EU ISF-funded SafeBorders-project[1] that focuses on enhancing the capacity of criminal justice authorities and frontline workers in addressing child trafficking. The structure of the report is based on a given template, which has been adapted by the authors to better suit the Finnish context and to make the report more accessible for readers. The report has also been extended to reflect some new developments, statistical information and research which has been published in the end of 2025 or in early 2026.

The desk research phase of the report was conducted in the spring of 2025, involving a review of relevant laws, policy documents, action plans and reports concerning trafficking in human beings and/or children's rights. During the summer and autumn of 2025 three focus group discussions and 16 expert interviews were conducted to collect information on current trends as well as on good practices and challenges. The participants were chosen based on HEUNI's existing contacts to professionals routinely working in the field of trafficking in

1 Strengthening Judicial expertise and Frontline support to combat Child Trafficking - SafeBorders -project (2025-2026, project number 101188335, ISF-2023-TF2-AG-OC-Organised-Crime.

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human beings, as well as using the snowballing method where interviewees were asked to recommend relevant experts.

Three focus groups were also organised: the first was targeted at NGO experts, the second at governmental and municipal authorities and officials, and the third at law enforcement officers and members of the judiciary. 14 persons in total took part. The 16 one-on-one expert interviewees included police officers, prosecutors, judges, social workers, and victim services providers and governmental representatives. The interview quotes included in the report are pseudonymised but refer to the background organization of the interviewee.

The structure of the report is organised to guide the reader from the broader context of child trafficking in Finland to the practical challenges in addressing it. Chapter 1 outlines the aims of the study, while Chapter 2 reviews the legal and policy framework, including child specific provisions and victim assistance. Chapter 3 presents the institutional landscape, covering public authorities, civil society organisations, and cooperation structures.

Chapter 4 examines the context of child trafficking through statistics, forms of exploitation, emerging trends, and vulnerability factors. Findings from the interviews and focus groups are included from this chapter onwards. Chapter 5 addresses practical aspects of work against human trafficking, including detection, investigations, convictions, victim support, and prevention. Finally, chapter 6 summarises the main findings, followed by recommendations and the references used in the report.

Readers who wish to skip the description of the legal and policy frameworks and institutional landscape of anti-trafficking work in Finland may proceed directly to chapter 4.

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2 Legal and policy framework

2.1. Existing legal and policy framework on child trafficking

TRAFFICKING IN human beings was criminalised in Finland in 2004. The trafficking legislation follows the UN Trafficking Protocol of 2000. The offence of trafficking in human beings is included in the Finnish Criminal Code 39/1899, in chapter 25, sections 3 and 3a. The definition outlines three separate elements: the act, the means, and the purpose of exploitation. In trafficking crimes, the offender takes advantage of the dependent status or insecure state of the victim in order to subject them to exploitation. If the victim is a child, the means need not be proved. In other words, proving the act, such as recruitment or harbouring, and the purpose of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation, forced labour, or other circumstances contrary to human dignity, is sufficient in cases involving child victims. Circumstances contrary to human dignity include conditions resembling slavery, including debt bondage.[2] It can also include, e.g., exploitation in criminal activities, domestic servitude and exploitation in begging.

The Finnish trafficking legislation was amended in 2015 to better correspond to the obligations concerning criminalisation found in the international treaties that bind Finland, and to clarify the difference between the crimes of human trafficking and pandering/pimping. In the beginning of 2025, the trafficking legislation was further amended to incorporate forced marriage as a purpose of exploitation. The law contains a broad definition of forced marriage, which includes situations where after initial consent to marry, a person is prevented from

2 Government Proposal 34/2004, 97.

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leaving said marriage because of threat of honour-related or community-based violence. It also covers other than legally binding marriages, such as so-called religious unions. The penalty scale for trafficking in human beings is from four months to six years of imprisonment; for aggravated trafficking in human beings, from two to ten years of imprisonment.

Finland is a party to the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, which emphasises the status and identification of the victims. The implementation of the Agreement is supervised by the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), which has assessed Finnish actions against human trafficking and issued recommendations to the authorities in three rounds. Child trafficking was one of the focus areas in GRETA's second report on Finland published in 2019. GRETA's recommendations focused on identifying and preventing the risk of trafficking among unaccompanied and separated children seeking asylum.[3]

Finland has transposed the European Union Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims (2011/36/EU) and is currently in the process of transposing the amended trafficking directive (2024/1712). As part of this process, Finland is amending its trafficking legislation to include exploitation in surrogacy as a form of trafficking and criminalising the knowing use of services of victims of trafficking.

Finland is party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which obliges children to be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, such as the exploitative use of children in prostitution or in pornographic performances and materials. Finland is also obliged to take national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the looting, sale and peddling of children for any purpose and in any form. Based on the Convention, a National Child Strategy was prepared in parliamentary cooperation and published in 2021. According to one of the strategic policies, "-- efforts to combat child trafficking and other forms of human trafficking will be stepped up across different administrative branches."[4]

Finland ratified the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual

3 GRETA 2019, 46–47.
4 Finnish Government 2021, 34.

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Abuse (Lanzarote Convention) in 2011. The Convention aims to prevent and combat sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children, to protect the rights of child victims of said crimes, and to promote national and international co-operation against said crimes. The Lanzarote Committee oversees the implementation of the Convention. A National Action Plan for the Lanzarote Convention for the years 2022–2025. One of the actions in it is to "increase co-operation between low-threshold services and awareness of the link between child sexual abuse and human trafficking"[5].

The rights and best interests of children are also emphasized in the Victims' Rights Directive (2012/29/EU). The risk of secondary and repeat victimization, intimidation and retaliation is acknowledged in the Directive to concern victims of human trafficking and child victims of crime.

In October 2023, amendments to the Criminal Investigation Act (805/2011) and the Criminal Procedure Act (689/1997) entered into force, stipulating that several crimes against children must be processed urgently. This applies to cases where the plaintiff is under 18 years old and the suspected crime is a sexual crime, or a crime against the life, health, freedom, privacy, peace, or honour of the injured party, including human trafficking. The prosecutor must also make the decision on pressing charges urgently, and the court has to begin the main hearing within 30 days of the initiation of the case.[6]

In April 2025, an amendment into the Finnish Criminal Code took effect, which added involvement in street gang activity, inciting children under the age of criminal liability (i.e., under 15) into committing an offense and using humiliation as grounds for increasing the severity of the punishment for a crime. By inciting a child to commit a crime on their behalf, a person may seek to avoid criminal liability, and they also may find it easier to incite a child than an adult.[7] The Government Proposal described incitement as the exploitation of a child, stating also that if the action involves pressure or coercive features, it may also fulfil the elements of coercion (CC 25:8).[8] However, potential links to the crime of trafficking in human beings were not discussed.

5 Malja & October 2022, 87.
6 Oikeusministeriö 2023.
7 Government Proposal 219/2024.
8 Government Proposal 219/2024.

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The Marriage Act (234/1929) was amended in 2019 so that persons under the age of 18 could no longer marry in any circumstance. Prior to this, the Ministry of Justice could give an exemption to minors to marry based on the party's/parties' application. According to the Government Proposal leading to the amendment, the interest of protecting children from potential risks related to marriage (e.g., exploitation) was one of the reasons for no longer granting exceptional permissions for underage persons.[9]

2.2. Assistance to victims of trafficking

IN ACCORDANCE with international obligations binding Finland, victims of human trafficking, including children, are entitled to specialized assistance and support. In Finland, measures for assisting victims are provided by the National Assistance System for Victims of Human Trafficking (NAS), which operates under the Finnish Immigration Service. The NAS coordinates victim assistance to trafficked persons and their children in the whole country and is responsible for helping victims who do not have a municipality of residence in Finland (e.g. undocumented migrants, asylum seekers). The NAS also provides assistance to the children of victims of trafficking who have been accepted into the system. Furthermore, they provide support to victims of trafficking who have been exploited outside of Finland, e.g., during their migratory journey or in their previous country of residence.

Provisions on assistance are laid down in the so-called Reception Act, i.e. the Act on the Reception of Persons Applying for International Protection and on the Identification of and Assistance to Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings (746/2011). The law was last amended in 2022 to diminish the connection between support for victims and participation in the criminal procedure. The changes were approved by the Parliament in the end of 2022 and entered into force on 1 January 2023.[10]

Assistance measures under the Reception Act include advice and guidance, safe accommodation, reception allowance or income support, social services, health care services,

9 Government Proposal 211/2018.
10 Government Proposal 220/2022 vp; Report by the Administration Committee HaVM 30/2022 vp; Ministry of the Interior 2022.

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interpretation and translation services, legal aid and legal advice, tracing of the parent or guardian of a child victim without a guardian, and support for a safe return. A representative is appointed for a child without a guardian who is taken into the Assistance System. Undocumented migrants may be given a 1–6-month reflection period by the NAS, if they are identified as potential victims of trafficking.

The regional well-being counties are responsible for the provision of assistance to victims who have a municipality residence (e.g. citizens of Finland, refugees). The regional well-being counties took over the tasks of organizing the social and health care services from municipalities in 2023. The counties provide various social and health services to victims who reside in their region, including child welfare services. Different counties have organised assistance to victims of trafficking in different ways: some have specialized units/designated persons responsible for victims of trafficking, while others do not. The regional well-being counties can receive reimbursement for costs incurred from assisting victims of human trafficking from Centers for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY Centers[11]).

Pursuant to the Child Welfare Act (417/2007, section 25), a child welfare report is submitted without delay on a child victim or the children of a victim admitted to the Assistance system, if the child's need for care, circumstances endangering the child's development, or the child's behaviour make it necessary to investigate the need for child protection. Furthermore, the police must be immediately notified, regardless of the confidentiality provisions if in the course of their duties professionals have reason to suspect that a child has been subjected to: (1) a sexual offence under Chapter 20 of the Criminal Code; or (2) a serious offence against life or health under Chapter 21 of the Criminal Code, punishable by at least two years' imprisonment.

Section 15 of the Child Welfare Act stipulates that the health care unit of the well-being services county must provide expert assistance in case-specific child welfare and, when necessary, arrange examinations as well as treatment and therapy services for the child. It is also stated that services needed to investigate suspected sexual exploitation or physical abuse of a child must be provided as a matter of urgency.

11 Called, from 1 Jan 2026 onwards, Economic Development Centres (Elinvoimakeskus).

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3 Institutional landscape

3.1. Public institutions

NON-DISCRIMINATION OMBUDSMAN was named the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings in Finland in 2009. The Rapporteur is fully independent and provides a report to the Finnish Parliament every four years, which means that their recommendations can influence the development of anti-trafficking work in Finland. Several of their reports have considered the issue of child trafficking.

The Police is the main criminal investigation authority in Finland and responsible for the investigation of child trafficking cases. In early 2021, the police set up an investigation team specialised in human trafficking offences at the Helsinki Police Department. They have units specializing in labour exploitation, sexual exploitation and large-scale cases that require special expertise. The team also provides support to other police districts in trafficking investigations in other parts of the country. In addition, three persons are placed in the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) and tasked with forming an overall picture of the trafficking situation, producing various analyses and engaging in international cooperation.

The National Police Board issued guidelines on human trafficking investigations in 2020. The guidelines state that all police departments must ensure that they have access to sufficient expertise so that they are able to investigate the special features of human trafficking criminality. The guidelines state that the preconditions for the effectiveness of anti-trafficking measures include the ability to identify potential victims of human trafficking across all police activities and to refer them to the NAS.[12] However, the guidelines also note that victims cannot be forced into the assistance system; rather, referral to the assistance system must be based on the individual's

12 Poliisihallitus 2020, 2.

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consent. In the case of children, protective and restrictive measures defined in the Child Welfare Act may be used when necessary.[13]

The Border Guard is a criminal investigation authority referred to in the Criminal Investigation Act (805/2011). A more detailed description of its role in crime prevention is provided in the Act on Crime Prevention by the Border Guard (108/2018). Trafficking in human beings is one of the crimes that falls within the mandate of the Border Guard in cases where it is associated with the arrangement of illegal entry, as referred to in chapter 17, section 8 and section 8a of the Criminal Code of Finland (39/1889). On 1 September 2025 the legislation was changed to allow the Border Guard to investigate human trafficking cases also without the link to arrangement of illegal entry.[14] The Border Guard has the right to data monitoring and covert intelligence gathering if there is justified reason to suspect that aggravated facilitation of illegal entry or related trafficking in human beings will be committed (Act 108/2018).

