SafeBorders

Combatting Child Trafficking

Belgium Country Report

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Table of contents

1. Introduction 5
2. Legal and policy framework 6
   2.1. Existing legal and policy framework on child trafficking 6
   2.2. Effectiveness of the framework 12
3. Institutional landscape 15
   3.1. Public institutions 15
   3.2. Civil society organizations 19
   3.3. Coordination and cooperation 23
4. Child trafficking in context 26
   4.1. Patterns and trends 26
   4.2. Victim profile and groups at risk 30
   4.3. Factors leading to vulnerability 32
5. Practical aspects of anti-trafficking efforts 33
   5.1. Detection, investigation and prosecution 34
   5.2. Victim support 37
   5.3. Prevention 41
6. International cooperation mechanisms 43
7. Conclusions and recommendations 47

GLOSSARY

Administration générale de l'aide à la jeunesse: regional youth welfare agency in the French-speaking community of Belgium.

CAW: Center for General Welfare in Flanders.

TSW/CLS: Social Laws Inspection

CPAS/OCMW: Public Centre for Social Welfare

Dienst Voogdij/Service des Tutelles: Guardianship service

Directive 2024/1712/EU: EU Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims.

DJSOC: Central Directorate for Combating Serious and Organized Crime

EEA: European Economic Area

EU: European Union

Fedasil: Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers

FJP: Federal Judiciary Police

FOD Justitie/SPF Justice: Federal Public Service Justice.

FOD Federal Public Service

GRETA: Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings

IBZ/Office des Étrangers: Immigration Office

ICU: Interdepartmental Coordination Unit

IOM: International Organization for Migration

MS: Member States

Myria: Belgian Federal Migration Centre and independent national rapporteur on human trafficking.

NAP: National Action Plan

NCB: National Central Bureau

NCMEC: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

NRM: National Referral Mechanism

ONSS/RSZ: Office National de Sécurité Sociale/Rijksdienst voor Sociale Zekerheid

OTF: Operational Task Forces

PPO: Public Prosecutor's Office

Project de loi / Wetsontwerp: Draft legislation

SIS: Schengen Information System

SIENA: Secure Information Exchange Network Application

TFEU: Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

UN: United Nation

UAC: Unaccompanied Child

Opgroeien: Regional youth welfare agency in the Flemish-speaking community

1. Introduction

Belgian governments have made the fight against human trafficking one of their key national priorities over the years.[1] Therefore, it is not surprising that the country has been regarded as a pioneer in this field.[2] Likewise, the new coalition agreement, finalized at the end of January 2025, reaffirmed the current government's commitment to strengthening its efforts to combat human trafficking.[3]

This country report aims to present an overview of Belgium's response to child trafficking between 2018 and 2025, highlighting both its strengths and challenges. It includes an analysis of the relevant policies, legal frameworks, and institutional mechanisms. The report also maps the key actors involved, identifies trends and patterns over the past decade, and examines how detection, investigation, prosecution, victim support, and prevention strategies are operationalized. Finally, it assesses Belgium's role in international cooperation efforts in this area and offers recommendations for improvement as well as inspiration for other countries.

The first phase of the research was carried out through desk research. Key documents reviewed include the Circular of 23 December 2016 relating to the implementation of multidisciplinary cooperation concerning victims of trafficking in human beings and/or certain aggravated forms of trafficking in human beings (hereafter: The Circular of 23 December 2016), the Belgian National Action Plan (2021–2025), and country reports from the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) and the Belgian Federal Migration Centre and independent national rapporteur on human trafficking in Belgium (Myria).

In the second phase of the research, qualitative data collection was carried out. A total of four focus groups were organized. One with civil society representatives (French-speaking, 3 participants), one with government officials (French-speaking, 2 participants), one with government officials (Dutch-speaking, 4 participants), and one with judicial and law enforcement authorities (French-speaking, 2 participants).[4] Additionally, 17 interviews were conducted with 20 individuals.

In total, the second phase engaged 31 participants, including representatives from government institutions (FOD Justitie/SPF Justice, Fedasil, Aide à la Jeunesse, IBZ/Office des étrangers, RSZ/ONSS), law enforcement (local police, federal judicial police, DJSOC), judicial authorities (youth judge, public prosecutors, and a lawyer), civil society organizations (victim support centers, the Red Cross, IOM, Caritas, Myria, psychologists), and an academic researcher specialized in human trafficking. This diverse stakeholder group provided a comprehensive view of the operational realities involved in addressing child trafficking in Belgium.

[1] FPS Justice, Service of Criminal Policy. 'Belgium fights human trafficking', 18 September 2024, accessed 30 September 2025, Belgium fights human trafficking | FPS Foreign Affairs - Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation.
[2] IOM, 'Fighting against Human Trafficking, n.d., Fighting Against Human Trafficking | IOM Belgium and Luxembourg.
[3] Mouton, M., 'het Nieuw Belgisch regeerakkoord: een rechtvaardiger rechtssysteem met de slachtoffers op de eerste plaats', 10 February 2025, 7 October 2025, Het Nieuw Belgisch regeerakkoord: een rechtvaardiger rechtssysteem met de slachtoffers op de eerste plaats - De Groote - De Man.
[4] Due to scheduling constraints and language considerations, given Belgium's three official languages, focus groups were small and complemented by individual interviews.

2. Legal and policy framework

2.1. Existing legal and policy framework on child trafficking

Belgium's legal and policy framework on human trafficking is anchored in international, European Union (EU) and national instruments. At the **international level**, Belgium has ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and its additional protocol relevant to trafficking: the Palermo Protocol.[5] Belgium also signed and ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.[6]

At **the EU level**, four key instruments have progressively harmonized national legislation: Joint Action 97/154/JHA (1997)[7], Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA (2002)[8], Directive 2011/36/EU[9], and its revision, Directive 2024/1712/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims (hereafter 'Directive 2024/1712/EU').[10]

In Belgium, the Belgian Criminal Code is the primary regulatory source for defining human trafficking. Currently, human trafficking is defined in Article 433quinquies.[11] The definition encompasses sexual, labor exploitation and forced begging, the illegal removal of organs, and forced criminal activity. Belgium has until 15 July 2026 to incorporate surrogacy exploitation, forced marriage, and illegal adoption[12] into its national legislation, as required by Directive 2024/1712/EU.[13]

A government official explained that forced marriage and illegal adoption will be criminalized under Belgium's new Criminal Code, which was adopted in 2024 and will enter into force on 8 April 2026.[14]. A draft law will be submitted in 2026 and will most likely include exploitation through surrogacy.[15] The Belgian definition excludes the coercive means listed in the Palermo Protocol. Instead, these are included as aggravating circumstances in subsequent articles of the Criminal Code.[16]

[5] General Assembly resolution 55/25, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 2000.
[6] Council of Europe Convention against Trafficking in Human Beings No. 197, 2005. The Convention, which strengthens victim protection and monitoring mechanisms, entered into force in Belgium on 1 August 2009 and is monitored by GRETA.
[7] Joint Action 97/154/JHA of 24 February 1997 adopted by the Council on the basis of Article K.3 of the Treaty on European Union concerning action to combat trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation of children, OJ L 63, 4.3.1997.
[8] Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA of 19 July 2002 on combating trafficking in human beings, OJ L 203, 1.8.2002.
[9] Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA, OJ L 101.
[10] Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, OJ L, 2024/1712.
[11] Belgian Criminal Code, Art. 433quiquites, which states that "§1. The offense of human trafficking constitutes the act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring, receiving, taking or transferring control over a person: 1° for the purposes of exploiting prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation; 2° for the purposes of exploiting begging; 3° for the purposes of labor or services, under conditions contrary to human dignity; 4° for the purposes of exploitation through the removal of organs or human bodily material; 5° or in order to have that person commit a crime or offense against their will. Except in the case referred to in 5, the consent of the person referred to in paragraph 1 to the intended or actual exploitation is irrelevant. […]"
[12] In 2024, the Belgian parliamentary assembly adopted a new Criminal Code which will come into force on 8 April 2026. The definition of human trafficking has been expanded with illegal adoption and forced marriage. In the new Criminal Code, provisions on human trafficking are found in Book 2, Chapter 7, Section 2.
[13] Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, as amended by Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024, OJ L, 2024/1712, art. 2§3.
[14]Interview with government official.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Belgian Criminal Code, Art. 433sexies, 433septies, 433octies.

2.1.1. National Action Plans

In line with Directive 2024/1712/EU[17], Belgium's strategic policy response is set out in five-year **National Action Plans** (NAPs).[18] Belgium's 2021–2025 NAP acknowledges both international guidance, such as the 2018 assessments and recommendations of GRETA and Myria. [19]

The 2021-2025 NAP particularly emphasizes the need to intensify and diversify training efforts on child trafficking for frontline actors, magistrates, guardians, and youth care services, an element in line with article 18b of Directive 2024/1712/EU.[20] The NAP also calls for an amendment to the Circular of 23 December 2016, which outlines the procedures to follow when a potential victim is detected, to clarify, among other things, the steps in cases involving children, while considering both federal and community-level competences. The amendment will also place greater emphasis on the fact that victims can also be Belgian nationals. [21] Additionally, the NAP proposes the development of a child-friendly tool to inform children about the special protection procedure (see 2.1.3). It also highlights the importance of raising awareness, particularly of trafficking in children, within the education sector and among young people. [22]

2.1.2. Multidisciplinary approach

The Belgian government has opted for a **multidisciplinary approach** to fight human trafficking. This approach brings together various stakeholders, such as law enforcement, immigration authorities, judicial bodies, and specialized victim support services.[23] Key components of this strategy are the **National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and the Act of 13 April 1995 on Trafficking of Human Beings**[24], which ensure that victims are properly identified, referred, and supported.[25] In doing so, Belgium seems to be ahead of the curve in meeting the requirements of Directive 2024/1712/EU, which requires Member States (MS) to formally install a NRM.[26] At the time of writing, the central contact point for the cross-border referral of victims, as required by Directive 2024/1712/EU[27], has not yet been designated.[28]

[17] Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, as amended by Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024, OJ L, 2024/1712, art. 19.
[18] FPS Justice, Service of Criminal Policy. 'Action Plan Fighting Human Trafficking', 2021, https://www.dsb-spc.be/doc/pdf/NAP_TIP_2021_2025_ENG.pdf.
[19] FPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. 'Belgium Fights Human Trafficking'.
[20] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024', 2024, https://emnbelgium.be/sites/default/files/publications/2024_MYRIA_Jaarverslag_Mensenhandel_en_mensensmokkel.pdf.
[21] FPS Justice, Service of Criminal Policy. 'Action Plan Fighting Human Trafficking'.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Myria, 'A Multidisciplinary Approach', n.d., accessed May 28 2025, https://www.myria.be/en/traff-and-smuggling/a-multidisciplinary-approach.
[24] Myria, 'annual report trafficking and smuggling of human beings: online', 2017, accessed 23 October 2025, 2017 Annual Report trafficking and smuggling of human beings: Online_ | Myria.
[25] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M3.
[26] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[27] Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, as amended by Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024, OJ L, 2024/1712, art. 11§4.
[28] Interview with a government official.