Prosecutors work in close cooperation with criminal investigation authorities. However, in the Finnish system, the investigation leader is a member of the police. Special prosecutors work in particularly demanding criminal cases that fall within their field of specialization. Some prosecutors are specialized in human trafficking cases and they can provide professional assistance to other prosecutors.[15] When suspecting human trafficking or similar offences, a notification referred to in the Criminal Investigation Act, chapter 5, section 1 must always be submitted to the prosecutor.

The Finnish Immigration Service is responsible for issuing residence permits and reception of asylum seekers, including unaccompanied minors. The migration service runs reception centers as well detention centers, and their staff can identify victims of trafficking in their various processes, e.g., during asylum hearings, at the reception and detention centers, and when issuing permits to students. In 2020, the Finnish Immigration Service issued guidance on handling the cases of potential victims of human trafficking. The guidance was renewed in the spring of 2026. The aim of this guidance is to promote the consistent application of the Aliens Act when processing asylum or

13 Poliisihallitus 2020, 11.
14 Rajavartiolaitos n.d.
15 The Finnish Prosecution Service 2021.

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residence permit applications submitted by potential victims of human trafficking. The guidance highlights specific issues related to children, such as tracing a guardian and making a child welfare notification. According to the guidance, in the handling of a child's case, special attention must always be paid to the child's situation and best interests. As a general rule, this means hearing the child or otherwise ascertaining and taking into account the child's views, with due regard to the child's age.[16]

The Finnish Immigration Service's guide also specifies that trafficking in children constitutes a serious violation of the child's fundamental rights, such as the right to life, survival and development, as well as the right to protection from violence, child labour, abduction, sale, and trafficking. According to the guidance, the impacts of human trafficking must be assessed in a child-friendly manner, and the assessment must take into account potential reactions from the community, such as rejection, exclusion, and discrimination of the victim.[17]

Seri Support Centres for Victims of Sexual Assault are support units for people over 16 years of age who have experienced sexual violence. There are currently 25 Seri Support Centers in Finland. They were established to fulfil the obligations of the Istanbul Convention.[18] The Center's services include forensic sampling, an overall assessment of the situation, testing for sexually transmitted diseases, psychological support, and a follow-up treatment plan. They also offer support in initiating a legal process, however, filing a report is not a requirement for receiving treatment. The service is free of charge, but victims should make the first contact within a month from the assault. If more than a month has passed since the incident, victims can seek help from their local health centre, family counselling services, a sexual health counsellor, or from different NGOs. Filing a police report is not a requirement for receiving care, although it is encouraged. Children under the age of 16 receive care in children's hospital (emergency) units.[19] According to a doctor

16 The Finnish Immigration Service 2026, 92–93.
17 Kainulainen & Valovirta 2021, 26.
18 The Istanbul Convention is formally known as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, which is a legally binding human rights treaty designed to protect women and girls from all forms of violence, prevent domestic violence, and prosecute offenders. Finland ratified the Convention in 2015.
19 thl.fi/aiheet/vakivalta/apua-ja-palveluja/seri-tukikeskus-seksuaalivakivallan-uhreille; hus.fi/en/patient/hospitals-and-other-units/womens-hospital/seri-support-center-victims-sexual-assault. (Accessed 26 May 2025).

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working at the Helsinki Seri Support Centre, they have had patients who are victims of human trafficking.[20]

3.2. Civil society organisations

OUTREACH WORK and low-threshold services provided by the third sector play a significant role in identifying victims of human trafficking and thereby in addressing trafficking itself. The third sector provides low-threshold services for children and adolescents and reaches young people through outreach activities. The third sector can also help build trust toward authorities in the case of children.[21]

The four non-governmental organisations Victim Support Finland, MONIKA – Multicultural Women's Association Finland, the Finnish Refugee Advice Centre and Pro-tukipiste together make up a network of anti-trafficking actors (Neliapilajärjestöt, "Four-Leaf Clover Associations") established in 2015. The network helps victims of human trafficking and similar crimes, increases awareness of the identification of vulnerabilities associated with human trafficking, advocates for the rights and status of the victims, and seeks to ensure sufficient support services that meet the needs of victims.

Victim Support Finland has offered specialised services for victims of human trafficking and labour exploitation since 2015. The role of Victim Support Finland in advocating for trafficking victims' rights has grown much more important in the past five years, and their number of clients has also significantly increased. They have identified a growing number of young people who have been exploited when they were children, but who only sought for assistance when they became adults.[22] RIKU provides services in all regions of Finland. They operate as a service provider in line with the EU Victims' Directive, offering assistance, guidance, and information to victims of crime, their family members, and witnesses regardless of the type of offence.

MONIKA – Multicultural Women's Association Finland (Monika-naiset ry) is an umbrella organisation of multicultural women's organisations that helps and supports women in different languages. They run a crisis centre, a shelter and

20 Jompero / Helsingin Uutiset 2020.
21 Nuotio 2025, 78.
22 Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023.

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integration services and offer support to victims of trafficking, forced marriage, domestic violence and other abuse. Their services also cover children of the victims, and they regularly identify e.g. cases of forced marriage, which according to Finnish legislation is a form of human trafficking.

Pro-counselling centre (Pro-tukipiste) provides low-threshold support, counselling and health services as well as community activities to sex workers, people offering transactional sex or people involved in erotic industries, including victims of trafficking. They offer services in Helsinki, Tampere and Turku.

The Finnish Refugee Advice Centre provides legal aid and advice to asylum seekers, refugees and other foreigners in Finland. The Refugee Advice Centre's lawyers are specialised in investigating the situations of potential human trafficking victims and assist them in all processes related to their situation involving the Finnish authorities. They also offer services for undocumented migrants.

Save the Children Finland operates a service called "Net tip-off" (Nettivihje), where anyone can leave a tip-off if they suspect that they have encountered activity or material related to child sexual abuse, including trafficking of children for sexual exploitation. Professionals will check the tip and forward knowledge about any illegal activity to the National Bureau of Investigation. A child protection notification can also be made, if there is enough information to do so. In 2024, the service received 8,615 tip-offs.[23]

3.3. Coordination and cooperation

THE GOVERNMENT Anti-Trafficking Coordinator was first appointed in 2014 and made a permanent function in 2022.[24] The position is under the Ministry of Justice and is a joint function of the Government and is responsible for coordinating the anti-trafficking responses of the various government entities, in particular the ministries. The coordinator is supported by one expert.

There have been four Anti-Trafficking National Action Plans in Finland. The first national action plan against human trafficking was published in 2005, and a more detailed national

23 Pelastakaa Lapset 2024.
24 Ministry of Justice 2022.

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action plan was adopted in June 2008.[25] The most recent Action Plan covered 2021–2023 and included several measures to combat human trafficking in Finland.[26] A new NAP is under development and will be launched for 2026–2027. Trafficking in children and the particularly vulnerable status of underage victims is highlighted in the NAPs.

The National action plan on Non-Violent Childhoods 2020–2025[27] aims to prevent violence against children, including child trafficking. The action plan covers the rights of the child, inclusion, factors that protect against violence as well as risk factors and their consequences. The aim is to improve the position of the child victim in the current service, care and crime systems with focus on prevention, minimising harmful impact and providing treatment. New action plan is being finalised and covers 2026–2033 with separate chapter on actions against child trafficking.

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) was released in 2025 in the form of a concrete handbook. The handbook and e-learning materials provide a clear model for practitioners who may identify trafficked persons, including children, in their line of work and outline the next steps in their referral to services, and the organization of services and care for them. The aim of NRM is to ensure the rights of victims of human trafficking and guarantee the identification and access to the needed services nationally. The handbook emphasizes the importance of timely identification and victim assistance which increases the victim's trust in the professionals around them which reduces the risk of re-victimisation and helps to ensure that the victim will not to return to their exploiter. The handbook and the e-training materials provide information and support to different actors in the identification and assistance of victims of human trafficking, including in cases where the victim is a child.[28]

A multidisciplinary network of professionals working with children and young people in the Helsinki region was established in 2022 to strengthen understanding of child and youth trafficking and to improve multidisciplinary cooperation. Approximately 15 professionals actively participate in the network, including representatives from the social and health care

25 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2005; Ministry of the Interior 2008.
26 Roth & Luhtasaari 2021.
27 Korpilahti et. al. 2020.
28 Nuotio 2025.

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services in Helsinki, child welfare, after-care services, youth work, the NGO Victim Support Finland, Helsinki police department, Eastern Uusimaa police department, and the National Bureau of Investigation as well as pupil welfare. The working group has strived to look into various issues, lessons learned and good practices related to, for example, the prevention of exploitation, identification and assistance to child and youth victims.[29]

Best practice example 1. The Lasta model

THE LASTA MODEL is an inter-agency cooperation model, aimed at ensuring information exchange and multidisciplinary collaboration between authorities when there is a suspicion of a child being subjected to a violent crime or a sexual offence.[30] Over 10,000 children become victims of suspected violent crimes and sexual offences every year in Finland.[31] The idea behind the model is the comprehensive collection of background information by the police, social services, and health care using a standardised form, as well as the organisation of regular multi-agency meetings to discuss the cases.[32] According to interviewees in a 2023 study, a key factor regarding the model is that the preliminary information is collected in a multi-professional manner, and specifically, that social welfare information is screened by a social services professional, and healthcare information by a healthcare professional. This approach not only frees up police resources to focus on their core tasks but also helps ensure that essential social and healthcare information and perspectives are taken into account in criminal investigation decisions.[33]

29 Pihlaja 2024a; Council of Europe 2025.
30 Fadjukoff, Hautamäki, Hakala & Ellonen 2023, 14.
31 Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö 2023.
32 Fadjukoff & Ellonen 2023, 2.
33 Fadjukoff, Hautamäki, Hakala & Ellonen 2023, 90–91.

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However, as the Lasta screening model has expanded, multiple regional variations in its implementation have emerged.[34] They differ significantly from one another concerning, for example, the professionals involved, the scope of the screening activities, the frequency of meetings, the background information used, and the use of the standardised form. The differences raise the question of whether one can speak of a single, unified Lasta screening model. Although regions have been encouraged to adapt the model to local conditions, variations in implementation also create challenges. One of the core goals of the Lasta model is to ensure that children receive high-quality and equal services regardless of where they live. Based on the study, significant differences in practices may increase the risk of inconsistent treatment of children in suspected abuse cases.[35]

34 Ibid., 44.
35 Ibid., 44–45.

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4 Child trafficking in context

4.1. Statistics

BETWEEN 1 JANUARY 2020 and 30 June 2023, nearly 70 children were admitted into the National Assistance System for Victims of Trafficking (NAS). They had been subjected to different forms of exploitation, including forced labour, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, and exploitation in begging and in criminal activity. None of them were Finnish citizens, and most were referred to the NAS during their asylum process.[36] This is because the NAS focuses on assisting victims without a municipality residence, meaning asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, while well-being service counties are responsible for assisting victims who have a municipality residence. Victims of Finnish background mainly become clients of the NAS only after reaching adulthood, even if the exploitation had taken place or started when they were minors.[37]

In 2023, 326 new clients were admitted into the NAS, 11 of whom were underaged (potential) victims, and 36 the children of adult victims. Most of the 11 had been victims of forced labour. In a total of 208 cases the exploitation had taken place in Finland, and in one of these cases the victim was an underaged girl, while the rest were adults. On 31 Dec 2023, there were a total of 1,536 clients in the Assistance System, 19 of whom were children and 105 of whom had been admitted into the NAS when they were minors. 276 clients were children of adult victims.[38] In 2024, 207 new clients were admitted into the NAS, 10 of whom (5%) were underaged (potential) victims, and 23

36 Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024, 12.
37 Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024, 12; Kervinen & Ollus 2019, 95–96; Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023, 67.
38 Ihmiskaupan uhrien auttamisjärjestelmä 2023.

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the children of adult victims.[39] In 2025, 271 new clients and 32 children of the victims were admitted into NAS. Four percent of the victims were children.[40]

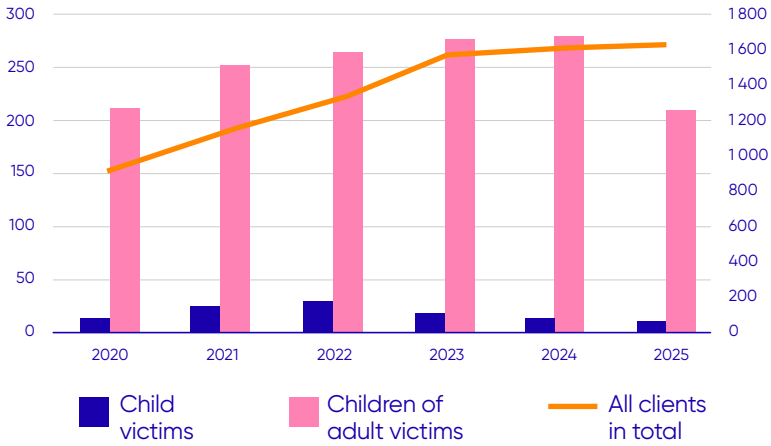
There are no statistics available on how many victims of child trafficking are being assisted by regional well-being counties, if the children have not been referred to NAS. Their experience may not be processed under the trafficking label by the child protection services, but rather, e.g., as sexual offences. The interviewed experts pointed out that child trafficking in particular is a hidden form of criminality, and the real figures are likely to be much higher than suggested by official statistics. Kervinen and Ollus, for example, suggest that since based on police data, the number of cases of sexual abuse and aggravated sexual abuse of a child reported to the authorities by far exceeds the number of cases of trafficking, some of them could upon closer examination also show signs of human trafficking.[41]

The following table and graph 1. made based on the table show the number of clients within the system each year. Please note that clients may stay within the system for more than one year, i.e., the numbers here do not portray the number of new clients admitted per year.

Table 1. The number of child victims, adult victims' children, and all clients in total in the Assistance System of Human Trafficking in 2020–2025.[56]

Year	Child victims	Children of adult victims	All clients in total
2020	13	212	916
2021	24	252	1 132
2022	29	263	1 314
2023	19	276	1 563
2024	12	279	1 610
2025	10	210	1 634

39 Ihmiskaupan uhrien auttamisjärjestelmä 2024.
40 Ihmiskaupan uhrien auttamisjärjestelmä 2025.
41 Kervinen & Ollus 2019, 42.



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Graph 1. The number of child victims, adult victims' children, and all clients in total in the Assistance System of Human Trafficking in 2020–2025.[42] N.B. the graph contains two scales: the left one indicates the no. of child victims and victims' children, and the right one the total no. of clients.

4.2. Forms of exploitation

Sexual exploitation

Focus group discussions and expert interviews as well as previous literature indicate that children and young people are vulnerable especially to sexual exploitation. This includes children of Finnish background or citizenship as well as children with migrant background. Valovirta and Kainulainen (2024) analysed 35 human trafficking convictions concerning children given by the district courts and courts of appeal in 2012–2024. In most of the cases the children had been subjected to sexual exploitation. This often involved continued and serious sexual violence that was highly traumatic to the child. The convictions indicated that, in some cases, the children had also been subjected to commercial sexual exploitation by more than one person.[43] The plaintiff was usually a teenage girl and the defendant an adult man.[44]

42 Ihmiskaupan uhrien auttamisjärjestelmä 2025; 2024; 2023; 2022; 2021; 2020.
43 Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024, 5.
44 Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024, 60.

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Children and young people with a refugee or asylum seeker background, including unaccompanied children may be subjected to human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation on their way to Finland. Smugglers have sexually abused children in exchange for transportation or for continuing to the next leg of the trip. Children have also been used as "payment" for smuggling or a means of extorting money from the parents.

Kainulainen and Valovirta (2021) found in their study on residence permit decisions that victims of sexual exploitation were mainly women and girls who had been exploited in their country of origin, during their migratory journey, or in their previous country of destination.[45] Many had experienced a disrupted childhood, which exposed them to mistreatment. Several of the women had already suffered sexual violence and abuse during their childhood. In some cases, the incident appeared to be a single act of violence, while for others, the sexual abuse had been repeated and long-term. The victim may have attempted to speak out about what had happened but was not believed. Some had fled the abuse while still children. When a child or young person had been left without the care of their parents or relatives, they were in an especially vulnerable position, which exposed them to further exploitation. The analysed decisions also included accounts of young girls who had escaped forced marriages. While homeless, the girls encountered an adult who seemed to offer them safety and protection but then forced them into prostitution.[46]

Pihlaja and Piipponen published a report in 2023 on the victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation who had been clients at the special support service for victims of trafficking at Victim Support Finland between 1 Nov 2022 and 31 Jan 2023 (N=184, 90 of whom were victims of forced marriage and 94 victims of other sexual exploitation). In 96% of the examined cases the exploitation had taken place in Finland (or it had begun abroad and continued in Finland).[47] Of the clients, 29% had been under the age of 18 when the trafficking crime had taken place. Out of them, 25% had first disclosed their situation and gotten help only after becoming of age.[48] Most often the exploiter was either a boyfriend, a person posing as a trustworthy adult, or the client's own group of friends.

45 See also Kervinen & Ollus 2019; Lilja et al. 2021.
46 Kainulainen & Valovirta 2021, 59–60.
47 Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023, 9.
48 Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023, 15.

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Many victims had not realized that they were being seriously exploited, because the perpetrator was someone they trusted and some felt like they were also profiting from, e.g., selling sexual services.[49]

Case example 1. Commercial sexual exploitation of Finnish girls[50]

THE CASE CONCERNS internal human trafficking involving the sexual exploitation of two Finnish girls aged 15 and 16 during the summer of 2016. According to media reporting on a decision of the Lapland District Court from 2025, the perpetrator was a 17 year old female acquaintance and older friend of the victims, who pressured them into selling sexual services after they had watched a film about prostitution together. The perpetrator recruited the girls, arranged meetings with buyers, and took a cut of the money obtained. The younger victim, whose virginity was sold, had sexual intercourse with six different men over at least four days, while the older victim was exploited by eight men. The perpetrator used manipulation and pressure, and later blackmailed the victims by threatening to disclose their activities if they refused to continue. The exploitation ended only after the victims paid the perpetrator approximately 350–400 euros.

49 Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023, 67–68.
50 Sources for the case example: Saukkonen / Yle 2025; Nuutinen-Kallio, Pöyhönen & Saukkonen / Yle 2025.

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The prosecutor emphasized that the younger victim did not fully understand what she was agreeing to due to her age and inexperience. One victim filed a criminal report only in 2020, explaining that she had been afraid to contact authorities earlier because she believed she herself had committed a crime. In 2025, the Lapland District Court sentenced a woman born in 1999 to one year and four months of suspended imprisonment for aggravated human trafficking and human trafficking committed as a young person. The court found that the victims suffered long term psychological harm, including depression, anxiety, sleep problems, and loss of trust, requiring medication and therapy. Due to excessive delays in the proceedings, the state was ordered to pay additional compensation to one victim. Two sex buyers were also convicted of aggravated child sexual abuse.

Halmeenlaakso suggests that crimes resembling human trafficking should also include in crimes related to the sexual abuse of children. Currently, the overlap in legislation may potentially lead to situations where the possibility of trafficking in human beings is not investigated when the elements of a clearer and more concise sexual crime are fulfilled.[51] This was also mentioned by interviewed law enforcement officers and members of the judiciary who outlined that the criminal justice actors may more used to investigating and prosecuting these kind of sexual offences under more traditional crime labels, so they are used and are also more likely to result in a conviction. This is because certain elements of the trafficking definition are considered difficult to prove, even though the legislative framework itself is considered to be sufficient. However, the interviewed law enforcement representatives did feel that the police has become more aware of the dynamics of child trafficking in recent years and are now using also human trafficking as an investigation label in certain types of cases of sexual crimes against children.

All focus groups, but especially NGO representatives and law enforcement officers brought up challenges in dealing with cyber-facilitated sexual exploitation of children. This is an area where more focus should be placed. Halmeenlaakso (2023; 2025) has argued that human trafficking related to child sexual abuse online should in certain cases be treated as placing

51 Halmeenlaakso 2023, 5–6, 107–108; Halmeenlaakso 2025.

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the child into circumstances contrary to human dignity.[52] Furthermore, the production and distribution of online material featuring the sexual abuse of a child should be looked at as a phenomenon linked to human trafficking criminality and networks, instead of focusing solely on individuals in possession of or sharing such material.

Forced marriage

Forced marriage is currently the second most commonly identified form of trafficking according to statistics from the NAS.[53] Cases of forced marriage in Finland have involved young people, mostly girls, with a migrant background who live in Finland and are sent to their home country to be married to a local man; couples with migrant backgrounds who have been married elsewhere, and the exploitation in the marriage takes place in Finland; and men with migrant backgrounds living in Finland who find a young spouse in their home country and get married in the home country or in Finland.[54] In cases where young girls have been forced to marry, they may have already been subjected to honour-related violence and intense pressure and control by their (extended) family, and if the girls have disobeyed the family's rules or begun dating, marriage may be forced upon them in order to preserve the honour of the girl, and thereby, of the family. In some cases, marriage may be used as a way to acquire residence in Finland through family reunification.[55] An interviewed prosecutor mentioned that after the amendment in the trafficking legislation, it would be more straight-forward to prove trafficking in cases where a child born in Finland would be sent abroad to marry against their will.

52 Halmeenlaakso 2023; 2025.
53 Ihmiskaupan uhrien auttamisjärjestelmä 2024, 6.
54 Kervinen & Ollus 2019, 61–63, see also Toivonen 2017; Kainulainen & Valovirta 2021, 38–39.
55 Kervinen & Ollus 2019, 61–63.

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> **It meets the threshold for human trafficking surprisingly easily, because the intention to force someone into a forced marriage is already enough for it. So, for example, if you have a Finnish child, or a child who has grown up in Finland, and their account – along with perhaps someone else's, or some messages – shows that they are being prepared or intended to be married off to someone in country X, then it would very easily meet the criteria [of trafficking].**
>
> – Expert interview 8.

Circumstances comparable to forced marriage can also occur between Finnish nationals. These situations may, for example, be connected to the practices of a close-knit or closed religious community.[56] Young people in Finnish religious communities have been coerced into marriage, and getting a divorce has been made very difficult by e.g., labelling it as something that will lead to being ostracised from the community.[57]

Within families where, e.g., honour-related violence takes place, boys exercising control over their siblings may also be closely controlled themselves by fathers and uncles. An interviewed law enforcement officer saw this is as an aspect that is still at the discussion stage and should be investigated more often.

> **When it comes to honour related violence and similar issues, I think that especially the idea of seeing boys who exercise control within the family also as victims of that control is still something that's mostly at the discussion stage. People are starting to question it a bit, but as for whether these cases are actually investigated, I don't believe they are.**
>
> – Expert interview 12.

56 Lehtinen & Rossi 2022, 129; Jokinen et al. 2025, 21.
57 E.g., Malinen / Helsingin Sanomat 2021; Söderlund & Westergård / Yle 2025; Koskinen 2024.

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Exploitation in forced marriage can include sexual and labour exploitation, as well as forced marriage itself, along with associated patterns of control and abuse, which can include restricting victims' social interactions, limiting their movement beyond the home, isolating them, and exploiting their dependency or insecure status.[58]

Case example 2. Forced marriage[59]

IN 2008, A 13-year-old girl from Iraq was forced to marry and older male relative with her parents' approval and encouragement. The forced marriage took place in Greece, from where the man brought the victim to Finland using forged documents and a false story. During a ten-year period, the husband threatened the victim, subjected her to violence and silenced her. The victim eventually filed for divorce. In 2018, after the divorce, the man abducted their three children to Iraq. Having lost her children, the victim called the police and decided to tell the authorities about being forced to marry as a minor and about the violence and exploitation she had been subjected to. The authorities issued a European arrest warrant for the ex-husband. In August 2024, he was arrested at the Greek border and was taken into custody.