The **Circular of 23 December 2016** outlines the multidisciplinary cooperation[29], which applies to any potential victim, regardless of gender, age, nationality, or residence status. Belgian law determines whether a situation constitutes exploitation based on Belgian legal standards, regardless of how the situation may be in another country.[30]

The coordination of all Belgium's anti-trafficking efforts is overseen by the **Interdepartmental Coordination Unit for Combating Human Trafficking and Smuggling** (hereafter 'Interdepartmental Coordination Unit or ICU)[31], which brings together all the federal actors involved in combatting human trafficking and develops policies.[32] This could mean that in practical terms, Belgium is already fulfilling the new obligation under Directive 2024/1712/EU to establish a national coordinator responsible for assessing trafficking trends, evaluating policy impact, and preparing reports.[33] Namely, a policy coordination mechanism is in place under the authority of the Minister of Justice (the ICU), supported by reporting from governmental bodies and Myria. However, it remains to be seen whether this structure will align with Directive 2024/1712/EU's final implementation requirements.[34]

2.1.3. Special protection procedure

Articles 61/2 and 61/5[35] of the immigration law establish a **special protection procedure** for victims of human trafficking and set out the conditions for entering it.[36] Firstly, breaking off contacts with the suspected perpetrator(s). Secondly, compulsory accompaniment by an approved specialized reception center. Thirdly, cooperation with the judicial authorities, by making statements or lodging a complaint.[37]

Before entering the procedure, child victims are entitled to a **reflection period** of three months.[38] This period allows victims time to recover from their exploitation and consider whether they want to cooperate with authorities, without being penalized for any actions they took under duress. The reflection period is the only aspect of the protection procedure that differs from the one applied to adults, who are entitled to only 45 days of reflection. By providing a longer reflection period for children, Belgium aligns with European legislation, which requires MS to adapt procedures to the child's age and maturity, particularly by extending the reflection period.[39]

On the one hand, the special protection procedure allows victims to receive support from one of the three **specialized centers for victims of human trafficking**, including during the reflection period described above. Directive 2024/1712/EU highlights the need for adequate,

[29] The Circular of 23 December 2016 is currently under review.
[30] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M3.
[31] Myria, 'A Multidisciplinary Approach'.
[32] Document received by government official on coordination structure.
[33] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Myria, 'Slachtofferstatuut', n.d., accessed 23 October 2025, Slachtofferstatuut | Myria.
[36] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M1.
[37] Ibid.
[38] European Commission, 'Belgium', n.d., Belgium - European Commission.
[39] Myria. 'Annual Report 2018 Trafficking and Smuggling of Human Beings Minors at Major Risk', 2018, https://www.myria.be/files/RATEH-EN-2018-DEF.pdf.

accessible shelters, including appropriate housing tailored to children's needs,[40] and Belgian civil society has already been taking steps in this direction.

Since 2002, the Center Esperanto has been supporting child victims of trafficking, with backing from the French Community and Social Maribel funding through the *Office Nationale de Sécurité Sociale/Rijksdienst voor Sociale Zekerheid* (ONSS/RSZ).[41] In 2022, a second initiative, Meza, was launched by Minor-Ndako, a recognized facility within the youth assistance services of the Flemish Community, which provides shelter and guidance to children and young people in difficult living situations.[42] Although Esperanto and Meza play a key role in victim support for children, who are, in practice, referred to these two centers, they are not formally recognized as specialized centers for victims of human trafficking.[43] in 2022 GRETA emphasized the importance of such recognition.[44]

On the other hand, non-Belgian nationals who are identified as victims may be granted a **residence permit**.[45] First, they are eligible for a temporary residence permit valid for three months, with the possibility of a further three-month extension if needed for the investigation. This permit can be extended for an additional six months, depending on the evolution of the criminal procedure.[46] Then, they can obtain a permanent residence permit if one of the following conditions are met: either the magistrate includes human trafficking charges in their official requisitions, or the traffickers are convicted in court. At every stage of the process decisions must be made in accordance with the best interests of the child**,** as required under international and national child protection standards.[47]

In cases where proceedings are closed without further legal action, the special protection procedure ends, and the child may be left without a residence permit. This outcome can be perceived as unfair and disheartening for victims.[48] In practice, they may then become eligible for a residence permit on humanitarian grounds. This is informally known as the 'stop procedure', as it is not formally codified in law.[49] Although this procedure is rarely applied in practice, it is regarded as a (potential) good practice, particularly for victims who, by that time, are well integrated into the country.[50]

Being in the special protection procedure should not prevent an individual from applying for international protection. This is because foreign nationals may be recognized as refugees if they meet the conditions set out in the international conventions binding for Belgium.[51] In that sense, Belgium can be considered as already complying with Article 11a of Directive 2024/1712/EU. [52]

[40] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[41] Interview civil society representative.
[42] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024', 2024, https://emnbelgium.be/sites/default/files/publications/2024_MYRIA_Jaarverslag_Mensenhandel_en_mensensmokkel.pdf.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M2.
[46] Law of 15 December 1980 regarding the entry, residence, settlement and removal of aliens, art 61/3.
[47] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M1.
[48] Interview lawyer.
[49] Interview lawyer, interview public prosecutor.
[50] Interview public prosecutor.
[51] Law of 15 December 1980 regarding the entry, residence, settlement and removal of aliens, art 48.
[52] Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, as amended by Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024, OJ L, 2024/1712, Recital 21.

Unaccompanied children (UAC) who are not from the European Economic Area (EEA) must be assigned a **guardian**, regardless of their residency status.[53] Citizens of the EEA who are UAC are only eligible for a guardian if they are considered to be in a vulnerable situation.[54]

The victim is entitled to **financial assistance** throughout the entire protection procedure, equivalent to the social welfare allowance provided by the Public Centre for Social Welfare (*CPAS/OCMW)*.[55]

2.1.4. Prosecution

Two key elements are required to constitute the offense. First, the material element, which means that the perpetrator must have had the intention to exploit the victim in one of the legally defined ways at the time of the recruitment or other related actions. Importantly, the exploitation does not have to be completed for the offense to be established. Second, the moral element, meaning that the perpetrator must be aware that their actions are unlawful and must act with a specific intent to exploit the victim.[56]

Currently, perpetrators may face **imprisonment** from one to five years and a fine ranging from €500 to €50,000. Attempting to commit human trafficking is also punishable, with imprisonment ranging from one to three years and a fine of €100 to €10,000. The fine is applied per victim.[57]

In 2024, the Belgian parliamentary assembly adopted a new Criminal Code and will enter into force on 8 April 2026. Human trafficking will then be covered under Article 258.[58]A system of eight penalty levels will be established. Human trafficking will carry a base penalty of level three, which includes three to five years of imprisonment. When the victim is a minor, the penalty raises to level four. Level four consists of imprisonment of, on the one hand, more than five years to a maximum of ten years. On the other, it consists of treatment under deprivation of liberty[59]can be replaced by level two or three. Fines may be imposed per victim, and additional aggravating factors, such as the victim's death or involvement in organized crime, can further elevate the penalty to level five.[60]

While Belgian law does not specifically define trafficking in children, it is considered an aggravating circumstance, resulting in harsher sentences for the perpetrators involved.[61]

A victim of human trafficking who has committed offences (‘infractions’) as a direct consequence of their exploitation will not be prosecuted for those acts. This is currently codified by a **non-punishment clause** in Article 433quinquies of the Criminal Code.[62] Under the new Criminal Code, this clause will be established as an autonomous provision in Article 264. This means that victims of human trafficking who commit offences punishable by a level one to six

[53] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M6.
[54] Interview civil society representative.
[55] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M5.
[56] Human trafficking must be distinguished from smuggling. Smuggling, defined in Article 77bis of the Law of 15 December 1980 regarding the entry, residence, settlement and removal of aliens, involves facilitating the entry, transit, or stay of a non-EU national in breach of immigration laws for financial or material gain.
[57] Belgian Criminal Code.
[58] Myria, ‘Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024’.
[59] Treatment under deprivation of liberty is an alternative form of detention for individuals who, for example, have medical or psychological conditions, and are under deprivation of liberty.
[60] Belgian Criminal Code, book I of the new Criminal code, art. 36. This new Criminal Code is set to enter into force in April 2026.
[61] Belgian Criminal Code, art. 433septies.
[62] Belgian Criminal Code, art 433quinquies §5.

penalty, as a direct result of their exploitation, shall not be punished for those offences.[63] In this regard, Belgium can be considered as already compliant with article 8 of Directive 2024/1712/EU.[64] The clearer and more systematic integration of the non-punishment principle for victims in the new Criminal Code is highlighted as a good practice by Myria to provide further clarification and to emphasize the broad scope of this principle. [65]

The new Article 18a of Directive 2024/1712/EU[66], which establishes an obligation for MS to criminalize the use of services when knowingly provided by victims of human trafficking is currently not reflected in the (new) Belgian criminal code. In fact, Myria has raised questions regarding how Belgium intends to transpose and implement this provision in practice, particularly in light of the recent reforms of its sexual criminal law.[67] That is to say, in 2024 the Belgian Federal Parliament adopted a reform of sexual criminal law that, among other changes, decriminalizes certain forms of third-party involvement in sex work and allows sex workers to be employed under specific conditions. Nevertheless, the engagement of children in sex work remains prohibited.[68]

In Belgium, the new Criminal Code includes provisions specifically dedicated to the use of information and communication technologies. However, it does not explicitly establish the use of information and communication technologies as an aggravating circumstance, specifically in relation to the offence of trafficking.[69] It remains to be seen whether Belgium's legislation is in that regard fully complied with Article 4 of Directive 2024/1712/EU. [70] Most likely this will be one of the points addressed in the draft proposal relating to the transposition of the directive prepared by the Ministry of Justice.[71]

In cases where judicial proceedings lead to the conviction of perpetrators, victims may seek **financial compensation** through the same courts handling the criminal case. Compensation claims can encompass both material and moral damages, with the court determining the extent of harm suffered.[72] When perpetrators are insolvent or unable to pay, victims in Belgium have the option to apply to the *Commissie financiële hulp/Commission pour l'aide financière aux victimes d'actes intentionnels de violence* for financial assistance.[73]

In the new coalition agreement, the government will examine the possibility of increasing compensation for moral damages. It also intends to advance payments to victims and later recover the costs from the perpetrator or their insurer. Similarly, as with material damages, the government will be able to reclaim therapy costs from the offender. This approach aims to ensure that victims can access the necessary support more quickly and without financial barriers.[74]

[63] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[64] Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, as amended by Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024, OJ L, 2024/1712, art. 8.
[65] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[66] Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, as amended by Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024, OJ L, 2024/1712, art. 18a.
[67] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[68] FOD Werkgelegenheid, Arbeid en Sociaal Overleg, 'Arbeidsovereenkomst voor sekswerker', n.d., Arbeidsovereenkomst voor sekswerker | Federale Overheidsdienst Werkgelegenheid - Arbeid en Sociaal Overleg.
[69] Article 165, Article 174, Article 179, Article 340.
[70] Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, as amended by Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024, OJ L, 2024/1712, art. 4.
[71] Interview civil society representative.
[72] Interview lawyer.
[73] Interview lawyer.
[74] Mouton, M., 'het Nieuw Belgisch regeerakkoord: een rechtvaardiger rechtssysteem met de slachtoffers op de eerste plaats'.

2.1.5. Data collection

Myria has focused on child victims in their annual reports. However, in their 2024 report, it was the first time that data from Esperanto and Meza were analyzed in detail.[75] The approach may serve as a good practice towards meeting the requirement of Directive 2024/1712/EU, which mandates that each MS establishes a system for collecting, generating, and providing anonymized data based on various indicators, such as victims, suspects, accused persons, judgments, and convictions, in order to monitor the effectiveness of anti-trafficking measures.[76] To date, there is no centralized data system collecting all data on human trafficking in a uniform way. Although this was once intended, privacy concerns[77], availability of funding to undertake a complex IT-interoperability challenge, quality and complementarity of the available data have prevented the linking of the available separate datasets.[78]

2.2. Effectiveness of the framework

2.2.1. On detection and identification

Belgian actors face difficulties when it comes to detecting children who are victim of human trafficking children.[79] While none of the interviewees could specify a clear reason for this, several explanations were offered. One explanation is that the existing outputs are not tailored for children. A closer examination of the child-focused objectives in the NAP 2021–2025 reveals that for example, while awareness brochures have been developed for Ukrainian youth[80], no other child-specific awareness materials have been produced to date.[81] A promised child-friendly tool to guide children through the trafficking procedure[82] also remains unavailable.

Moreover, while trainings on human trafficking for judicial authorities and frontline actors exist, they tend to occur sporadically and have limited or no focus on children. Limited capacity due to the high workload also hinders participation in these trainings.[83] As a result, an awareness gap persists.[84] Particularly, the principle of non-punishment remains insufficiently known, leading to reluctance among both victims and professionals to exchange information essential for identifying victims of trafficking.[85] Likewise, awareness of child-specific and psychological factors that may impede minors' participation in proceedings also remains limited.[86]

[75] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[76] Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, as amended by Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024, OJ L, 2024/1712, art. 19a.
[77] Interview government official.
[78] Comment civil society representative.
[79] Interview public prosecutor.
[80] Interview government official.
[81] Interview government official.
[82] FPS Justice, Service of Criminal Policy. 'Action Plan Fighting Human Trafficking'.
[83] During interviews, government officials acknowledged these deficiencies and confirmed that children will be a central focus in the upcoming National Action Plan (2026–2030).
[84] Interviews civil society representatives, law enforcement officials, youth judge, public prosecutor.
[85] Interview law enforcement officials and civil society representatives.
[86] Interview law enforcement officials, civil society representatives, judicial authority.

Another explanation concerns the inherent complexity and often hidden nature of the trafficking signs, making identification difficult even for well-informed professionals.[87] The effectiveness of the response also heavily depends on the individual mindset of the professional, as well as the context in which they work. Responses also vary by location. For example, in smaller towns or rural areas with limited resources, detecting efforts are often weaker than in larger cities.[88]

Finally, other stakeholders pointed out that, although there is evidence of children's exploitation, they are not always identified as victims of human trafficking, which distorts official statistics and, thus, probably conceals the true extent of 'child trafficking' as an act in Belgium (see further 2.2.3.). [89]

2.2.2. On protection of child victims

Once a child enters the special protection procedure, the support provided by the centers for victims of human trafficking is considered highly effective. Sometimes, victims who have successfully moved on, they return to the center, even though most prefer to leave that part of their lives behind. In general, their time at the center is regarded as a particularly significant period, and former residents provide positive feedback about their experience.[90] However, interviewees highlighted that many children struggle to access this procedure, leaving them without the sufficient support and protection they need.[91]

The eligibility criteria to enter the protection procedure are narrow and often fail to reflect the realities of the cases. For example, the requirement to sever all contact with the trafficker is especially difficult in cases involving, for example, trauma bonding or family ties.[92] It is also common for victims to not see themselves as such,[93] or to want to reject the label of 'victim'.[94] It may also not always be in the best interests of the child to enter into the protection procedure, for example, if they have the option of other procedures.[95] Finally, the requirement to cooperate with the investigation puts enormous pressure on a child to engage with legal procedures they may not be ready for. [96]

While a government official and a public prosecutor stated that the cooperation requirement may be interpreted flexibly, a civil society representative disagreed.[97] One civil society representative even called for the importance of this collaboration to be reconsidered, suggesting that other factors, including the child's psychological state, should be taken into account. For example, understanding the role that lying plays in children's coping or survival strategies, should serve as important indicators.[98] The flexible interpretation of the reflection period is seen as effective, as illustrated by a case where a child victim, after 50 days rest and care, was able to provide profound statements to law enforcement[99], Myria has nonetheless

[87] Interviews civil society representatives, government official, law enforcement official.
[88] Interview law enforcement officials and civil society representatives.
[89] Interview civil society representatives and public prosecutors.
[90] Interviews civil society representatives, law enforcement officials, government officials.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Interview civil society representatives.
[93] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[94] Interview civil society representative.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[97] Interview civil society representative, government official, public prosecutor.
[98] Interview civil society representative.
[99] Myria. 'Annual Report 2018 Trafficking and Smuggling of Human Beings Minors at Major Risk'.

repeatedly called for reform of this protection system to better reflect a child-centered, rights-based approach. [100]

This is all the more important because, without formal identification as trafficking victims, children are excluded from specialized support services. Also, the overburdened youth welfare system lacks the capacity to provide them with adequate alternatives.[101] Interviewees highlighted that many children remain completely outside the detection, identification, and protection system (see chapter 4).[102]

2.2.3. On prosecution

While the prosecution framework includes strong mechanisms, such as the penalties outlined in the Criminal Code and the non-punishment clause, challenges limit its effectiveness in prosecuting trafficking cases, delivering consistent justice and adequate support for victims. Public prosecutors face challenges in gathering sufficient legal evidence to meet the trafficking definition provided in Article 433quinquies of the Criminal Code. Particularly, providing the proof of the specific intention to exploit the victims is considered problematic, as it is a moral element that is difficult to demonstrate in practice.[103] There is also a lack of clarity regarding the definition of trafficking, which can discourage lawyers from litigating based on the trafficking offence, particularly when other parties consider that trafficking has not occurred.[104]

As a result, perpetrators are sometimes charged with other, related criminal offenses that carry similar penalties.[105] While this alternative prosecution approach may not substantially affect the perpetrators, it has repercussions for victims. Victims in such cases can be denied access to support services provided by specialized trafficking centers, and it undermines the moral value of recognition. Additionally, such cases are not recorded as human trafficking in official statistics, which can distort the overall picture and, thus, hinder policy responses.

Sentencing outcomes vary depending on the judge and the specificities of each case, with some judges being more lenient and others more radical than those requested by the public prosecutor. The deterrent effect of sentencing also fluctuates, particularly in relation to suspended sentences, whereby the judge convicts and imposes a penalty but defers its execution for a specified period. This form of sentencing is viewed by public prosecutors as having a notable impact on deterrence. According to prosecutorial experience, repeated offenses appear to be relatively rare.[106]

Having access to the European Criminal Record under the Council Framework Decision 2008/675/JHA of 24 July 2008 on taking account of convictions in the EU MSs in the course of new criminal proceedings[107] is seen as a clear added value, as it allows authorities to

[100] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[101] Interview civil society representatives.
[102] Interview youth judge, civil society representatives.
[103] Interview civil society representatives and public prosecutors.
[104] Interview lawyer.
[105] Interviews public prosecutors.
[106] Interview public prosecutor.
[107] Council Framework Decision 2008/675/JHA of 24 July 2008 on taking account of convictions in the Member States of the European Union in the course of new criminal proceedings, OJ L 220.

determine whether an individual has prior convictions in other countries. This information can influence the severity of the sentence imposed.[108]

2.2.4. On cooperation

Belgium's Interdepartmental Coordination Unit is responsible for overseeing implementation and interagency collaboration, however, the country's federal structure complicates effective coordination. Interviewees highlighted that child trafficking is a cross-cutting, intersectoral issue. Although general awareness of human trafficking has increased, the efforts across sectors remain too fragmented. While cooperation between sectors does exist, it is typically organized on an *ad hoc* basis by the involved parties themselves, rather than being formally coordinated or mandated.[109] Progress is being made, but it remains slow.[110] In this regard, the forthcoming new Circular on multidisciplinary cooperation, provided it is well disseminated and known among professionals, is seen as a welcome reform to clarify roles and improve interagency collaboration in protecting child victims.[111]

3. Institutional landscape

3.1. Public institutions

3.1.1. Law Enforcement

Law enforcement plays a vital role in detecting victims and conducting investigations that lead to the identification of victims and the prosecution of perpetrators. There is a dual-level policing system, local and federal, that work in a complementary manner.[112] The division of responsibilities is regulated by the Law of 7 December 1998.[113] Within the **local police**, there are specialized teams, often interconnected, focusing on areas such as children, disappearances, or human trafficking.[114] However, this is not always the case, especially in smaller towns.[115] At the **federal level**, each judicial district is served by members of the **Federal Judicial Police (FJP)**, a branch of the Federal Police that focuses on combating organized crime.[116] While the FJP can carry out proactive operations, they primarily focus on investigating human trafficking cases, especially when organized (international) networks are involved.[117]

[108] Interview public prosecutor.
[109] Interviews civil society representatives.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Interview civil society representatives and government officials.
[112] Law of 7 December 1998 organizing an integrated police service, structured at two levels, art. 3.
[113] Interview law enforcement officials.
[114] Interview law enforcement official.
[115] Interview civil society representative.
[116] Federale politie, 'Federale Gerechtelijke Politie', 2025, accessed 5 September 2025, Federale Gerechtelijke Politie | Federale Politie.
[117] Interviews law enforcement officials.

Children are considered a priority. However, factors such as the capacity and scale of a case influence the extent and level at which the investigation is conducted.[118] Detecting potential victims and collecting evidence to escalate the investigation to a higher level is perceived to be complex. For example, children may be suspicious of the police and therefore reluctant to share information.[119] The use of technology also plays a role. One of the most significant capacity gaps lies in the inability of police services to keep pace with these rapid evolutions, particularly on social media platforms. Although trainings and community-based projects, such as project Kombi, exist to gain knowledge on trafficking, strengthen investigative skills, and build trust between the police and the public, time and resources are needed, both of which are often limited due to the heavy workload of police officers.[120]

3.1.2. Inspection Services

As an independent agency, responsible for collecting and managing social security contributions, the ***RSZ/ONSS*** is tasked with flagging potential human trafficking situations, for example, when detecting fraudulent social security practices, such as failure of paying social security contributions or social dumping. In each provincial directorate, a **specialized ECOSOC-team** conducts targeted inspections in high-risk sectors.[121] While their work does not focus exclusively on human trafficking, ECOSOC teams are tasked with investigations in labor exploitation, typically in cooperation with specialized units of the Federal Police and at the request of the labor prosecutor.[122] In line with the Belgian government's prioritization of the fight against fraud[123], the ECOSOC teams have received increased staffing over the past two years, with 10 new staff members in 2023 and a further four in 2024.[124] Nevertheless, detecting children is perceived to be challenging. Possible reasons could be that children are often not declared in official records and that exploitation often occurs in highly informal or private spheres, such as domestic work, where inspections are particularly hard to carry out.[125]

According to one interviewee, ***Toezicht op Sociale wetten (TSW)/ Controle des Lois Sociales (CLS)***, part of the Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue might be better positioned to detect the presence of children, as it verifies compliance between employers and employees regarding labor laws, including youth employment regulations.[126]

3.1.3. Judicial Authorities

Each judicial district has one **Public Prosecutor's Office** (PPO) responsible for authorizing investigative actions by law enforcement, formally identifying victims, and prosecuting offenses on behalf of the State. PPOs handle cases involving sexual exploitation, forced begging, organ removal, and criminal exploitation. Cases related to economic exploitation fall under the jurisdiction of the Labour Auditor's Office.[127] Additionally, each district has at least one

[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Interview government official.
[122] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[123] Interview inspection service officials.
[124] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[125] Interview government official.
[126] Interview government official.
[127] Belgian Judicial Code, art. 155.

designated **reference prosecutor** who specializes in human trafficking cases.[128] In the Region of Brussels-Capital, there is even a reference prosecutor who specializes in child victims of human trafficking.[129] Each reference prosecutor usually handles (a) particular form(s) of trafficking, but cases are assigned based on a rotation system, depending on who is on duty at the time.[130] For complex, cross-district or international cases, the **Federal Prosecutor's Office** may take jurisdiction.[131]

In general, public prosecutors receive a basic training module on human trafficking. Additional training opportunities are limited and offered irregularly. As a result, cases are typically referred to a reference prosecutor when there are clear indicators of human trafficking. This means that everything hinges on early detection. If a public prosecutor handles a case without recognizing the signs of human trafficking, the case may not be flagged as such.[132]