According to the prosecutor, the accused took complete control over the victim, subjecting her to degrading conditions by exploiting her vulnerable situation as a child without money and language proficiency, first abroad and later in Finland. The criminal justice process lasted for years. During this time, the victim travelled to Iraq and Greece several times in order to get her children back, but they were only reunited in 2024. The court found the man guilty of aggravated human trafficking, child abduction and aggravated deprivation of liberty, and gave him a prison sentence of six and a half years. The verdict is not final.

58 Jokinen 2025.
59 Sources for the case example: Kossila / Yle 2025; STT, Ristola / Yle 2025; Stolzmann / Yle 2025.

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Exploitation in criminal activities

Criminal exploitation of children and the identification of offending children rather as victims of trafficking than as offenders is particularly challenging for different authorities.[60] Instances of forced criminality have been identified in Finland concerning, e.g., drug offenses and theft. The exploiters have blackmailed and intimidated the victims into committing additional crimes by threatening to tell the authorities what the child has done.[61] A young person struggling with substance abuse may be pressured or forced into criminal activities to repay debts incurred through drug use. Children may also be made to commit crimes because those under the age of 15 cannot be held criminally responsible.[62]

Finland is part of the new Europol Operational Task Force (OTF) GRIMM which aims to "tackle the rising trend of violence-as-a-service and the recruitment of young perpetrators into serious and organised crime". The taskforce is led by Sweden and brings together law enforcement from seven other European countries, including Finland.[63]

Generally, the interviewees mentioned that police officers investigating sexual crimes against children are highly trained in interviewing methods and are well-versed in encountering children in difficult situations. Criminal exploitation is more difficult to identify as cases involving children as perpetrators of e.g. property crimes are not necessarily dealt with by such specialised officers.

Moreover, the interviewed law enforcement officers pointed out that it is difficult to get a young person suspected of a crime to talk so that the police can identify whether they have acted according to their own will or if someone is exploiting them.

60 Jokinen et al. 2026.
61 Kervinen & Ollus 2019, 67.
62 Lehtinen & Rossi 2022, 128.
63 Europol 2025.

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> **A major issue is that the youth don't want to talk about being recruited, tricked, or forced into something. That may partly reflect a desire among young people to assert their own agency. If someone has spent their whole life in the child welfare system, being moved from place to place with very little control over their own life, they might want to reclaim some of that agency. [...] And of course, there's also the real or perceived fear of what might happen if they do speak up. That's completely understandable – if someone has committed crimes themselves, they probably have to be in a pretty tight spot before they start talking about those crimes and expose the people behind it all.**
>
> – Expert interview 12.

According to Pihlaja (2024; 2025), the identification of human trafficking should be improved especially in situations where it is likely that the child or young person has been the victim of abuse or is suspected of having committed crimes themselves.[64] Pihlaja also points out that reluctance of children and young people to disclose their actions to the police is not solely due to the lack of trust or interviewing techniques, but stems from a broader structural issue: the means to protect a child or young person from retaliation or other potential negative consequences of speaking out are extremely limited or non-existent. If a child or young person feels that the criminal justice system is unable to intervene effectively and promptly or to punish the perpetrators, they may perceive the risks of speaking out as greater than the benefits of not doing so.[65]

According to the Finnish Police, the youngest perpetrators of crime are not always lured into crime by adults, rather some of them may have adopted a "criminal lifestyle" independently. This was also mentioned by experts working in the field of social and victim services. Children may also buy violent "services" from other children (e.g., pay another child to threaten their victim).[66] For example, in a recent case, a minor drug dealer aged 17 is suspected of drug-related crimes as well as

64 Pihlaja 2024a; 2025.
65 Pihlaja 2025, 422.
66 Ikola / Helsingin Sanomat 2025.

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extortion after allegedly coercing a couple of his peers into selling drugs on his behalf, in order to pay back inflated drug-related debts.[67]

Girls involved in criminal networks may be vulnerable to multiple forms of abuse, violence and exploitation. They may be recruited via grooming or manipulation. Criminal men may protect themselves by making their girlfriends carry the drugs. Some offer drugs in exchange for shelter and sex, assault the girls, commit fraud, or take out loans in the girls' name and leave the debts for them to handle.[68] Young women may be targeted for this type of financial exploitation because they often have creditworthiness.[69] The issue was also discussed in the focus groups and expert interviews. An interviewed expert working in the field of social and victim services also noted that girls are often in quite a weak position in these groups.

> **For example, the position of girls in these youth groups is weak [...] I was speaking with a youth worker while trying to find out more about one particular group where a lot of crimes have occurred. It's known that there have been girls involved too, and I was trying to locate one specific girl who had been in certain situations – she's small and blonde – and the youth worker just said, "They're all small and blonde, and none of them have names. They're constantly changing." So basically, these girls are being passed around within the group, and they don't have a voice or a role in it.**
>
> – Expert interview 2.

Two survivors interviewed in an article by Helsingin Sanomat have recognized a pattern in which girls start dating feared men from the drug scene, thinking that they are then safe or in control of the situation like "criminal princesses". Furthermore, youth workers have noticed that groups of men hang around in Helsinki city centre offering drugs or alcohol to girls and expecting sex in return. Some men also lure

67 Salomaa / Helsingin Sanomat 2025.
68 Jokinen et al. 2026, 45–47.
69 Kuokkanen / Helsingin Sanomat 2025.

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girls into exploitation through social media, e.g., Snapchat. They may promise the girls €500 in exchange for their online banking codes, as even empty accounts can be used for money laundering.[70]

Girls exploited by criminals often share a similar background which includes traumatic experiences, parents with substance abuse problems, domestic violence, and often neuropsychiatric or mental health problems.[71] This was confirmed by expert interviewees, who also emphasized the risk of re-victimization and intergenerational violence as background factors.

Forced labour

Some migrant children have also been exploited in forced labour in a transit country before allowing them to continue their journey.[72] An analysis of residence permit decisions regarding trafficking victims by Kainulainen and Valovirta (2021) found that the loss of one's parents during childhood had exposed children, both boys and girls, to forced labour in their country of origin or during their migratory journey. The analysed decisions described how relatives had taken the child into their home but treated them poorly. The child was not necessarily allowed to attend school but was instead forced to work either at home or outside the home. Basic needs were not adequately met, and the child had not received sufficient food or other care. The child was often subjected to both physical and psychological violence.[73] The decisions revealed that the applicants had not always perceived their experiences as forced labour during childhood. However, human trafficking or indicators of it were later identified when their treatment was examined from the perspective of the rights of the child, or by taking into account how those responsible for the child's care had exploited the child's vulnerable and dependent position for their own financial gain.[74]

70 Ibid.
71 Jokinen et al. 2026, 46–48.
72 Kervinen & Ollus 2019, 74–75.
73 Kainulainen & Valovirta 2021, 55–56.
74 Kainulainen & Valovirta 2021, 55–56.

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Case example 3. Labour exploitation of undocumented migrant children[75]

TWO BOYS, AGED 14 and 16 arrived in Finland in 2011 as undocumented migrants and were in a highly vulnerable position due to their age, irregular status, and precarious living conditions. The defendant recruited them informally after meeting them in an abandoned building, offering work dismantling cars in a garage under hazardous and substandard conditions, with minimal pay and inadequate equipment. Although accommodation was provided, the boys depended on the defendant and at times resorted to obtaining food from waste containers. The District Court of Southwest Finland found elements suggesting labour exploitation, including abuse of situation of insecurity and dependence, and poor working conditions, but concluded that the legal threshold for human trafficking under the stricter provision in force at the time – requiring proof of "seizing power" amounting to deprivation of liberty – was not met. The court found that the victims had freedom of movement, had free access to their accommodation, and found no sufficient evidence of coercion or explicit threats was established, beyond implicit references to deportation. While the court acknowledged the victims' vulnerable situation and potential exploitation, it determined that intent to subject them to forced labour was not proven and acquitted the defendant of trafficking charges, also noting inconsistencies in the evidence and the complainants' prior violent actions against the defendant.

Other forms of exploitation

One of the forms of exploitation under Finnish trafficking legislation is subjecting a person to conditions contrary to human dignity. This can include a number of different forms of exploitation, including domestic servitude, exploitation in criminal activities and begging. No cases concerning exploitation in begging have yet been identified in Finland.

Such other forms of exploitation were found difficult to proof in court according to study by Valovirta and

75 Source for the case example: Surakka / Edilex 3 Mar 2025 (based on the ruling of the District Court of Southwest Finland R 21/5600).

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Kainulainen.[76] There is, however, one recent case which resulted in a conviction on aggravated human trafficking. The case highlights how human trafficking of children can occur within the family, how coercion and control may prevent disclosure for extended periods, and how children may only be able to reveal exploitation once separated from the perpetrator and provided with safety and stability.

Case example 4. Domestic servitude and violence[77]

THE CASE CONCERNS trafficking involving domestic servitude and violence against children by their own mother in Lappeenranta, Finland. According to a public summary of the conviction by the South Karelia District Court and media reporting, the crimes took place between 2015 and 2019, with the trafficking offence occurring during a four-month period in the spring of 2019. The victims were three children, and the main victim was 12 years old at the time of the exploitation. The court found that the mother had forced the child to perform household work and care for an infant sibling to an extent that was unreasonable given the child's age and developmental level. Basic needs such as food, sleep, and access to school were made conditional on the child completing these tasks. As a result of food deprivation, the child's growth was slowed, and the child accumulated more than 200 hours of absence from school during one spring semester.

76 Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024.
77 Sources for the case example: District Court of Southern Carelia 2024; MTV Uutiset & STT 2024; Hannus / Yle 2025; Korkee / STT & Helsingin Sanomat 2025.

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In addition to domestic servitude, the mother subjected the child to serious and prolonged violence, forcing the child to live under a constant threat of abuse. The court established that the mother physically assaulted the child. During the preliminary investigation the children were interviewed several times. In the first hearings, none of the children disclosed violence and instead spoke positively about their mother. Only after the children had been placed in care and contact with their mother had decreased did they begin to disclose the exploitation. The children reported that their mother had instructed them on what to say to authorities, and they had complied. About a year after the abusive conduct ended, the children jointly decided to tell the truth.

In May 2024, the South Karelia District Court sentenced the mother, born in 1982, to one year and eleven months of suspended imprisonment and 120 hours of community service for human trafficking, aggravated assault, and two counts of assault. The court initially assessed the case as human trafficking rather than aggravated human trafficking, citing the relatively short duration of the domestic servitude and the assessment that the labour itself was not inherently dangerous or inappropriate. The case was appealed, and on 1 July 2025 the Eastern Finland Court of Appeal overturned this assessment, finding that the conduct constituted aggravated human trafficking, and sentenced the mother to four years of unconditional imprisonment.

Children that have been forced to fight in wars have been identified in Finland, i.e., children who were child soldiers in their country of origin. Recruitment of boys as foreign combatants has also been reported.[78]

78 Kervinen & Ollus 2019, 71, see also Lehtinen & Rossi 2022, 129.

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Case example 5. Taking one's children to a warzone

ACCORDING TO THE National Bureau of Investigation, a woman with Finnish-Russian dual citizenship is suspected of the aggravated trafficking of her own children, because she took her underaged children from Finland to Isis-controlled areas during the Syrian civil war in 2014, thereby placing them in circumstances contrary to human dignity. Later, the family was placed on al-Hol camp. The woman and two of her children have since returned to Finland, but an unknown number of the woman's children stayed in Syria. The children living in Finland, now adults, are the plaintiffs in the case. [79]

4.3. New patterns and trends

BEYOND RECORDED information, there are also some other patterns and trends that the interviewed experts and focus group participants had identified. An interviewed law enforcement officer shared that they are identifying more cyber-facilitated or cyber-initiated cases involving children who have been subjected to psychological control and manipulation which has then escalated to actual exploitation.

> **Cyber-facilitated cases where the child has been brought into a situation like that where they haven't really been able to influence their own situation in any way, or have been under coercive control from the perpetrator's side, even if it has taken place online. Cases like that, and including ones where it has progressed into something physical. Like into a situation of abuse of trust and sexual exploitation. So, the purpose of the contact online in the first place was the sexual exploitation of the child, which then was carried out.**
>
> – Expert interview 10.