Throughout the process, **youth judges** play a crucial role in safeguarding the child's well-being. However, they only intervene when seized by a public prosecutor. This means that the prosecutor may refer the case to the youth judge if the situation appears serious and voluntary child welfare services are either insufficient or refused by the child or their carer/guardian. Voluntary assistance is always considered the first option by the competent youth services.[133]

There are no youth judges specialized in human trafficking, cases are assigned on a rotational basis to duty judges. While youth judges receive mandatory training, specialized instruction on trauma and the psychological aspects of trafficking is generally lacking. This gap can hinder effective detection, as youth judges are key actors in identifying potential victims of human trafficking, because they interact with children involved in criminal activities or in vulnerable situations.[134] Additionally, youth judges face a heavy workload that limits their time to engage in specialized training. Finally, finding appropriate protection placements for children is increasingly difficult due to the saturation of the youth care system.[135]

3.1.4. Immigration Office

Office des étrangers/IBZ holds exclusive authority to process and issue residence permits for victims of human trafficking who have been formally recognized as such by the PPO[136]. It is also the sole body authorized to issue binding instructions to municipal authorities regarding the issuance of residence documents. Additionally, it is the first authority encountered by UAC, if they apply for asylum, and therefore plays an important role in providing them with information. However, children are often already overwhelmed, both by the large amount of information they receive and by the trauma they may have experienced during their journey. As a result, *Office des étrangers/IBZ* is generally reluctant to share this information at this early stage, unless they perceive clear and immediate relevance to the child's situation.[137]

[128] Interview Public Prosecutor and law enforcement officials.
[129] Interview public prosecutor.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Interviews public prosecutors.
[133] Interview youth judge.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Law of 15 December 1980 regarding the entry, residence, settlement and removal of aliens, Belgian Official Journal, 31 December 1980 Art. 61/2, 61/3, 61/4, 61/5.
[137] Interview government official.

Within the Immigration Office, the **MINTEH department** is specifically responsible for managing procedures related to trafficking cases.[138] Training for frontline services within the *Office des étrangers/IBZ* includes both theoretical and practical components, focused on identifying indicators of human trafficking. However, this is typically just one component within a broader training session. These training courses are also extended to the staff at the municipal level.[139]

3.1.5. Guardianship Service

The **Dienst Voogdij/ Service des Tutelles** is responsible for assigning a guardian to UAC. The guardian plays an essential role in monitoring the child's situation and safeguarding their rights and well-being throughout legal and administrative procedures. Guardians are encouraged to meet with the child at least once a month. During the initial phase of guardianship, these meetings are often more frequent to allow time to build a relationship of trust.[140]

Guardians receive general training on working with UAC, including a human trafficking component, and can seek guidance or support from partner organizations to help identify and respond to potentially concerning situations. Those who specifically register to act as guardians for victims of human trafficking receive additional specialized training. Children who are EU nationals are assigned a guardian only if they are considered to be in a vulnerable situation.[141]

3.1.6. Federal Public Service Justice

FOD Justitie/ SFF Justice holds political responsibility for shaping Belgium's criminal justice policy. Within *FOD Justitie/SPF Justice* the **Service for Criminal Policy** is responsible for developing criminal justice policies. This service includes a Human Trafficking Unit.[142]

3.1.7. Regional Youth welfare authorities

The three Communities of Belgium hold competence over youth policy and services.[143] In the Flemish Community**, *Opgroeien*** serves as the central agency for child welfare, youth care, and family support. Within the French Community, *the* ***Administration générale de l'Aide à la Jeunesse*** is responsible. In the German-speaking Community, youth welfare services are managed by the Ministry of the German-speaking Community, specifically through its Department of Family and Social Affairs. In each child protection service (*Service des équipes mobiles d'accompagnement* (EMA), *Institution Publique de Protection de la Jeunesse (IPPJ), Service Aide à la Jeunesse/Service de Protection de la Jeunesse)*, of the French Community system, a designated human trafficking officer is appointed. This officer acts as a link between

[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Interview civil society representative.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Interview government official.
[143] Ibid.

the professionals in their services, partner services specialized in human trafficking, and Aide à La Jeunesse. Specific training on human trafficking is provided to all staff within the administration every three years.[144][145]

3.1.8. Communal authorities

The **mayor** of a municipality may order the closure of an establishment for up to six months if there are serious indications of human trafficking. This decision can only be taken after consulting with judicial authorities and giving the person responsible an opportunity to present their defense. The decision is subject to appeal before the Council of State. [146]

3.1.9. Reception Centres for asylum seekers

Reception centers, managed by the *Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum seekers* (***Fedasil***) or the ***Red Cross***[147], particularly the observation and orientation centers, as well as centers exclusively for UAC***,*** provide shelter, social, and medical support to children applying for asylum in Belgium, a group considered at risk of exploitation (see chapter 4).

Based on observed vulnerabilities during an initial stay of about a month (in normal circumstances), children are referred to either collective reception centers or youth welfare services. For example, Fedasil co-finances placements with partners such as *Opgroeien*, where children are accommodated in small living groups. There have been cases where individuals falsely presented themselves as relatives of children residing in centers or living groups, and children have expressed loyalty to criminal networks despite recognizing the associated risks. These dynamics, combined with the open nature of the structures and the challenge of voluntary participation of children, make effective protection challenging. A lack of adequate staffing in the youth sector and Fedasil further hampers the ability to provide the necessary support.[148]

3.2. Civil society organizations

3.2.1. Specialized reception centers

Belgium has two reception centers supporting victims of child trafficking. Namely, **Esperanto** in Wallonia and **Meza** in Flanders. Esperanto provides support for up to 20 victims of human trafficking and honor-related violence. Meza primarily focuses on girls aged 14 to 18, with a

[144] Ibid.
[145] Opgroeien didn't respond to our requests for an interview.
[146] Law of 28 December 2012 inserting article 134quinquies into the New municipal law, relating to the police powers of the mayor in the fight against human trafficking and smuggling networks.
[147] Fedasil, 'Reception Centres', n.d, accessed May 28 2025, https://www.fedasil.be/en/reception-centres.
[148] Interview government official.

particular emphasis on sexual exploitation, and has 6 places.[149] These centers provide predominantly administrative, legal, socio-psychological and housing support.[150]

In practice, these centers collaborate with the three adult centers, PAG-ASA (Brussels), Payoké (Flanders) and Sürya (Wallonia), particularly regarding residence permit applications through the Immigration Office, as only these centers are authorized to do so. When a victim is identified, it is also mandatory to first contact one of these recognized adult centers, which then facilitates referrals to Esperanto or Meza.[151]

However, according to some interviewees, this referral process is perceived as cumbersome.[152] Data also shows that children are mostly referred to Esperanto by other agencies and not through one of the adult centers necessarily. As PAG-ASA and Minor-Ndako work closely together with Meza, there's a more structural referral mechanism at work, but this seems to be less the case for young people who receive support in Esperanto. They are not necessarily referred by one of the three centers, nor are they put in contact by Esperanto with one of three centers, for example when the child isn't interested in the special protection procedure.[153]

Esperanto operates under an educational project approved by the Youth Aid services of the French Community, while Meza was established by Minor-Ndako, a youth care organization, to fill a gap in the Flemish Community that previously lacked a dedicated shelter for child victims of human trafficking. In Flanders, there are no specialized centers for male victims of trafficking, or for other specific victim groups, such as victims of grooming. This lack of specialization can hinder rehabilitation, as it is often inappropriate to house all victims together or to place, for instance, male victims in centers designed for girls.[154] However, exceptions are made by Meza (i.e. sometimes also youngsters who are not part of their primary target groups are taken in), depending on the availability of places and the youngsters already present in the shelter.[155]

3.2.2. Independent rapporteur on human trafficking

Myria issues recommendations based on their evaluation reports during the development of government action plans and advises both the government and field actors. It also provides input to Parliaments on proposed legislation. Myria is tasked with producing an independent and publicly available annual report assessing the progress and results of Belgium's efforts to combat human trafficking. In addition, it has the authority to file civil claims in court in order to stimulate the fight against trafficking in human beings and, if necessary, request further investigation.[156]

[149] Interview civil society representatives.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M6.
[152] Interview civil society representatives.
[153] Interview civil society representative.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.

3.2.3. *Lawyers*

Legal aid may be provided free of charge through legal aid services (formerly called ***pro deo services***). Lawyers are expected to uphold and defend the rights of the child throughout all legal proceedings. Human trafficking is not included in the core curriculum of CAPA training (Certificate of Aptitude for Lawyers in Belgium, organized by the Bar of each judicial district), and there is no mandatory specialized training on the subject for lawyers. As a result, many lack knowledge of the specific vulnerabilities of trafficked children, the psychological impact of trauma, and the relevant child protection frameworks.[157]

3.2.4. *Casa Legal*

Casa Legal is Belgium's first non-profit legal hub that brings together lawyers, social workers, psychologists, jurists, and mediators within one center to provide holistic legal and psychosocial support. Inspired by the model of community health centers, the organization addresses each case through a multidisciplinary lens. While Casa Legal primarily assists adult victims of trafficking, particularly in cases of forced labor, it is open to expanding its services to child victims. Victims are typically referred by NGOs or the legal aid system, though in some cases, trafficking is only identified during the handling of unrelated issues.[158]

3.2.5. *Child Focus*

Child Focus is Belgium's hotline for missing and sexually exploited children. The organization plays a key role in prevention and follows up cases of missing children, which are often linked to trafficking. In this capacity, Child Focus acts as a bridge between victims' families, the police, judicial authorities, and the guardianship service.[159]

3.2.6. International Organization for Migration (IOM Belgium and Luxembourg)

The **IOM Belgium** assists migrants, including those victims of trafficking, in returning to their country of origin through its Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program. In this process, the IOM collaborates with specialized reception centers, NGOs, and authorities to ensure a safe return, support reintegration, and prevent re-victimization. The IOM Belgium also supports the return of Belgian victims who have been exploited abroad. However, this is funded by the host country, not the Belgian government. Beyond return assistance, the IOM is active in policy and advocacy work, awareness-raising campaigns, and training. Additionally, the organization runs projects focused on social inclusion and the protection of UAC.[160]

[157] Interview lawyer.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Interview civil society representative.
[160] Ibid.

3.2.7. End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT) Belgium

ECPAT Belgium focuses on the prevention of child trafficking and exploitation. As part of the international ECPAT network, it trains frontline professionals to detect exploitation among children and creates awareness tools for young people in accessible language, informing them of their rights in Belgium.[161]

3.2.8. Samilia Foundation

Samilia Foundation works to raise awareness among vulnerable groups, the public, and the media about human trafficking. It operates both in countries of origin and destination, aiming to prevent trafficking through education and public engagement, particularly around emerging forms of exploitation.[162]

3.2.9. Caritas Belgium

Caritas focuses on UAC in transit offering shelter and guidance through the Xtra MENA project.[163] The project emerged from the observation that many of these children lack access to reliable information and fear engaging with formal systems. Establishing trust was therefore identified as a key priority. To address this, Caritas helped create a reception model where children are not required to disclose their identity, allowing young people to come and go freely without fear or pressure. Two reception centers were set up as part of the initiative, managed respectively by the civil society initiatives *BelRefugees* and *Samu Social*. Children can stay for a maximum of three months. The two centers together offer approximately 60 to 80 places.[164] Additionally, Caritas Belgium provides support to guardians and facilitates voluntary return.

3.2.10. Macadam

Macadam is a frontline service where young people can simply come to relax and hang out. There is no obligation to talk, but if they choose to, that option is available. The main goal is not intervention, but rather to offer a sense of safety and stability. For vulnerable groups such as street-involved youth, who are often targeted for criminal exploitation, this kind of low-threshold initiative plays an important role.[165]

3.2.11. Foyer

Foyer is an organization that works with mediators to facilitate communication and cooperation between Roma families, vulnerable groups at risk of exploitation, and public institutions, services, and schools. Their work aims to strengthen the social inclusion of these communities

[161] ECPAT, 'ECPAT Belgique | Éradiquons L'exploitation Sexuelle Des Enfants', n.d., accessed 15 May 2025, https://ecpat.be/.
[162] Samilia Foundation 'Human Trafficking', n.d., accessed 15 May 2025, http://samilia.org/.
[163] Caritas, 'Xtra MENA: niet-begeleide minderjarigen op doortocht in België en de nood aan pre-opvang', 2021, accessed 25 September 2025, NBMV-in-transit-rapport-Xtra-MENA-NL.pdf.
[164] Interview civil society representative.
[165] Ibid.

through intercultural mediation, home visits, community outreach, support in education and employment pathways, and neighborhood-based actions in collaboration with local partners.[166]

3.3. Coordination and cooperation

3.3.1. Federal Cooperation mechanisms

The **Interdepartmental Coordination Unit** brings together representatives from key federal departments involved in anti-trafficking to develop, align and monitor national anti-trafficking policies. As part of the ICU, a **bureau** meets monthly to exchange information, for example on emerging trends. The bureau can also issue recommendations to the ICU. Not all concerns discussed within the bureau escalate to the ICU, and both the bureau and the ICU are generally not regarded as highly operational bodies.[167] Esperanto and Meza are not official members of the ICU or the bureau. However, along with other relevant civil society organizations, they can be invited to participate in meetings of the Bureau, specialized sub-group/working groups or bilateral meetings.[168]

3.3.2. Cross-cutting Cooperation

At the time of writing, practical, day-to-day cooperation among all relevant actors across federal, regional, and local levels largely takes place within the framework of the **Circular of 23 December 2016.** However, this Circular is currently under revision (see chapter 1). The dissemination of the Circular of 23 December 2016 is done through various partners within the Federal Public Service (FOD), who are in turn aiming to collaborate with the communities and regions to determine the most effective channels for reaching specific sectors. Nevertheless, accessibility remains a challenge, as the Circular is lengthy and not easy to navigate.[169]

In addition to the formally regulated national cooperation framework, collaboration also emerges organically between stakeholders themselves, some of these partnerships are formalized, while others operate on a more *ad hoc* basis. For example, Child Focus has a **special protocol** in place with the guardianship service outlining the procedures to follow when a minor goes missing.[170] Additionally, Child Focus has established a separate information-sharing protocol with law enforcement and the PPO to facilitate the exchange of information in such cases. This protocol is frequently cited as a model of effective collaboration. Stakeholders have expressed interest in developing a similar framework specifically for UAC who are victims of sexual exploitation.[171]

On a more informal, yet structurally embedded basis, reference prosecutors in each judicial district hold **regular meetings** with law enforcement. In Brussels, for example, these meetings

[166] Brussels Platform Geestelijke Gezondheid, 'Foyer – Dienst Roma en Woonwagenbewoners', n.d., accessed 5 September 2025, FOYER - DIENST ROMA EN WOONWAGENBEWONERS | Brussels Platform Geestelijke Gezondheid.
[167] Interview government official.
[168] Interview civil society representative.
[169] Interview government official.
[170] Interview civil society representative.
[171] Interview law enforcement official.

take place every three months.[172] Further collaborative efforts can be seen in a **project** currently being implemented by the *Office des étrangers/IBZ*, in cooperation with its dispatching service and Fedasil. This initiative aims to enable immediate reporting of identified vulnerabilities. This is done through an alert form completed at the registration center when specific vulnerabilities or risk levels are observed. Then, the Guardianship Service can, for example, promptly appoint a guardian; the dispatching service can arrange appropriate accommodation, and, where necessary, the PPO is informed for further intervention. There are also plans to meet with the PPO and juvenile magistrates to discuss which types of cases or vulnerabilities they consider important to be flagged. In parallel, **working groups** are ongoing, focusing on data sharing, vulnerability detection, and assessment.[173]

There is also active **information exchange** between the *RSZ/ONSS* and law enforcement. This occurs either via formal requests or when *RSZ/ONSS* is directly involved in investigations under the authority of the same magistrate.[174]

While overall cooperation among stakeholders is generally strong, interviewees highlighted that finding the right balance between upholding confidentiality and enabling timely, protective intervention remains a challenge.[175] Especially, professionals within the youth care sector may hesitate to take action when trafficking is suspected, prioritizing the preservation of trust and the young person's consent. A decree also stipulates that no information may be shared between Service Aide à la Jeunesse (SAJ) and *Service de Protection de la Jeunesse*, which is the Youth Protection Service (SPJ) and handles judicial interventions.[176][177]many consider this unfortunate and inconsistent, as it leads to a loss of information between services.[178] Legislation on professional confidentiality is foreseen to be amended to better protect victims of sexual or domestic violence, according to the 2025 coalition agreement.[179]

Professionals in specialized centers operate under a framework of shared professional secrecy, which is systematically explained to the young person upon arrival. If it is truly crucial, they explain to the child why it is necessary to share it.[180] Other challenges include high staff turnover and limited resources. [181] Several interviewees also highlighted the need for joint training sessions involving all relevant actors to reduce fragmentation, improve mutual understanding, and reinforce intersectoral coordination.[182]

3.3.3. Cooperation between the centers

[172] Interview public prosecutor.
[173] Interview government official.
[174] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[175] Interview civil society representative.
[176] Interview government official.
[177] Interview government official.
Interview government official.

[179] Mouton, M., 'het Nieuw Belgisch regeerakkoord: een rechtvaardiger rechtssysteem met de slachtoffers op de eerste plaats'.
[180] Interview civil society representative.
[181] Interview lawyer and civil society representative.
[182] Interview civil society representative.

The three recognized specialized centers operate a joint hotline for victims of human trafficking. This offers direct, multilingual access to support and helps streamline the referral process across regions.[183] A shared database called 'My Eldo' is used by the three centers and Myria[184]While full case files are not shared, the database includes the identities of individuals who have made contact and a summary sheet, allowing users to check whether a request has already been submitted. The system also supports anonymous data extraction for reporting and statistical purposes.[185]Centers receive training from expert organizations, such as Foyer, to gain deeper insights into specific target groups and their needs.[186]

3.3.4. Cooperation mechanisms at judicial level

The Board of General Prosecutors promotes nationwide coordination through specialized expertise networks, such as human trafficking or youth. The expertise network on trafficking brings together magistrates from the PPO's and the Labor auditorate, and, when relevant, other experts, to analyze legal and practical issues, facilitate information sharing, and issue recommendations or draft circulars to ensure a coherent and coordinated criminal policy on human trafficking.[187]

In parallel, a local platform on human trafficking operates in each judicial district, chaired by a liaison magistrate from the prosecution office. These platforms include representatives from the PPO, the labor auditorate, the police, the ONSS/RSZ, and the labor inspectorate. They meet at least four times a year to discuss ongoing and new cases.[188]

Between public prosecutors, information is usually shared through internal calls (circulars) and can be directed to the reference prosecutor. The involvement of juvenile magistrates varies by district. In some cases, they are invited to coordination meetings. A joint training session for reference and juvenile magistrates was previously organized by *Instituut voor Gerechtelijke Opleiding/Institut de Formation Judiciaire*, the Youth Expertise Network, and the Human Trafficking Unit. Joint circulars, in which ministers or the College issue instructions to various stakeholders, are also commonly used.[189]

3.3.5. Law Enforcement

[183] Belgian Helpline for Victims of Human Trafficking, 'What Is Human Trafficking?', n.d., accessed May 28 2025, https://www.stophumantrafficking.be/.

[184] Interview civil society representative.

Charles-Éric Clesse, Traite et trafic des êtres humains: Législations belge, française, luxembourgeoise et suisse (Brussels: Larcier, 2023), 79-107.

[186] Ibid.

[187] Openbaar Ministerie, 'College Van Procureurs-generaal', n.d., accessed May 28 2025, https://www.om-mp.be/nl/beleid-beheer/college-procureurs-generaal.

[188] Charles-Éric Clesse, Traite et trafic des êtres humains: Législations belge, française, luxembourgeoise et suisse (Brussels: Larcier, 2023), 79-107.

[189] Interview government official.

In the police, communication follows established internal channels.[190] One local law enforcement official explained that they work with specialized teams, each focusing on a specific theme. They hold regular briefings and use an online system where concerned individuals can be entered. This allows officers to see who is working on which person or file and also helps in identifying potential links and patterns across cases.[191]

3.3.6. Online Platforms

The level of cooperation between online platforms and law enforcement varies considerably. Some, like Quartier Rouge, are known for actively collaborating with authorities. For instance, they share information with the police and have introduced pop-up messages, developed in partnership with Child Focus, that prompt users to consider whether a person featured in an ad might be a child. When suspected cases arise, the platform notifies and alerts law enforcement. In contrast, other platforms, such as VivaStreet, are far less responsive and cooperative. While a Royal Decree outlines conditions for collaboration with these platforms[192], ensuring effective enforcement remains a major challenge.[193]

3.3.7. Missing Actors

Interviewees emphasized that local frontline workers, such as hospital staff, family planning centers, and sexual assault centers, are still insufficiently involved in anti-trafficking policies. The same goes for people working in sectors, such as transport, finance, and academia.[194]

4. Child trafficking in context

4.1. Patterns and trends

4.1.1. Data Collection

Belgium lacks an integrated database. That is to say, each department has its own statistics and encoding methodology. While Myria collects data from a wide range of stakeholders and presents it in its annual report, it remains difficult to compare data and obtain a comprehensive overview of the scale of human trafficking, particularly in relation to children.[195] Additionally, existing figures often reflect the activity of specific authorities rather than the true extent of the issue. For example, a child subjected to sexual exploitation may not be classified as a trafficking victim. As a result, potential victims can be classified differently, leading to a potential underrepresentation of the exploitative acts themselves, such as 'minors being forced into certain behaviors', compared to the official number of registered 'trafficking victims'.

[190] Ibid.
[191] Interview law enforcement official.
[192] Royal Decree of 18 May 2024 implementing Article 433quater/2 of the Criminal Code.
[193] Interviews law enforcement officials and public prosecutor.
[194] Interview researcher.
[195] Interview civil society representative.