79 Kallionpää / Helsingin Sanomat 2025.

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According to the European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment 2025 (EU-SOCTA), organised criminal groups also target vulnerable youth to recruit them into committing crimes such as drug trafficking, cyber-attacks, online fraud and violent extortion. The recruitment takes place on social media platforms and messaging apps. Finland takes part in Europol's Operational Task Force GRIMM which aims to tackle youth recruitment into organized crime and the trend of violence-as-a-service.[80]

The Com is an internationally active online community that exploits children and young people and is known for the extremely violent blackmail and exploitation methods used by its members.[81] Europol has underlined that particularly vulnerably youth aged 8 to 17, such as LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities and individuals with mental health issues are at the high risk of becoming victims.[82] The Finnish police is currently investigating a case under aggravated trafficking involving a Finnish child where the perpetrator is member of the group "764", which is a part of The Com network.[83] 764 is known for their extremely torturous methods of child abuse and the group has reportedly been associated with sadistic, satanic elements.[84]

FBI and Europol have issued warnings of these online networks of predators.[85] The Finnish police have also expressed concern about the Com network's impact in Finland.[86] Internationally, there are several hundred cases under investigation in which young people have harmed and killed others or committed suicide under the influence of The Com network.[87] The Com ties children and young people tightly to the exploitation, and victims have little opportunity to report it or break free from it.

Finally, focus group discussion of NGO representatives as well as some expert interviewees brought up the issue of so-called missing children, including the situation of children who taken abroad by their parents, or by one parent without permission from the other, or by another adult altogether.

80 Europol 2025a.
81 Europol 2025b; Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2024.
82 Europol 2025b.
83 Poliisi 2025a; Poliisi 2025b; see also e.g., Lapinkangas / Ilta-Sanomat 2025; Juonala / Ilta-Sanomat 2025.
84 The Guardian 2025; Poliisi 2025b.
85 FBI 2023; Europol 2025b; see also The Guardian 2025.
86 Poliisi 2025b.
87 Ibid.

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According to an NGO representative, it is not difficult to take a child abroad, as checks at (EU) borders are often non-existent or minimal. Risks associated with this may include using the child for the transportation of drugs; taking the (potentially underaged and/or unwilling) child abroad to marry; or sending the child to, typically, the parents' country of origin for a "disciplinary trip" in order to change some type of unwanted behaviour. According to the Finnish Crisis Response Association, on these disciplinary trips, children usually stay with their relatives or in a disciplinary institution specifically established specifically for the purpose, where the aim is to reshape the child's thinking, identity or behaviour with violent methods.[88]

4.4. Vulnerable groups and factors leading to vulnerability

CHILD TRAFFICKING is very much a gendered phenomenon. In broad terms, child victims of labour exploitation are often boys, victims of child marriage are often girls, and child victims of sexual exploitation are of all genders, although the majority of identified victims seem to be girls.[89]

A potentially high-risk group for child trafficking are children who have run away from or do not return to foster care (so-called runaways). They were frequently mentioned in the expert and focus group interviews as being vulnerable to multiple forms of exploitation. Running away from a place of care repeatedly seems to correlate with criminal behaviour, and furthermore, it increases the risk of exploitation, because children on the run often need money buy basic necessities (and in some cases, drugs) and may be exploited when trying to acquire funds.[90] According to a 2019 PhD study by Isoniemi, in a sample set of 200 Finnish cases of runaways that were registered into the police information system, every third child (n=64) committed a crime and every tenth child (n=20) became a victim of a crime during the time they spent on the run from a care facility. The most common form of crime victimisation among these 20 children was sexual and physical assaults (incl. sexual abuse of a child, 4 counts); and purchase of sexual services from a

88 Mohamed & Poikolainen 2024.
89 Kervinen & Ollus 2019, 61, 75, 96, see also Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023, 15.
90 Isoniemi 2019, 110, 123.

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young person and aggravated sexual abuse of a child (3 counts). Due to the sensitive nature of these crimes, it is likely that many are never brought to the attention of the police.[91]

The 2023 report by Haapala, Kaijanen, Minkkinen and Westerlund on children missing from foster care examined the forms of exploitation and violence these children had been subjected to. While on the run, children had faced violence and sexual abuse, committed and witnessed crimes, and had sex in exchange for drugs, alcohol or accommodation. Many had feared for their own or a close one's safety, been threatened, and been pressured into doing something against their will (for instance by exploiting the child's lack of accommodation). Interviewed professionals stated that runaway children are "easy targets" for those looking to sexually exploit them or exploit them in criminal activities in exchange for accommodation or money. In some cases, older teens have pandered younger runaways.[92]

Kekkonen and Pekkarinen (2024) conducted a study based on the same survey data as Haapala and colleagues. Based on the data the authors created an indicator to examine the risk of human trafficking among children who have run away from foster care.[93] They found, e.g., that the risk of trafficking and related crimes concerned girls in particular, and those who had been previously raped were in the middle to high-risk category for trafficking as well. Furthermore, risk factors for human trafficking increased in cases where children on the run were staying at strangers' homes or other unfamiliar locations.[94]

Expert interviewees also mentioned that children with cognitive disabilities or mental health problems are at heightened risk, as well as children who are abducted by their parents abroad.

91 Isoniemi 2019, 160–161.
92 Haapala et al. 2023, 115, 118–119, 122, 188.
93 Kekkonen & Pekkarinen 2024, 26.
94 Kekkonen & Pekkarinen 2024, 27–29.

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Case example 6. Sexual exploitation of a run-away girl[95]

A 11-YEAR-OLD FINNISH girl with ADHD who had been placed in care was approached online by a 27-year-old man. The girl had repeatedly run away from home. The perpetrator sent messages to her through various mobile applications, including nude images and videos, and also demanded nude images from the victim. The perpetrator accommodated the victim at the perpetrator's residence at least six times. The perpetrator engaged in sexual intercourse with the victim, humiliated her and subjected her to violence, and recorded the acts. According to the description of the offense, the perpetrator exploited the victim's infatuation, young age, and poor health. The perpetrator also controlled the victim's other communications and caused the victim to conceal the sexual abuse from others.

The sexual abuse came to light during work carried out with child welfare services. However, when the case proceeded to court, the charges of aggravated trafficking in human beings were acquitted by the Western Uusimaa District court. The conditions of the act of taking control and accommodating the victim were not considered to have been fulfilled – for example, because the victim was considered to have returned to the perpetrator independently. However, the perpetrator was convicted of several sexual offenses and sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment, and was also ordered to pay compensation to the victim.

Overall, the interviewed experts and focus group participants referred to various aspects of vulnerability which may increase the risk of exploitation. The most commonly mentioned aspects were related to young age, family instability and previous trauma, lack of life experience, reduced ability to evaluate risks as well as substance abuse problems, behavioural issues, and neuropsychiatric disorders. Also, children of victims of trafficking were mentioned by several expert interviewees as particularly vulnerable. Perpetrators are well-versed in identifying vulnerabilities and abusing them in such a way that the victims

95 Source for the case example: Ruling of the Western Uusimaa District Court, 16 May 2025.

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do not disclose their experiences to others due to, e.g., fear of consequences.

By conducting a survey and interviews with experts working with children and adolescents, Kervinen and Ollus (2019) identified the following vulnerability factors: prior abuse and vulnerable emotional state; children's unawareness of risks and dangers, risky behaviour; substance abuse; poor mental health or slight disability; unstable family situation or no family around; poverty in the family; being an immigrant/asylum seeker without a formal guardian; being on the run from home or from a (foster) care facility; social exclusion; and lack of support and insufficient identification of potential victims. Often, different factors accumulate and become compounded in cases of exploitation and trafficking.[96] The lack of language skills, a poor education or lack thereof, being illiterate, having a physical and psychological illness were also mentioned by interviewed experts in relation to increased vulnerability to trafficking.[97]

Children and young people who grew up in substitute care have often encountered various types of violence and serious physical and emotional neglect during placements.[98] This was confirmed by interviewed experts and focus group participants. Particularly so-called runaways and minors who live without a guardian or permanent residence are vulnerable to criminal exploitation.[99] In his 2019 study Isoniemi found that often cases of children running away from care institutions are seen as unauthorized absences and registered within the police as requests for assistance instead of as missing persons' reports. This is seen by Isoniemi as problematic considering the principle of the best interest of the child.[100] The risk of falling victim to exploitation or crime is heightened by factors such as lack of language skills, an unfamiliar environment, and lack of financial resources.[101] During periods of unauthorised absence, the range of criminal activity and victimisation spans the entire spectrum of criminal offences, from minor property crimes to homicide. Moreover, the first instance of unauthorised absence

96 Kervinen & Ollus 2019, 43–44, 55–57, 80–85.
97 Kainulainen & Valovirta 2021, 78–81.
98 Hytönen et al. 2016.
99 Lehtinen & Rossi 2022, 128.
100 Isoniemi 2019, 125.
101 Isoniemi 2024, 69.

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is often an indicator of recurrence, although only 8–10 per cent of children in care leave without permission.[102]

The 2024 study by Valovirta and Kainulainen found that exploitation often took place in close, trust-based and/or intimate relationships, which increased the child's dependence on the perpetrator. Previous life experiences and mental health issues were also cited as attributes increasing child victims' vulnerability.[103]

Similarly, in the study by Pihlaja and Piipponen concerning clients of Victim Support Finland who had faced sexual exploitation, all cases (both with adult and child victims) involved psychological control, subjugation, and the victim being in a dependent status in relation to the perpetrator. These features resulted in a situation where the victim felt that they could not escape the situation without serious consequences.[104] A young age alone did not increase a person's likelihood of being exploited, however, when paired with another factor of vulnerability, there seemed to be a greater risk for trafficking and more difficulties in leaving the situation. In cases of forced marriage, a young age together with honour-related control and violence, the role of family and community in shaping one's life choices, and unawareness of one's own rights were risk factors for exploitation. In cases of sexual violence, childhood experiences of exploitation, mental health challenges, a difficult family situation, intergenerational violence, etc. seemed to expose young people to exploitation.[105]

Finally, some concern has also been raised in relation to the business of bringing in underaged upper secondary school students to rural Finnish schools from abroad, from countries such as Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, China and Iran. This practice, however, is likely to decrease due to forthcoming legislation that will introduce tuition fees for non-EU upper secondary students in Finland.[106] According to an interviewed expert in the field of social and victim services, they have encountered these students in relation to some criminal cases. The first step would usually be to contact the child's parents, but because the children have come to the country alone and live either alone or with peers in, e.g., dormitories, reaching

102 Isoniemi 2024, 69.
103 Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024, 5, 59.
104 Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023, 20–21.
105 Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023, 67–68.
106 Pekkarinen et al. 2026; Ruissalo et. al. / Yle 2024; Toivonen / Yle 2025.

the parents abroad can be a challenge. Moreover, students moving to Finland for upper secondary studies do not receive a municipality of residence because studying alone is considered temporary and does not establish the right to a municipality residency. Therefore the amount of information on students that is available to the authorities is very limited.

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5 Practical aspects of anti-trafficking efforts

5.1. Detection

DETECTION OF child victims of trafficking is challenging according to interviewed experts and focus group participants. The interviewed experts noted that children may be unaware of or unable to describe the situation they are in, or even to see it as exploitative in the first place. Some may even blame themselves for ending up in a situation of exploitation.

According to Victim Support Finland, some of their clients who had been victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation while underaged stated that reasons preventing them for seeking help included psychological control and threats by the perpetrator(s); unawareness of their situation; fear of the potential consequences of disclosure such as a child welfare placement or restrictive measures at an institutional care facility; solidarity towards the abuser or the exploitative friend group; and being ashamed for getting into the situation. Underaged victims of forced marriage were trapped in the situation also because of honour-related violence; dependency on the husband, family and community; and the fear of bringing shame to one's own family.[107]

Law enforcement officers in particular mentioned that it may be difficult to get young people to talk openly about their

107 Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023, 69.

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situation. Moreover, perpetrators will actively avoid attracting attention to the exploitation that is taking place. They may threaten the victims or instruct them either to not talk at all or to tell a pre-rehearsed story about the situation. One interviewed law enforcement officer also noted that oftentimes children and young people are encountered by police patrol units who may lack expertise to identify indicators of trafficking.