Interviewees emphasized that a significant portion of cases likely also remains entirely undetected.[196]

Improving data accuracy is essential. As one interviewee noted, it is by objectively assessing the scale that we will be able to obtain additional resources to combat trafficking in human beings.[197] If every contact, regardless of whether the child accepts support, were registered by the centers, it could offer a more accurate picture of the situation in Belgium. Currently, such referrals are inconsistent [198]

4.1.2. Data

What we know is that, between 2014 and 2023, Meza and Esperanto supported 130 potential victims of child trafficking. Meaning, not all those children entered the special protection procedure for victims of trafficking.[199] Between 2015 and 2024, *Office des étrangers/IBZ* initiated residency permit procedures for 113 children as part of the protection procedure. Of these, 46 were NAM.[200][201] Between 2015 and 2024, the *RSZ/ONSS* conducted investigations involving 13 children suspected of being victims of economic exploitation.[202]

Between 2014 and 2023, law enforcement registered 3,564 human trafficking offences. However, these figures include both adults and children. Moreover, they concern perpetrators, as the police does not possess a database on victims. Between 2014 and 2023, the PPO's services opened 3,065 criminal cases related to human trafficking, involving both adults and children.[203]

4.1.3. Main forms of exploitation (past 10 years)[204]

Based on available data concerning children, **criminal exploitation** is one of the main forms of exploitation identified. Between 2014 and 2023 Esperanto and Meza supported 50 potential victims of criminal exploitation.[205] Nevertheless, according to *Office des étrangers/IBZ* victims of criminal exploitation rarely come forward.[206] Law enforcement indicates that they observe this phenomenon, but that cases often only come to light during investigations. Many cases remain likely undetected.[207] Similarly, youth judges may encounter children who have committed offenses and suspect that something more serious, such as trafficking, might be involved. However, it depends on the judge's awareness and decision to communicate these concerns to the prosecutor or police.[208]

[196] Interview civil society representatives, law enforcement officials, government officials, public prosecutor, youth judge.
[197] Interview government official.
[198] Interview civil society representative.
[199] Data received by Esperanto and Meza.
[200] Interview government official.
[201] The others were minors whose parents were involved in the protection procedure for trafficking victims.
[202] Data received from RSZ/ONSS.
[203] Myria, 'Annual Report on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings 2024'.
[204] It should be noted that the primary target groups of Meza are underaged unaccompanied female victims of sexual exploitation. Exceptions are made by Meza (i.e. sometimes also youngsters who are not part of their primary target groups are taken in), depending on the availability of places and the youngsters already present in the shelter.
[205] Data received by Esperanto and Meza.
[206] Interview law enforcement official.
[207] Interview law enforcement officials, public prosecutor.
[208] Interview youth judge.

Sexual exploitation has been one of the other main forms of exploitation identified. Between 2014 and 2023, Meza and Esperanto supported 54 potential child victims of sexual exploitation.[209] *Office des étrangers/IBZ* initiated residency permit procedures for 13 victims of sexual exploitation between 2015 and 2024.[210] Law enforcement and Child Focus remain particularly active in addressing this phenomenon, focusing on detection and investigation, with cases being identified in forced prostitution-related contexts and related to children who run away.[211]

Economic exploitation of children appears less in Meza's and Esperanto's statistics. Between 2014 and 2023, the two centers supported 26 potential child victims of exploitation.[212] According to the *RSZ/ONSS*, 13 investigations involving children were opened, including 1 case in the cleaning sector, 7 in domestic work, 3 in the beauty sector, and 2 in the horeca/commerce sector.[213] *Office des étrangers/IBZ* initiated residency permit procedures for 8 child victims of economic exploitation between 2015 and 2024.[214]

Forced begging appears less in these two centers' statistics. Between 2014 and 2023, the centers supported 8 potential victims, including 1 child who was also a victim of economic exploitation.[215] The low number is largely explained because these victims often belong to highly nomadic communities and run away quickly, so they rarely reach the stage where they can even begin the process of being identified as victims.[216] *Office des étrangers/IBZ* initiated residency permit procedures for 2 victims of forced begging between 2015 and 2024.[217] **Illegal organ trafficking** has not been reported to any of the stakeholders interviewed. *Office des étrangers/IBZ* initiated residency permit procedures for 7 victims of multiple forms of exploitation between 2015 and 2024.[218]

4.1.4. Shifts in victim's profile

The profiles of child victims of trafficking tend to fluctuate over time, but the main types of exploitation seems to remain relatively consistent. In other words, certain profiles of potential victims become more prominently represented during specific periods, but the underlying forms of exploitation remain quite the same. For example, Nigerian and Vietnamese children, often victims of sexual and labor exploitation, were particularly visible in 2018–2019, while at the time of writing, Belgian girls (in both Flanders and Wallonia) and Afghan boys (mostly in Flanders) have become more prominent, with sexual exploitation being the most common form among those profiles.[219][220] Nevertheless, victims are becoming younger, with increased visibility of children linked to Maghreb-origin street gangs, who are most commonly subjected to forced criminal activities. However, this does not necessarily mean criminal exploitation is a new phenomenon. Similarly, economic exploitation appears less visible currently, but this may reflect changes in detection rather than actual incidence. The presence of Roma children, often

[209] Data received by Esperanto and Meza.
[210] Interview government officials.
[211] Interview law enforcement official and civil society representative.
[212] Data received by Esperanto and Meza.
[213] Data received from RSZ/ONSS.
[214] Interview government official.
[215] Data received by Esperanto and Meza.
[216] Interview civil society representative.
[217] Interview government official.
[218] Interview government official.
[219] Interviews civil society representatives, government official, law enforcement officials, public prosecutors.
[220] It can also be linked to forced criminality. For instance, in a case ruled by the Ghent Court of Appeal, girls had to carry out 'ripdeals', i.e. making an appointment with a client and running off with the money. Myria, jaarverslag mensenhandel en mensensmokkel 2023: een keten van verantwoordelijkheden, 28 November 2023, accessed 14 October 2025, *2023 MYRIA Annual report THB.

subjected to forced begging, among trafficking victims has also fluctuated, with their visibility varying from year to year.[221]

4.1.5. Main forms of techniques used

A tactic often used by traffickers is grooming, a process by which a person establishes and/or builds a relationship with a child to abuse and manipulate them. The abuse can be for sexual purposes, financial or include other illegal acts. Grooming often results in what is called trauma bonding. Trauma bonding is the attachment an abused person feels for their abuser, specifically in a relationship with a cyclical pattern of abuse and positive reinforcement. After each instance of abuse, the abuser professes love, regret, and otherwise tries to make the relationship feel safe and needed for the abused person. Trauma bonding is one reason that leaving an abusive situation can feel confusing and overwhelming. It involves positive and/or loving feelings for an abuser, making the abused person feel attached to and dependent on their abuser. It is important to note that trauma bonding does not mean bonding with another person over shared traumas; but rather, a bond that a victim of abuse feels toward the person perpetrating the abuse. [222]

Perpetrators usually contact victims online through mutual connections ("via via") to then meet in real life. After that, communication continues both online and offline. Isolation can be used by traffickers to deliberately cut victims off from their support networks to increase dependence and reduce the chances of escape or disclosure.[223] Perpetrators may lure children with promises of "quick money" or deliberately create drug dependencies to exert control, using addiction as a means to coerce victims into exploitative acts. Blackmail and the exploitation of shame are also common tactics, for example, threatening to release sexual recordings or using existing debts as leverage. This is particularly frequent for migrant children, who may owe significant sums to their smugglers for their journey and are pressured into exploitation as a way to repay those debts.[224]

However, the situation is often far from black and white. For children, exposure to risky behaviors can be a gradual part of their natural environment. For example, children in certain settings may be surrounded by older youths engaged in sexual activity, nightlife, and other leisure pursuits usually restricted for their age. Being part of this older circle can normalize these activities.[225]

4.1.6. Shifts in the techniques

A civil society representative noted that the "initiation" period, the time used to manipulate, contact, and build a bond with the victim before exploiting them, has become shorter compared

[221] Interviews civil society representatives, government official, law enforcement officials, public prosecutors.
[222] Heroes, Novel Strategies to Fight Child Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking Crimes and Protect their Victims, 24 november 2023, D7.1.pdf. Interview researcher.
[223] Interview civil society representatives.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Interview public prosecutor.

to several years ago. It is also less about building a relationship and more about promising the victim quick money to gain control.[226]

Additionally, sex work has increasingly moved online, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic.[227] This digitalization has made detection and monitoring significantly more difficult.[228] Meanwhile, labor inspectors are increasingly confronted with complex cases where initial signs may suggest compliance with legal standards. Employers and exploiters are learning from previous inspections and are adapting their practices to better circumvent legislation and avoid detection.[229]

4.2. Victim profile and groups at risk

4.2.1. Victim Profile

Firstly, very young children from the Roma community are often involved in theft, robbery, forced begging or domestic work.[230] They usually carry no form of identification, and while they may provide a name or age, it is often unclear whether the information is accurate. Some claim to be accompanied by family, but this is not always true. In certain cases, the girls are found to be pregnant. They tend to disappear quickly, making it extremely difficult to offer them support or protection.[231][232] Secondly, young Vietnamese individuals usually around 16 years old, often found working in nail salons, where they are repaying large debts incurred from being smuggled into the country.[233]

Thirdly, Belgian girls are falling victim to grooming at an increasingly younger age[234], often starting around 14 or 15. [235] Fourthly, young children from South-East Europe (Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia), usually girls**,** lured by false job offers or trapped through forced marriages, are then exploited in prostitution, sometimes by their own families.[236] There are also cases of forced criminality involving victims from this region, with the majority being women, although some men are affected as well.[237] Fifthly, Nigerian girls, often around 15 years old and unaccompanied, arriving in Europe after enduring the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean, then become victims of sexual exploitation.[238]

Sixthly, young people of Maghreb origin are often found living on the streets, particularly in Brussels-Capital, though they move frequently across Europe. With little to lose, many do not apply for international protection and often escape the guardianship system. To cope with the harsh realities of street life, many struggle with drug use and are frequently observed under the influence when committing minor offenses. In numerous cases, it seems unlikely that they

[226] Interview civil society representative.
[227] Interview public prosecutor, law enforcement and civil society representatives.
[228] Interview law enforcement officials.
[229] Myria, '2024 annual report Trafficking and smuggling of human beings'.
[230] Interview civil society representative.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Interview government officials.
[233] Interview civil society representative.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Myria, '2024 annual report Trafficking and smuggling of human beings'.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid.

act alone, indicating the involvement of others operating behind the scenes.[239] Finally, Afghan boys, are mostly victims of the *Bacha Bāzī* practice and smuggled to Belgium. During their journey they often experience (sexual) violence, to then being blackmailed and coerced into continued (often sexual) abuse once they arrive in Belgium. Due to the deep shame and stigma associated with this issue within their communities, it is extremely difficult for these boys to speak openly about their experiences or seek help.[240]

4.2.2. Groups at risk

Anyone can become a victim, so it is crucial not to limit prevention efforts to specific at-risk profiles.[241] That said, certain groups face significantly heightened risks. Firstly, children with mental disabilities are particularly vulnerable, as traffickers may exploit these disabilities. Some disabilities may be caused by the exploitation itself, and they can also affect how survivors access justice, protection, employment, healthcare, and support services. [242]

Secondly, UAC who are from the European Economic Area are also at risk[243], as they do not automatically receive guardianship. This protection is only granted once vulnerability, such as trafficking, is detected. Also, specific risks apply to UAC traveling through Belgium to reach the UK, avoiding applying for international protection, because they remain under the radar and receive little to no institutional support.[244]Finally, unaccompanied boys who apply for international protection but have their age contested are particularly vulnerable. They often cannot access appropriate shelter due to a shortage of reception places with many ending up on the streets (see 4.3).[245]

Thirdly, persons who are misled in their country of origin by criminal organizations offering false promises of safety or opportunity are also at risk.[246] This also applies to asylum-seeking children aged 16 and older in Belgium who are allowed to work and living in a reception center, as they must contribute part of their income towards their stay. Many choose not to disclose their employment to avoid this, pushing them toward informal and exploitative work.[247]

Fourthly, children in the youth welfare system are often already vulnerable.[248] Overburdened services means that juvenile judges struggle to find appropriate placements, leaving children in need of protection at risk. [249] This was illustrated in August 2025, when an 11-year-old girl was left to wander the streets and was raped due to the lack of suitable accommodation in Brussels youth care.[250] Children growing up in poverty are vulnerable, as well as those experiencing absent, weak, or dysfunctional social relationships, such as lacking a supportive network or family warmth. The need to belong to a group extends beyond romantic relationships and can affect children from all social backgrounds, including those from highly