> **Those police officers who deal with these young people, of course, can't really have any special training in human trafficking issues. Because they have to handle the whole range of duties in emergency response. And, you know, the situations can look like it's just a young person committing petty crimes or stuck in a cycle of offending, or something like that. But there could be much bigger things going on in the background, and I don't know how well those are recognised.**
>
> — Expert interview 4.

NGO representatives noted that young people may not want to talk to officials about their experiences because of fear of consequences for themselves and/or their friends. Furthermore, when perpetrators are family members, they may be able to hide the situation by lying convincingly to the authorities. The exploitation may unfold through the child's own disclosure, or individuals working at the police, child welfare services, the school, or in health care may notice signs that alert them to the situation. Representatives of the authorities have a duty to notify the well-being countries if a child's need for care, circumstances endangering their development, or their behaviour require investigation. When suspecting sexual abuse or a crime against the life and health of a child (e.g., human trafficking), officials must notify the police.[108]

According to Pihlaja (2024), there are shortcomings in the identification of human trafficking involving children and young people and in understanding the diversity of different types of exploitation which children and young people may be subjected to. Indeed, trafficking in children and young people

108 Kervinen & Ollus 2019, 86–88; Child Welfare Act (417/2007, 5:25 & 25a).

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can appear as many types of exploitation and cases are not always limited to one form of exploitation; instead, one case may involve several different forms of abuse.[109] This was also discussed in the expert interviews, as pointed out by an expert working in the field of social and victim services.

> **People with multiple problems – it's like this big tangled mess, you know, and I don't believe I've ever seen a case where it was just one thing. Like, "Oh hey, this young person has been a victim of sexual abuse". No, it's always a big web of issues. There are several different challenges involved, and at the same time the young person might have engaged in some kind of problematic behaviour themselves – using or selling substances, assaults, crimes, or just general acting out – and then also been subjected to abuse.**
>
> – Expert interview 7.

Forced labour cases were also mentioned as potentially challenging to identify in the expert interviews. Children and young people may, for example, work at a family business (such as a restaurant) without any wages being paid to them, as pointed out by interviewed law enforcement officer:

> **One big thing, kind of like a black hole for us, is work related exploitation involving children. "Work" in quotes again, because rarely do the children get paid for it, but still, to some extent. It happens especially in those family-run businesses in the food service sector or similar, where the whole family takes part – and then you have a child working from morning till night. Washing dishes, cleaning, and homework gets left undone. So yeah, those cases can definitely remain hidden, I believe.**
>
> – Expert interview 5.

109 Pihlaja 2024a, 57.

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The research by Valovirta and Kainulainen found that forced labour or subjecting a child to conditions that violate human dignity was particularly difficult to prove in court according to an analysis of case law concerning child trafficking in Finland.[110]

Often, children and youth who have been victims of human trafficking have been within the scope of compulsory education, clients of child welfare or other social welfare services, have lived in a reception centre or substitute care, used health care services, met youth workers or visited services provided by low-threshold organisations, but their situation of exploitation has not been identified by any of the professionals involved.[111] This was also discussed in the expert interviews and focus groups, and many practitioners pointed out challenges in detecting signs of trafficking in situations involving children of different backgrounds and vulnerabilities.

Children in exploitative situations may not fully realise that they are being exploited. They may also fear that they have done something bad or worry about the consequences of disclosing their experiences, as highlighted, for example, by NGO representatives.

Pihlaja notes that it is important for professionals who encounter children or young people to respond to the needs of the child or young person while identifying vulnerabilities and concerning situations. As a matter of priority, she suggests that it is not necessary to know whether the concerning situation is precisely human trafficking but rather to identify potential indicators of exploitation, trafficking and abuse and to intervene in the situation so that its continuation is not made possible.[112]

5.2. Investigations

According to interviewed law enforcement experts, once a child has been identified as a potential victim of trafficking a comprehensive pre-trial investigation process is started. Children should always be interviewed by professionals who have received training in child interviews, which is very comprehensive.[113] Based on the Criminal Investigation Act (805/2011), interviews with children are recorded when the victim is under 15 years of age, or when the victim is 15–17 years old

110 Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024, 5.
111 Pihlaja 2024a, 58.
112 Pihlaja 2024a, 58.
113 Lehtinen & Rossi 2022, 75–76.

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and subjected to trafficking or aggravated trafficking or sexual offences and does not want to be heard in person during trial. It is also possible to use a video recording in cases of human trafficking/aggravated human trafficking involving a victim aged 18 or older if being heard in person during the trial would endanger the victim's health or cause other comparable significant harm.[114] If a child has to testify in court, it can be done through video conferencing.[115]

An interviewed expert working in the field of social and victim services pointed out that children with migrant backgrounds who are asylum seekers or refugees and who have been exploited e.g. sexually or in forced labour during their migratory journey, however, rarely want to file a criminal report. Even if they would like to do so, there is rarely enough detail for the police to initiate a pre-trial investigation.

> **We don't assume minors want to talk to the police. The child protective services know the main details. Those who have become victims abroad do not normally want to do so, unless they specifically want to file a criminal report, or unless we receive some kind of information that could actually lead to catching the perpetrator.**
>
> — Expert Interview 4.

According to a study by Pihlaja and Piipponen, cases of trafficking in children rarely come to the attention of the authorities in real time, and making a police report much later often means that gathering evidence is much more difficult.[116] Beyond the victim's story, also other evidence should be secured, such as messages from different communication apps and social media, photos, videos and so on. An interviewed member of the judiciary mentioned that the problem is that often perpetrators use messages that disappear after a few minutes, which make it more difficult to secure evidence of e.g. exploitation itself or means of control used.

114 See Act amending the Criminal Investigation Act 453/2023.
115 GRETA 2024, 29–30, 35.
116 Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023, 69–70.

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Another challenge highlighted by several interviewed law enforcement officers and members of the judiciary is establishing evidence of psychological control. Victims may find it very difficult to discuss such experiences, making it challenging for the police to document and demonstrate a sustained pattern of coercive conduct rather than an isolated incident, such as an assault or threat.

In cases involving children, Pihlaja and Piipponen noted that the investigation has not always been opened under aggravated human trafficking, even if elements of trafficking have been apparent. Moreover, the victims being underaged does not have a significant effect on the length of the pre-trial investigation when compared to adult victims.[117]

The interviewed law enforcement officials and members of the judiciary mainly agreed that children are treated well in the criminal justice process if it is a case of trafficking or sexual offences. In such cases their needs are carefully considered in different stages of the criminal justice process, including getting a support person and a skilled lawyer. NGO representatives and experts working in the field of social and victim services were more critical. In particular, the lack of information how the case is proceeding may be stressful for the victims:

> **One area where I often hear negative feedback is communication about the stages of the process: where things currently stand, whether there will be further questioning. While this isn't the case for all young people, for many of them and their families there's a lot of uncertainty about how long the process will take and what the different stages are. Of course, in some cases it's not even possible to provide precise information. But when it comes to questionings, based on what young people share, they are often very distressing experiences. I can't say for sure whether more preparation would be needed, but it seems that these situations, perhaps understandably, don't leave much room for the young person's emotions.**
>
> — Expert interview 11.

117 Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023, 69–70.

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Based on the Finnish Criminal Investigation Act (805/2011) the pre-trial investigator must determine whether the injured party is in need of special protection measures and based on instruction by the Prosecutor General's Office and National Police Board, the investigator must consult the prosecutor in cases that involve sexual and human trafficking crimes, violence in close relationships, and crimes against children.[118] Unlike in many other European countries, however, the police leads the investigation, although the prosecutor must be consulted in cases involving human trafficking.

The human trafficking legislation was generally seen by interviewees as sufficient. Some interviewees saw the sentencing range quite lenient, also in comparison to sexual offences. As one law enforcement officer said:

> **This way we measure punishment. The regulation concerning sentencing doesn't necessarily encourage the police to, instead of just dealing with one or five or ten sexual offences, also include human trafficking, which should be investigated in a completely different way and over a longer period of time. It comes across as more laborious, and the "reward" – in heavy quotation marks – that the police would get from it, or the punishment for the perpetrator, feels quite small. [...] Especially when we're talking about sexual violence offences, the sentences for crimes against children are often quite substantial, with fixed prison terms. So, there's a tendency to settle for that, because it's relatively easy to secure. And this has been discussed in research for probably 15 years now, that it's just so much easier to investigate something other than human trafficking.**
>
> – Expert interview 12.

118 Simanainen 2016, 33–34.

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Best practice example 2. Handbook for investigating human trafficking

A JOINT MODEL for the pre-trial investigation of human trafficking offenses ("Ihmemalli") was created by the Police University College in 2023 with the aim of clarifying and harmonizing police measures related to trafficking investigations across Finland.[119] The modelling took into account children as a particular target group of exploitation. The handbook developed as part of the project provides concrete tools for different actors in dealing with human trafficking and related phenomenon.[120] According to the handbook in investigations of child trafficking, it is essential to ensure that from the very beginning of the pre-trial investigation, the child has access to a legal counsel specialised in trafficking cases, as well as an adult/support person whom the child perceives as safe.

Having access to legal counsel specialised in trafficking cases as well as having a support person was confirmed by the interviewed experts and focus group comprised of law enforcement officers and members of the judiciary as a key issue in safeguarding victim's rights. NGOs pointed out that there may be challenges in finding such legal counsel.

The support person should be allowed to be present in the same room during interviews and interrogations and when the child is informed of their rights and responsibilities, as well as when questions regarding charges and penalties are asked. During the interview, it is important to investigate, for example, whether the perpetrator was aware of any vulnerabilities the child may have had – such as mental health issues or difficult home circumstances, who the child spoke with about, for instance, selling sex or drugs and their need for money before the situation arose, how the decision to act came about, what would have happened if the child had not acted as they did, and how the child would describe their relationship with the other individuals involved in the case.[121]

In cases of human trafficking, it is also important to assess the victim's need for protection, and this assessment should be done in writing.

119 polamk.fi/en/ihmemalli-en; HEUNI was a project partner and wrote a report on NGOs views of trafficking investigations.
120 Willman-Koistinen et al. 2024.
121 Pihlaja 2024b, 311.

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The assessment is carried out with the victim if they are aged 15 or approaching the age of 15, and for younger children, it is done with their guardians. The assessment must be conducted before the interview, at least to the extent that the interviewee is informed of their right to request that the recorded interview be used in the main hearing instead of personal testimony. Even if a young victim states that they wish to be heard in person during the main hearing, it is highly recommended to record the interview, as they may later change their mind.[122]

The interviewed members of the judiciary mentioned that using videoed interviews makes the criminal justice process less stressful for victims. However, if the victim turns 18 before the case goes to trial or proceeds to court of appeal, they may have to testify in court in person. There is however an update in court procedures taking place in late 2026, in which testimonies given in district court will be videoed and if the cases appealed, the videoed testimony is used by the court of appeal to make their decision.[123] This may help relieve the burden of the criminal justice process for the victims.

Best practice example 3. Handbook for interviewing child victims

HANDBOOK FOR FORENSIC child interviews in presumed cases of trafficking was developed to support professionals in carrying out investigative interviews in presumed cases of trafficking in children. The handbook introduces some best practices in interviewing children, while acknowledging that there is no "one size fits all" -method for the various situations children may find themselves in, including when they may themselves be suspected of committing crimes in relation to their exploitation. The handbook is based on research and experiences of practitioners and includes case examples and interview excerpts and is available in multiple languages.[124]

Few of the interviewees had experiences of international cooperation during investigations, as child trafficking cases in Finland are often cases of internal trafficking, where

122 Asmudela 2024, 315.
123 Hautamäki / Advokaatti 2025.
124 Korkman 2024.

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international cooperation is not needed. However, in cases concerning commercial sexual exploitation of children, there were some experiences of international cooperation. For example, interviewed criminal justice experts mentioned having good cooperation with Romanian authorities in cases involving Romanian victims and/or perpetrators. Cooperation facilitated by Europol was deemed to be mostly successful, although there had been some experiences of delays and problems in getting responses to requests. Cooperation with authorities from third countries was deemed more challenging also in terms of poor language skills and differences in approaching human trafficking investigations.

5.3. Convictions

Reseach into convictions regarding child trafficking reveals inconsistencies in the case law. Valovirta and Kainulainen (2024) analysed 35 human trafficking judgements concerning children given by the district courts and courts of appeal in 2012–2024. In most of the cases the children had been subjected to sexual exploitation. Some charges were also brought for forced labour or subjecting a child to circumstances contrary to human dignity. Slightly over a half of the cases led to a guilty conviction (either on trafficking charges or on secondary charges such as pandering or aggravated assault), mostly in cases involving sexual exploitation. No charges of forced labour succeeded in court.

Overall, the dismissal rate of charges was 46 percent which is high for offences under the Criminal Code. The authors found it surprising that the dismissal rate was so high, given that the definitional elements of human trafficking crimes are more easily applied to children than adults.[125] In a large part of the cases, the courts did not interpret the definitional elements of trafficking in a child-oriented manner, and that there was incoherence in the legal practice, with the definitional elements of trafficking in human beings applied differently in cases with similar characteristics. The study showed that there are clear shortcomings in using the Criminal Code to protect children from exploitation in the context of human trafficking.[126]

125 Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024, 61.
126 Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024, 5.

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Interviewed experts noted that based on their experiences, cases of prolonged sexual exploitation or cases involving commercialized sexual exploitation have the highest success rate in court.

Cases where a single incident of sexual exploitation has occurred are more challenging and the interviewed law enforcement and criminal justice experts mentioned that it may be easier to use other crime labels in such cases with the same result. This concerns e.g. cases where a run-away child has been picked up by an adult that provides them shelter and then rapes the child.

In line with the study by Valovirta and Kainulainen, the interviewed experts also discussed that forced labour in particular is considered difficult to prove in court when it comes to children. Furthermore, situations of placing a child into circumstances contrary to human dignity are challenging in light of case law, because the court has problems in defining what that means in practice.

Koivukari, Korkka-Knuts, Mahmood and Melander (2022) analysed case law from human trafficking cases between 2010 and 2020. This included a handful of court judgements involving victims that were underaged either during the entire act of trafficking or who had been underaged when it started. The authors concluded that in the latter type of cases, where the victim had turned 18 while being subjected to trafficking, the vulnerable position of a child had not been considered. Furthermore, the victims being underaged was not taken into account when determining the level of seriousness of the crime.[127]

Interviewed experts discussed that problems in case law and different interpretations may indicate that judges lack training on human trafficking and its features, given that the definition of trafficking is so complex. Therefore, charges of more traditional sexual offences may be perceived as a better route to secure a conviction. Moreover, as pointed out by an interviewed member of the judiciary, there is also a lack of specialization among judges.

127 Koivukari et. al. 2022, 166–170.

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> **Judges have certainly had less training on human trafficking than, for example, prosecutors. And of course, cases can often end up with anyone – someone who may not be specialized in the topic at all.**
>
> – Expert interview 3.

Interviewed members of the judiciary stressed that they have to rely on the available evidence brought up in court, as well as the offence label used by the prosecutor to carefully evaluate each element of the crime. The judges cannot evaluate whether there are elements of trafficking in a case if the prosecutor is not charging for trafficking.

> **In principle, we are bound by the charges: if the prosecutor only brings charges for rape or sexual abuse, then of course we don't even have the opportunity to formally consider whether there might be elements indicative of human trafficking. But if such a charge is brought, then that aspect is naturally examined thoroughly.**
>
> – Expert interview 14.

Interviewed members of the judiciary also saw the 2023 legislative change which requires that sexual crimes or crimes against life, health, freedom, privacy, peace or honour of children, including human trafficking must be processed urgently and the court has to begin the main hearing within 30 days of the initiation of the case by the prosecutor as a very good thing in terms of the interests of the child.

> **These cases of young victims are aimed to be taken into processing quickly, so that is in itself a good reform, because otherwise it is a shockingly slow process at the moment. So it is quite positive. Yes, in my opinion it has been good change.**
>
> – Expert interview 13.

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None of the interviewed members of law enforcement or the judiciary had direct experience with cases of trafficking for forced criminality proceeding to court. However, it was mentioned as a particular challenging field where cases could be identified. One member of the judiciary, for instance, mentioned the phenomenon of recruiting children under the age of 15 to take part in, e.g., robberies in order to avoid criminal liability, but had not come across such a case involving a trafficking charge.

Hannonen and Kainulainen (2022) researched the principle of non-punishment of victims of human trafficking, i.e., that victims of trafficking who have been compelled to commit offenses on behalf of the exploiter should not be punished for such offenses. There are still obstacles in the application of the principle due to the lack of experience in applying it, the inadequate identification of victims of trafficking, and the insufficient attention to the exploitation behind the offense.[128] In Finland, the age limit for criminal liability is 15 (CC 3:4.1), so the non-punishment principle needs to be considered for 15–17-year-old children. It has been argued that for the non-punishment principle to apply, it should be sufficient that the criminal offence committed by the child is connected to a trafficking situation.[129] Further research on exploitation in criminal activities is needed, particularly as a form of human trafficking involving child victims.[130]

The issue of non-punishment was also brought up in the focus group discussions. The participants highlighted the challenges in seeing suspects of crime as victims or getting to the truth of the matter. In worst case scenarios this may result in situations where the exploitation behind a criminal activity is not identified and the person is sent to prison instead, as outlined by one focus group participant:

128 Hannonen & Kainulainen 2022, 170.
129 Hannonen & Kainulainen 2022, 82.
130 Ibid., 175.

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> **A huge part of prisoners are both perpetrators and victims. Sometimes it feels like the role of the perpetrator is emphasized, by the authorities we work with and even by ourselves, and of course, one of our tasks in society is to intervene and prevent recidivism. But this emphasis can overshadow everything that the person has experienced as part of the criminal subculture. […] Much less is said about how people are lured or forced into crime, or how children are growing up in families, in native Finnish families, and in families of adult prisoners, who are already involved in criminal activities. These children, through their parents, may become involved in crime already as minors. Is that coercion, enticement, or something else? Is it intergenerationality?**
>
> — Participant in the focus group for authorities.

5.4. Victim support

AS A RULE, a suspicion that a child is a victim of violence, exploitation or trafficking triggers two investigation processes: the criminal process and the child protection process. The police and the prosecution system are responsible for the criminal investigation, and the social welfare department is responsible for child protection actions. This process focuses on finding out whether the child is safe and whether their development opportunities have also been secured.[131]

Child victims of trafficking can receive specialised assistance via the National Assistance System for Victims of Trafficking, or if they have a municipality residence, via their regional well-being county, as was outlined previously. Also NGOs can provide assistance to children. However, they should refer the child to child welfare services, if they suspect the child is a victim of trafficking. If the child is aged 15–17, their own consent is required in order to make the referral to the National Assistance System.[132]

In accordance with Section 11 of the Social Welfare Act (1301/2014), social services must be arranged, i.a., to support

131 Mäkelä, Bildjuschkin, Laajasalo & Kettunen in Korpilahti et. al. 2020, 136.
132 Lehtinen & Rossi 2022, 130.

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the child's balanced development and well-being, and to respond to the need for support caused by domestic and family violence, as well as other forms of violence, exploitation, and maltreatment. These other forms of exploitation may include, for instance, human trafficking or similar exploitation. It may be of a sexual, economic, physical, or psychological nature, and may involve, for example, coercive control.[133]

As stipulated in section 27 of the Child Welfare Act (417/2007), child welfare clientship begins when a social worker determines, based on a service needs assessment, that: 1) the child's growing conditions endanger or do not secure the child's health or development, or 2) the child, through their behaviour, endangers their own health or development, and 3) the child needs services and support measures as referred to in the Child Welfare Act.

All children regardless of their status are entitled to health care services, including dental services, as well as social and child welfare services if they are deemed necessary. Children also have the duty to attend school until they turn 18.

The interviewed experts working in the field of social and victim services pointed out that work in supporting child victims must be based on assessment of their individual needs and circumstances. As pointed out by one interviewed NGO expert, normally the child's whole sense of safety has been jeopardized and building of trust is an integral part of the support process.

> **Often, there's a strong underlying sense of insecurity, because there have been... well, there may have been several stays in shelters, depending on the situation. There are also unresolved custody and visitation issues. It depends on what kind of violence has occurred – whether it was directed at the child or whether the child merely witnessed it. Does the child even have a relationship with the father? So, the process starts with mapping out everything that's going on and building trust. I think restoring that sense of safety is really at the heart of it all.**
>
> – Expert interview 9.

133 Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö 2024, 49.

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If a child has no guardian, they are accommodated either in a group home or support housing (>16-year-olds) (Reception Act 746/2011, 17 §). Underaged asylum seekers without a guardian have the right to an (reception) allowance, and those potential victims of trafficking that are registered in a municipality in Finland may have the right to social assistance. According to the Aliens Act, the Immigration Services have the obligation to start tracing the parent or guardian of the potential child victim of trafficking.

Interviewed experts working in the field of social and victim services noted that in certain circumstances, children may be placed institutional care which then can result in them ending up in situations of high risk rather than lowering risks. It may be difficult to restrict children's movement also in cases where it is suspected that they are involved in criminal activities or are subjected to abuse.

According to the Child Welfare Act (417/2007), restrictive measures can in certain situations be used on a child in institutional care, and restrictions on contact may be applied in other forms of substitute care, such as foster care. Restrictive measures listed in Chapter 11 of the Act include restriction of contact, confiscation of substances and objects, body search, physical examination, inspection of property, deliveries and premises, and withholding of deliveries, physical restraint, restriction of freedom of movement, return of a child who has left the institution without permission, isolation, and special care for a child aged 12 or older.

According to section 61a of the Child Welfare Act, restrictions may only be used if: 1) the restriction is in the best interests of the child and proportionate to the child's age and level of development, 2) the restriction is justified and appropriate for the implementation of the child's care and upbringing or the purpose of the decision that led to substitute care, 3) the use of the restriction is necessary to prevent serious danger to the child's or others' health, to protect physical integrity, or to prevent significant property damage, 4) the restriction is proportionate to the interest being protected, 5) the child's opinion about the restriction has been ascertained in accordance with section 20, unless this is clearly impossible, and 6) other, less intrusive means are not suitable in the situation.

Furthermore, the restriction must be carried out safely and with respect for the child's human dignity, considering their individual situation, age, gender, and cultural and religious background. During the restriction, the child's individual needs

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and basic necessities must be met. The restriction must not include subjugation, punishment, or any other degrading treatment. The use of the restriction must be ended immediately once it is no longer necessary. A restriction must not be used as a punishment, nor should its use cause harm or damage to the child.

The amended Child Welfare Act is establishing a new rehabilitative, closed institutional care service to be provided by the State Reform School (VKK). This is to be implemented as 24-hour out-of-home care under child welfare services in a child welfare institution, where the freedom of movement and certain other fundamental rights of placed children would be restricted more intrusively and for longer periods than in other forms of child welfare out-of-home care. A child aged 12 or older could be placed in this closed institutional care if they pose serious danger to their own or others' safety through violent or other criminal behaviour, and if the service is deemed necessary to protect the child from behaviour that endangers their own and/or others' safety. The placement would be based on criteria set in the Child Welfare Act and would not be used as a criminal sanction.[134] The media has reported that this kind of facility will be established and piloted in Liminka reform school in 2027.[135]

134 Government proposal 149/2025vp, 53.
135 Polo / Yle 2026.

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Best practice example 4. The Barnahus model

THE BARNAHUS MODEL was identified as a best practice by interviewed law enforcement experts. It is based on European quality standards, the purpose of which is to establish a common operational and organisational framework for providing support and services to child victims of (sexual) crimes, while aiming to prevent the re-traumatisation of the child, to ensure the rights of the child and to achieve a smooth and reliable criminal process. Work following the Barnahus model is conducted by police officers investigating crimes against children, prosecutors, and health care and social welfare professionals.[136] Children and young people and their families are assisted in the acute phase as well as in the long run, by for instance by offering mental health services and supporting them during a criminal process. The five university hospitals in Finland house Forensic Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Units (or Barnahus units), which provide executive assistance by performing examinations based on a request by the police, prosecutor or the court. The units also provide consultation, assistance and training to other authorities.[137] Having such coordination in planning and service provision was described as a best practice by the interviewed law enforcement officers in terms of ensuring a comprehensive approach and access to specialised support for child victims.