[239] Interview civil society representative, government official.
[240] Interview civil society representative.
[241] Interview civil society representatives.
[242] Invisible victims: The nexus between disabilities and trafficking in human beings | OSCE
[243] The guardianship law of 24 DECEMBRE 2002. - Loi-programme (I) (art. 479) - Titre XIII - Chapitre VI : Tutelle des mineurs étrangers non accompagnés.
[244] Interviews civil society representative, government officials.
[245] The Brussels Times, 'Over 3000 unaccompanied foreign minors left vulnerable in Belgium', November 24 2024, https://www.brusselstimes.com/1319918/over-3000-unaccompanied-foreign-minors-left-vulnerable-in-belgium?utm_source.
[246] Interview government official.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Interview public prosecutor.
[249] Interview youth judge.
[250] Bruzz, Brussels meisje dat verkracht werd en geen opvang had, verblijft in Bergen, 30 August 2025, accessed 23 October 2025, Brussels meisje (11) dat verkracht werd en geen opvang had, verblijft in Bergen | BRUZZ.

educated families.[251] Institutional settings may facilitate internal recruitment into trafficking situations. Limited supervision, peer pressure, and a lack of awareness or communication can create conditions where trafficking feels like a 'natural' progression for some children.[252]

4.3. Factors leading to vulnerability

4.3.1. Institutional shortcomings

Since August 4 2025, Fedasil, has been allowed to refuse shelter to asylum seekers who have already been granted protection in another European country.[253] This measure further exacerbates the vulnerability of people seeking international protection, as Belgium has consistently failed, since 2021, to provide adequate accommodation, particularly for single men during their asylum procedure. This is despite the 2007 Reception Act, which guarantees access to basic social services for all applicants for international protection.[254]

Belgian courts have ruled against the State and Fedasil more than 10,000 times. Even the European Court of Human Rights has condemned the federal government for its "systematic failure." Many single men have been forced to live on the streets, deprived not only of shelter but also of essential social support. [255] With the introduction of the August 2025 measure, this situation has now extended to include families with children. [256]These inhuman conditions significantly heighten the risk of exploitation, as people, including children, are left in unprotected situations without access to the most basic rights and services.[257]

Staff shortages in reception centers further exacerbates that vulnerability.[258] Similarly, the broader youth care system is overstretched. There is a critical shortage of safe accommodation for children in need of protection (see 3.3.1). Chronic understaffing across justice and law enforcement sectors as well further limits consistent follow-up and the ability to build stable, supportive relationships with children at risk, which are essential for both early prevention and long-term protection.[259] A gap also exists in the availability of specialized accommodation for certain victim profiles, such as male victims of trafficking or girls victim of grooming.[260]

4.3.2. Structural shortcomings

Belgium's systems of protection often do not reach the most marginalized children. Some children, such as those exploited through forced begging or criminal activities, may remain

[251] Interview civil society representative, government official.
[252] Interview civil society representative, public prosecutor, youth judge.
[253] Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 'gezinnen met jonge kinderen op straat door hardvochtig Belgisch opvangbeleid', 14 August 2025, accessed 30 September 2025, Gezinnen met jonge kinderen op straat door hardvochtig Belgisch opvangbeleid | Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen.
[254] Caritas International, ' Vierde jaar van geen opvangbeleid: meer dan 10 000 veroordelingen voor de Belgische staat en nog steeds 3000 mensen op straat, 18 March 2025, accessed 30 September 2025, Vierde jaar van geen opvangbeleid: meer dan 10.000 veroordelingen voor de Belgische staat en nog steeds 3.000 mensen op straat | Caritas International België.
[255] Ibid.
[256] Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 'gezinnen met jonge kinderen op straat door hardvochtig Belgisch opvangbeleid'.
[257] Interview civil society representatives, government official.
[258] Interview government official.
[259] Interview youth judge, law enforcement.
[260] Interview civil society representatives.

entirely outside of formal structures, and thus, outside of any legal protection framework.[261] Systemic barriers, including insufficient outreach, legal complexities, and rigid entry points mean that many children simply fall through the cracks. Discrimination and marginalization further isolate vulnerable youth. Some feel disconnected from society and mistrust authorities, including law enforcement and social services. This mistrust fueled by previous negative experiences or perceptions of bias can prevent them from seeking help, driving them into the hands of exploiters.[262]

4.3.3. Socio-familial pressures

For UAC, especially those fleeing war, instability, or extreme poverty, the desire to help their families can become a source of vulnerability. According to a civil society representative, some children adopt a "savior" mindset, feeling responsible for ensuring the survival or betterment of their family.[263] [264]

4.3.4. Socio-economic vulnerabilities

Traffickers often target young people facing financial hardship by luring them, often through social media platforms, with false promises of fast money or success abroad. A lack of familial warmth, emotional support, or social networks as well as abuse in early childhood may further increase vulnerability. Prosecutors report that many trafficking victims were already known to the youth justice system, often as children who ran away or who were previously under supervision due to child protection concerns.[265]

4.3.5. The role of internet

Traffickers use the internet to manipulate individuals from a distance. They spread false information or misleading opportunity ads to lure those seeking a better life. They also use it as a tool for blackmail. Online platforms also allow traffickers to maintain contact after initial in-person meetings, facilitating ongoing control and recruitment.[266]

5. Practical aspects of anti-trafficking efforts

[261] Interview youth judge, civil society representative.
[262] Interviews civil society representatives.
[263] Ibid.
[264] Ibid.
[265] Interviews judicial authorities .
[266] Interviews civil society representatives, law enforcement officials.

5.1. Detection, investigation and prosecution

5.1.1. Detection

In practice, anyone may detect a potential victim of child trafficking, but it's mostly frontline professionals who do so. A youth judge may also identify trafficking indicators. However, this can be challenging, as children often remain reluctant to share information, and the judge's mandate is focused on the child's protection rather than identifying signs of trafficking. In general, it's perceived to be difficult to detect victims of child trafficking as the exploitation of children happens less public, mostly through closed Instagram groups, Tiktok, or Snapchat.[267] A good practice to increase detection is the e-learning developed by Child Focus on sexual exploitation.[268]

Another good practice could be by implementing Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD), as this approach would require companies to establish robust mechanisms to identify, prevent, mitigate, and address human rights violations within their operations and supply chains. Specifically, this means companies would be obligated to assess recruitment practices, particularly in outsourced or subcontracted labor arrangements. This would also oblige them to trace financial flows and contractual relationships within their supply chains as well as to establish monitoring and accountability systems, to develop internal action plans and to report to public authorities, with sanctions in place for non-compliance. The Borealis case in Belgium illustrates how HRDD could have made a critical difference. In this case, workers were recruited through an external agency to work for Borealis and were later found to be victims of exploitation and trafficking.[269]

The assessment of potential signs of human trafficking is conducted using a checklist of indicators provided in the confidential Circular COL 01/2015.[270] These indicators are also available in a brochure, which can be requested from the Federal Police or relevant federal public services.[271] When signs of trafficking are detected, it is mandatory to inform and refer the potential victim, in accordance with the procedures outlined in the public Circular of 23 December 2016.[272]

5.1.2. Identification

Identification refers to the official recognition of an individual as a victim of trafficking, granted through the assignment of (temporary) victim status by the public prosecutor. The prosecutor bases their decision on the indicators, the profile of the potential victim, and the collected evidence to determine whether to temporarily grant this status. In doing so, particular attention is paid to the specific vulnerability of children.[273] In cases of uncertainty, the prosecutor may choose not to immediately grant this status, as it can be withdrawn later. If that's the case and the person is ultimately not recognized as a victim, it can have a negative psychological impact.

[267] Interview public prosecutor.
[268] Interview civil society representative.
[269] Interview academic researcher.
[270] Public Prosecution Office, COL 01/2015 (Confidential).
[271] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M1.
[272] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M3. It is mandatory to contact of the three specialized reception centres for victims of human trafficking. In urgent situations, these centres are available 24/7 through a single phone number, which can be found on the website www.stophumantrafficking.be.
[273] Interview public prosecutor.

In such situations, the prosecutor may instead make use of the reflection period, during which the case is further investigated.[274]

From the outset, the prosecutor should contact the youth judge responsible for the follow-up of the minor. This coordination is based on the clearly defined roles and responsibilities of the human trafficking prosecutor and the youth judge, as outlined in COL 1/2015, setting out the investigation and prosecution policy on human trafficking in Belgium.[275] Importantly, a child does not need to make a formal statement to be considered a potential victim. The identification of relevant indicators is sufficient to initiate protection and support mechanisms.[276]

5.1.3. Investigation

Investigations typically involve cooperation between the local police in the zone where the case emerges and the Federal Judicial Police (FJP) assigned to the same judicial district.

Although the FJP is mandated to handle trafficking cases, in practice, the decision on which authority takes the lead depends on various factors. These may include the presence of an international dimension, the complexity of investigative techniques required, and informal discussions between the parties involved to determine the most appropriate approach.[277] The ECOSOC teams of the RSZ/ONSS may also be involved in investigations when cases involve labor exploitation.[278]

Standard initial investigative methods include witness hearings, phone tapping, the use of informants, phone data analysis, house searches, focusing on pictures, checking or description of bank transactions.[279] However, due to limited resources, it is not possible to analyze all communications to the same extent. Authorities must prioritize which phones or data sets warrant deeper investigation based on relevance and available capacity.[280]

In general, digital technology is a determining factor in investigations. When it comes to digital infiltration, legal procedures must be followed, and operations are carried out under the supervision of a magistrate. In certain cases, the law allows for the commission of specific offenses during infiltration, but only with prior authorization from the prosecutor. The use of AI to generate child exploitation content as a means of luring individuals is illegal.[281]

In 2024, the Federal Police launched a pilot called ‘cyber prostitution’ targeting cyber prostitution, using OSINT (Open-Source Intelligence) software to investigate cases of sexual exploitation, including those involving children. The software, which was costly and had to be officially procured, was used over a six-month period. In Belgium, 125 websites related to prostitution were identified. Of these, 21 were actively monitored using the OSINT tool. The monitoring revealed approximately 17,000 prostitution advertisements, likely corresponding to around 17,000 individuals, as many ads were published across multiple platforms. The investigation led to the identification of 112 cases involving the prostitution of children. Based

[274] Ibid.
[275] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M3.
[276] Ibid.
[277] Interview law enforcement officials.
[278] Myria, ‘2024 annual report Trafficking and smuggling of human beings’.
[279] Interview law enforcement officials, public prosecutor.
[280] Interview law enforcement officials.
[281] Ibid.

on this intelligence, the Federal Police were able to alert the local police, allowing them to carry out checks and initiate investigations to verify whether exploitation was taking place.[282]

In addition to digital methods, fieldwork is essential, but it also carries risks. A public prosecutor recounted a case involving a police officer who pretended to be a client and contacted an individual on Viva Street. Upon arriving at the flat, the officer revealed his identity and conducted an identity check. Following the incident, the individual filed a complaint for trespassing. However, the officer was acquitted.[283]

Effective investigations often require strong cooperation with the child's country of origin. This cross-border collaboration is crucial, as financial flows and the roots of exploitation frequently trace back to the home country. Establishing these links can provide vital context and help follow the money trail. According to interviewees, the level of cooperation varies between countries.[284] One public prosecutor noted that investigations often progress more smoothly when Belgian investigators are able to travel to the country concerned, allowing them to participate directly and offer on-the-ground guidance. In some cases, a public prosecutor or investigating judge may also accompany the team, which can help accelerate the process.[285]

For a case to be further investigated, there must be a link to Belgium. If the exploitation took place on Belgian territory, an investigation can more forward, even if the main perpetrator is no longer in the country.[286] One interviewee gave the example of Nigerian victims, where the trafficker (commonly referred to as the "Madame") may never have been in Belgium or may have left before the investigation began.[287]