Interviewed experts and focus group participants emphasised that multiple actors are needed in the efforts to protect child victims of trafficking. The role of NGOs providing low threshold and anonymous support was deemed important in reaching to those children and young people who e.g. fear the consequences of disclosing their experiences and actions to authorities. This essential work is now in jeopardy because of budget cuts by the Finnish government, which raised concern among experts:

136 barnahus.fi/en.
137 barnahus.fi/en/pre-trial-investigation-and-interviewing-the-child.

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> **Now that these major cuts to [non-governmental] organisations are coming, and even bigger ones are being discussed again… A civil society sector that can operate in these gaps – where people fall outside the scope of certain services – is really important. Services that are free and anonymous, where people can turn when official processes feel intimidating or frightening, are vital. That's why it's so important to safeguard the operating conditions of organisations.**
>
> – Participant in a focus group for NGOs.

Pihlaja and Piipponen (2023) note that to provide comprehensive assistance for victims of human trafficking, the reasons behind exploitation must be identified and addressed at first. According to the authors, effective support can be achieved through flexible, multi-sectoral cooperation, and comprehensive support services can contribute to the success of the criminal procedure.

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Best practice example 5. Toolkit for enhancing support to victims of forced marriage

HEUNI HAS DEVELOPED a toolkit for enhancing detection and support to victims of forced marriage. It includes a journey map which outlines the key stages victims go through—from initial awareness and seeking help, to emergency support, long-term care, and empowerment. Each stage details the victim's actions, experiences, and challenges, and suggests effective practices for intervention. The toolkit is designed to enhance understanding and improve the support system for victims. Alongside a survivor's story, the resource emphasizes the need for compassionate, effective care that addresses the unique challenges faced by those affected by forced marriage. The toolkit is available in Finnish, English, German, Spanish and Catalan.[138] It also includes a checklist for individuals assessing forced marriage situations.[139] HEUNI has also developed a best practice booklet outlining the concrete challenges, factors and concepts that must be addressed when developing effective responses to tackle forced marriages and providing support to victims and persons affected. It is targeted towards various professionals and practitioners who may encounter victims of forced marriage or persons, families or communities affected by the phenomenon in their line of work. The best practice booklet is available in Finnish[140] and English[141].

Finally, victims of trafficking can claim compensation from the State Treasury under the Act on Compensation for Crime Damage (1204/2005) in relation to personal injury and suffering. To receive compensation, the victim must have reported the crime to the police. If the case was heard in court, the victim must have claimed compensation from the offender, however, the victim can claim state compensation even if the offender was, e.g., not found, or was not heard for some other reason.[142] In most cases, the maximum compensation for suffering is 4,300€, but in cases involving a sexual offense, the maximum is 11,400€, and in cases where the victim was a child at the time

138 Jokinen & Pekkarinen 2024a; 2024b.
139 Jokinen & Pekkarinen 2025.
140 Jokinen, Pekkarinen & Rantanen 2025a.
141 Jokinen, Pekkarinen & Rantanen 2025b.
142 GRETA. 2024, 21.

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of the offense, 19,500€.[143] State compensation is secondary, so compensation received from the offender will decrease the amount of state compensation.

5.5. Prevention

PREVENTION OF human trafficking generally requires actions at many levels and policy areas such as in education and awareness raising. It should also tackle multiple and interlinked factors that contribute or enable violence, abuse and exploitation, such as discrimination, social exclusion, poor social protection and lack of legal and safe migration channels. Most experts and focus group participants frequently emphasized the role of schools in prevention of child trafficking.

School staff are well-placed to identify potential risk factors and situations but may lack information on indicators of trafficking and the national referral mechanism.

According to the study by Pihlaja (2024), it can be argued that before a child or a young person becomes a victim of human trafficking, they have likely already been subjected also to some other form of exploitation, violence or abuse. Consequently, the prevention of trafficking in human beings should linked to the prevention of a wide range of other forms of abuse against children and youth. Exploitation of children and youth can be best prevented by investing in the prevention of adverse childhood experiences, strengthening protective factors as well as supporting families and children in a timely manner. Preventing these can also help to prevent crimes committed by children.[144]

Thus, trafficking in children and youth must be prevented at multiple levels. First, root causes must be addressed at a broader societal level: In most cases, a child or young person has experienced abuse and exploitation for a long time before the situation meets the definition of trafficking as a criminal offence. Trafficking is effectively prevented by addressing factors that put victims at risk of exploitation and investing in early intervention. In addition, strengthening the experience of inclusion and early support is also needed. Second, prevention is needed at the individual level, on a case-by-case basis. Relevant cases must be exposed and identified in a timely

143 State Treasury 2025.
144 Pihlaja 2024a, 56.

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manner and must be effectively addressed in order to support victims and enforce their rights, prevent re-victimization and ensure criminal liability.[145]

Third, special attention should be paid to including the issue of trafficking in children and youth in education and training on human trafficking. Regular training should be obligatory to professionals. Fourth, awareness raising activities should be targeted towards children and young people in an age-appropriate and competent manner from multiple perspectives. From the perspective of raising awareness among children and young people, it also seems useful that professionals encountering children and young people in their work, such as the staff and representatives of schools, youth work and child welfare institutions, have been trained to inform children about the topic in an age-appropriate and diverse manner and to intervene in situations that raise concern.[146]

Best practice example 5. Anchor work

ANCHOR WORK (ANKKURITOIMINTA) is a practice consisting of multidisciplinary collaboration aimed at promoting the well-being of adolescents, preventing crime, and breaking any cycle of criminal behavior. A multi-professional anchor team includes experts from the police as well as from social, health, and youth services. The team meets young persons and their families as early as possible, so that the adolescents can be supported in their life situations and, if necessary, referred to other essential help or support services. Anchor work began in Hämeenlinna in the early 2000s and has since expanded through effective methods and good practices into a nationwide operating model. The anchor work development group has produced a handbook aimed at supporting the implementation, development, and evaluation of anchor work in Finland. Although anchor work is based on common national principles and objectives, it is organized at the regional level to address the needs and special characteristics of each area and region.[147]

145 Pihlaja 2024a, 57–58.
146 Pihlaja 2024a, 59.
147 Ankkuritoiminta n.d.

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The previous national Non-Violent Childhood Action Plan (2020–2025) and the new Action Plan for 2026–2033 focus on prevention of violence against children, including trafficking. The action plans highlight for example the role of child health clinic services and school healthcare services in Finland which encounter practically every child in Finland. These meetings are opportunities to address the impacts of violence and support non-violence, as well as identifying potential signs of violence and conditions that may increase the risk of violence. The action plan emphasizes that overall, the most important way to reduce violence against children is to train practitioners and professionals to identify potential violence and take action in situations where a child or young person is suspected of having been subjected to violence or having witnessed violence.[148]

Professionals can also support protective factors and identify risk factors, for example: in guidance provided to parents by child health clinics and by means of safety skills and sexual education in early childhood education and care and in schools.[149] Several interviewed experts noted that sexual health education and safety skills are key components in ensuring that fewer children and young people end up in exploitative situations.

> **In principle, sexual education is provided in all schools in Finland, but the thing is that it's not standardized, it's not clearly defined in the curriculum. Teachers also don't get much training in this area, so ensuring the quality of sexual education across the country is really important. […] It's crucial that people learn about the culture of consent and what it actually means, so that young people can protect themselves, but also from a positive approach: knowing one's own body and experiencing pleasure. It's all connected to having a healthy attitude toward sexuality and sexual health.**
>
> — Participant in a focus group for NGOs.

148 Korpilahti et al. (Eds.) 2020.
149 thl.fi/en/research-and-development/research-and-projects/non-violent-childhoods-action-plan/multidisciplinary-cooperation-and-information-flow (Accessed 23 May 2025).

Valovirta and Kainulainen highlight that children must be given special consideration in anti-trafficking action plans and measures. Comprehensive measures must be used to address the phenomenon, and multidisciplinary cooperation should be increased. Action against violence against children must better consider human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Additionally, measures to prevent re-victimization must be strengthened.[150] Professionals working with children need more training on child exploitation and trafficking as well as on the various forms of human trafficking, particularly the gendered nature of exploitation and violence, as well as the complexity of the phenomenon.[151]

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150 Valovirta & Kainulainen, 64.
151 Ibid., 68–69.

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6 Conclusions

FINLAND HAS established a comprehensive legislative and policy framework to combat trafficking in human beings, including child trafficking. However, challenges remain, particularly in the identification of child victims of trafficking and related exploitation. NGOs as well as the National Assistance System have reported a growing number of cases in which young adults seek support years after having been subjected to exploitation while they were still underage. Many of these young people were attending school and receiving various public services at the time the exploitation occurred, which highlights a challenge among professionals in these services to recognise the signs of abuse and the lack of trust and/or fear among children to disclose their experiences to various adults in their lives.

Although awareness of child trafficking and its associated risks has increased over the past five years, the number of identified child victims admitted to the National Assistance System for Victims of Trafficking remains low, and few cases result in convictions. Case law reveals inconsistencies in how courts interpret cases involving child victims and the constituent elements of trafficking. These discrepancies may stem from a lack of judicial specialisation and limited understanding of the consequences of trauma or expertise regarding key trafficking elements, such as the act of taking control or establishing the purpose of exploitation. Aspects of psychological control are particularly difficult for the criminal justice system to grasp.

Expert interviews, focus group discussions, and previous research suggest that cases involving prolonged or commercialised sexual exploitation are most likely to result in trafficking convictions. There are also parallel sexual offences which may be easier for criminal justice actors to investigate, prosecute and convict of. In contrast, cases related to forced labour or conditions contrary to human dignity more often led to acquittals because of a lack of evidence or a lack of understanding on what they would mean in practice. Exploitation linked to criminal activities and cyber-facilitated trafficking, in particular, continue to pose significant challenges for the criminal justice system.

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A lack of trust in authorities and fear of consequences may prevent young people from disclosing their experiences to professionals such as child protection workers, school staff or the police. Therefore, multifaceted prevention efforts are needed to empower children and allow them to become more aware of their rights and of the nature of exploitation, especially in situations where it may be difficult to recognize potential manipulation or abuse. At the same time, it is essential to strengthen the capacity of professionals across sectors to identify signs of abuse and trafficking, and to refer children to appropriate services in line with the National Referral Mechanism.

Recommendations:

- **It is important to strengthen the understanding within the criminal justice system of what constitutes child trafficking**, what different forms of exploitation entail, and what are the consequences and manifestations of trauma. This should be integrated into the training provided to police officers, prosecutors and members of the judiciary. Judges would likely benefit from training involving law enforcement officers and prosecutors which would facilitate a better dialogue about the nature of the crime and the constituent elements of trafficking.
- **It should be stressed among criminal justice actors, that according to the Criminal Code (ch. 25: 3§), if the victim is a child, the means of trafficking need not be proven.** Furthermore, more attention should be paid in the criminal justice system to the inherent power imbalance in relations between an adult and a child (e.g., when evaluating whether the child had other alternatives or a possibility to detach themselves from the situation).
- **Victims of human trafficking, including children and young people, should not be punished for crimes they were forced to commit as a result of being trafficked.** It is important that police, prosecutors and judges receive training to better understand the non-punishment principle and apply it in practice.
- **Awareness of child trafficking and its links to other forms of exploitation should be strengthened among professionals working with children and young**

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people. They should also be informed on the National Referral Mechanism and procedures in place to guarantee rights for trafficked persons.

- **Securing the funding of NGOs is essential** to ensure low-threshold and anonymous services, outreach work, and hands-on support for victims.
- **All regional well-being counties should ensure they have an assigned structure/unit/person** which can be contacted and consulted in cases potentially involving human trafficking.
- **Sexual education should be strengthened to ensure all young people understand what sexual exploitation and violence are**, know their rights, and learn how to respect their own and others' boundaries and respond to risky situations. This should also include guidance on online safety, helping children recognise the risks of sharing personal images and communicating with strangers in digital environments.
- **Better data collection efforts are needed to evaluate the policy responses to child trafficking**. There is no information available on how many child victims of trafficking are assisted by well-being service counties if they have not been referred to National Assistance System.

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