However, whether a case moves forward often depends on available resources and investigative priorities. A challenge is that many cases do not involve large, organized criminal networks. Instead, they often involve smaller, less structured groups or individuals, making it more difficult to justify launching a full-scale investigation. Authorities must weigh the effort and cost of investigating a suspect who is abroad and possibly unreachable, particularly in smaller-scale cases. Without sufficient funding or staffing, it becomes difficult to justify a lengthy and complex investigation with uncertain outcomes.[288]

Another challenge in investigating child trafficking cases is the reluctance of children to share information. In cases such as forced begging, cooperation is often minimal, particularly when exploitation occurs within the family. A trauma bond may impact the victim's cooperation with law enforcement. Building trust with victims is essential but can be difficult, especially when there is distrust towards law enforcement. A multidisciplinary approach is perceived as necessary.[289]The HEROES project developed best practices for trauma bonding identification protocols.[290] Some municipalities have taken proactive steps to foster this trust. For example, in Ghent, the Kombi project brings together the police and youth through activities such as kickboxing, helping to build mutual understanding and respect. Ghent also has an Integration Unit within the local police, whose members are present daily in various neighborhoods, engaging with street workers and community actors. This local presence allows them to better

[282] Ibid.
[283] Ibid.
[284] Interview law enforcement officials, public prosecutor.
[285] Interview public prosecutor.
[286] Interviews law enforcement officials, civil society representative.
[287] Interview civil society representative.
[288] Ibid.
[289] Interview law enforcement officials, public prosecutor, civil society representatives.
[290] HEROES, Findings on Trauma Bonding Impact in THB and CSA/CSE victims, 24 November 2023, D7.1.pdf.

understand the context and dynamics of different areas, providing useful background when incidents arise.[291]

In terms of interviewing child victims, Specialized TAM (Testimony by Audiovisual Means) hearings are used to minimize trauma. These sessions are recorded to avoid repeated questioning and are conducted with sensitivity. Each interrogation consists of five phases, which together comprise 11 steps (read further through this link). Two law enforcement officials noted that TAM-hearings can be too open-ended at times, which presents difficulties if the child is unwilling or unable to speak.[292]

5.1.4. Prosecution

Belgium does not impose a statute of limitations on serious sexual offences committed against children.[293] This means that prosecution remains possible regardless of how much time has passed since the offence.[294] Public prosecutors face challenges in the prosecution process (see chapter 1.2). However, one prosecutor notes that this does not significantly impact sentencing (see chapter 1.2). When suspects are abroad, they can be prosecuted and tried *in absentia*, and extradition may follow. A recent case demonstrated this, with a successful extradition of a Nigerian trafficker from Nigeria to Belgium.[295]

In Belgium the public prosecutor can recommend criminal mediation when a prison sentence of less than two years. However, this option is not possible in trafficking cases, since such crimes carry much heavier sentences. .[296] Moreover, a lawyer points out that the power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator undermines the principle of equality between parties, an essential requirement for a mediation process.[297]

5.2. Victim support

5.2.1. Immediate support

5.2.1.1. Centers for victims of trafficking

The potential child victim is entitled to a three-month reflection period (see chapter 1). [298][299] The flexible interpretation of the reflection period is considered good practice when dealing with children (see chapter 1). Belgium has two centers for victims of child trafficking, Meza and Esperanto. They offer a range of services (see chapter 3). Ideally, victims should first be received in an initial facility before entering either Meza or Esperanto. This allows their situation

[291] Interview law enforcement official.
[292] Interview law enforcement official, civil society representative.
[293] Belgian Code of Criminal Procedure, art 21 and 21bis; Law amending the law of 17 April 1878 containing the preliminary title of the Code of Criminal Procedure with a view to removing the limitation period for serious sexual offences committed against minors.
[294] Interview public prosecutor.
[295] The Brussels Times with Belga, 'Nigerian police arrest smuggler convicted in Belgium', The Brussels Times, 7 May 2025, accessed 17 September 2025, Nigerian police arrest smuggler convicted in Belgium.
[296] FPS, 'Procedure – criminal mediation', s.d. Déroulement de la procédure | Service public federal Justice
[297] Interview lawyer.
[298] Myria. 'Annual Report 2018 Trafficking and Smuggling of Human Beings Minors at Major Risk', 2018.
[299] Law of 15 December 1980 regarding the entry, residence, settlement and removal of aliens, art 61/3.

to be assessed without putting others at risk, as a smaller group is easier to manage than a large one.[300]

Once admitted to the center, the centers are secure, but not closed. The identity of victims is protected to build and maintain trust with young residents. In the event of a runaway episode from the center, relevant information is shared with the police and, if needed, Child Focus to help locate and protect the young person.[301] The centers employ a multidisciplinary, case-by-case approach to follow up with individuals. This personalized process aims to welcome, reassure, restore confidence, and stabilize each person according to their unique situation without pressure. Typically, a connection is established with the first staff member they meet at the center, creating a trusted point of contact.[302] They are informed through a universal 'Multilingual Brochure for Victims of Human Trafficking'. [303]

In cases where victims are detected in Belgium but were exploited in another country, and there is no direct connection to Belgium, there seems to be an implicit understanding that the individual may benefit from the reflection period in Belgium.[304] However, the next steps are handled on a case-by-case approach. In practice, this often involves assessing the likely direction of the investigation and exploring potential options for the person to stay in collaboration with a legal expert.[305]

If the child cannot enter the protection procedure, efforts are being made to collaborate more frequently with families in the country of origin, especially when it comes to children with a street profile, usually victims of criminal exploitation. Families sometimes do not know what is happening with their child and thus, this approach appears to have some positive effects.[306]

5.2.1.2. Investigation

Child victims can be accompanied during police hearings by a trusted adult, such as a guardian or a social worker from the reception center. However, while this support can offer important reassurance, it may also, according to a lawyer and a civil society representative, unintentionally influence the child's responses or lead to "unspoken tension/mistrust" from the police's side.

Hearings must be conducted by officers specially trained in interviewing children.[307] There are child-friendly hearing methods, such as the TAM hearing. The aim is to create a safe space for the child to speak freely, without being subjected to too many direct or leading questions.[308] However, in practice, these hearings are in some cases perceived as too open, particularly in

[300] Interview civil society representative.
[301] Interview representative civil society.
[302] Ibid.
[303] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M3.
[304] Interview government official.
[305] Interview representative civil society.
[306] Interview civil society representative.
[307] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M6.
[308] Interview with representative civil society and law enforcement official.

cases where the child responds with only brief answers, such as "yes" or "no," and does not elaborate further. This can make it difficult to gather sufficient information.[309]

Moreover, specialized hearings conducted by law enforcement trained to interview children typically only take place after a victim has been formally identified. During the earlier stage of potential detection, such as in cases of criminal offenses, interviews may be conducted by any available officer. Although police officers receive training on these issues, the quality and sensitivity of interactions can vary significantly depending on the individual officer and the context of the case.[310]

Additional challenges include delays in scheduling interviews due to a shortage of interpreters.[311] Children have the opportunity to review their statements throughout the proceedings.[312]

5.2.1.3. (Intercultural) Interpreters

Centers rely on interpreters to ensure clear and effective communication. Intercultural interpreters add significant value by providing not only linguistic translation but also essential cultural context. This helps ensure that the young person is recognized as an expert of their own experience, with attention paid to their cultural background and to what feels acceptable or appropriate to them within Belgian society.[313]

Interpreter services are equally essential in judicial proceedings to guarantee the child's understanding of the process and to ensure procedural safeguards. This includes ensuring access to sign language interpretation where necessary. Wherever possible, assigning one dedicated interpreter per child is recommended, in order to avoid repeated testimonies. This approach helps limit stress and reduces the risk of re-traumatization. However, limited resources may hinder consistent implementation of this practice.[314]

5.2.1.4. Guardian

If the child has not yet been assigned a guardian, the Guardianship Service must appoint one as a priority.[315]

5.2.1.5. During the trial

Cases of human trafficking can be handled by a specialized chamber. These proceedings may take place behind closed doors at the request of the public prosecutor, the perpetrator, or the victim. During the hearing, the public prosecutor presents the facts with respect for the victim's

[309] Interview law enforcement official.
[310] Ibid.
[311] Interview representative civil society
[312] Interview law enforcement official.
[313] Interview representative civil society.
[314] Interview youth judge.
[315] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M6.

dignity, while ensuring clarity for the judge.[316] A researcher highlighted the importance of raising awareness among defense lawyers representing perpetrators about the need for sensitivity when questioning child victims. In some cases, the questions posed are too direct or confrontational, potentially re-traumatizing the child. A trauma-informed approach is essential.[317] If the victim does not act as a civil party, the national rapporteur on human trafficking, Myria, can be present in court to defend the victim's interests.[318]

5.2.2. Long-term support

5.2.2.1. Support pathways

After the three-month reflection period, continued support by the center depends on whether the prosecutor grants the status of victim of trafficking.[319] If the victim does not receive the status, the centers refer the minor to appropriate services within the youth care system.[320] If involuntary placement is still necessary, the youth judge evaluates the situation and decides on the most suitable placement for the child. However, in practice, this decision is often limited by the lack of available places in youth care, meaning it is not always a matter of choice for the youth judge.[321]

If the child wishes to return to their country of origin, the specialized reception center, in consultation with the guardian, will contact the IOM or another non-governmental organization with a view to organize assisted voluntary return.[322] While the IOM also supports Belgian victims exploited abroad in returning to Belgium, this assistance is not funded by the Belgian government.[323]

For trafficking victims, after an initial informative meeting, the IOM conducts a thorough risk assessment in collaboration with the centers and reviews any relevant reports, such as police or hospital documentation. This information is then shared with colleagues in the country of origin to identify potential risks, including family involvement in trafficking or discrimination. Once cleared, the IOM organizes pre-departure counselling with the victim and partners to ensure alignment. Operationally, the IOM arranges flights and assistance during departure and arrival, including accompaniment if requested. Reintegration support follows, lasting six months to a year, with ongoing monitoring and evaluation. The IOM also conducts follow-up missions in the country of origin to assess and improve the program. Reintegration assistance is tailored individually and may include psychological support, family mediation, relocation, business start-up support, accommodation, legal aid, and emergency shelter.[324]

5.2.2.2. Type of therapy

[316] Interview public prosecutor.
[317] Interview researcher.
[318] Interview civil society representative.
[319] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M6.
[320] Interview representative civil society.
[321] Interview youth judge.
[322] Circular of 23 December 2016, Art. M5.
[323] Interview representative civil society.
[324] Ibid.

The centers employ a variety of therapeutic tools and interventions to support victims, including conversational hypnosis, a conscious technique that helps individuals visualize and de-dramatize traumatic experiences, alongside trauma-focused therapy, victimology therapy, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). These therapies are complemented by other informal center activities.[325]

Belgium considers adopting the *Barnahus* model, originally developed in the Nordic countries. *Barnahus*, meaning "Children's House," is a multidisciplinary approach that provides multiple services, medical care, social services, and judicial support, under one coordinated framework.[326] The model centers on a unified protocol ensuring all stakeholders work together, simultaneously with the child, minimizing the risk of re-traumatization. A dedicated team is assembled for each child to enhance communication and coordination, addressing challenges often caused by fragmented stakeholder collaboration.[327]

Before entering the Belgian school system, children residing in Esperanto undergo refresher courses for approximately one month, which include basic French lessons for those who do not yet speak the language. Once enrolled, Esperanto strives to place them in a variety of schools to promote better integration. The center intentionally avoids reception class programs, believing that individual placement fosters greater social inclusion.[328]

5.2.2.3. Transition to adulthood

Esperanto offers semi-autonomous apartments for children (from age of 15) to stimulate their development and autonomy. When they move in, therapeutic follow-up continues, sometimes with external therapists.[329] Once a child turns 18, follow-up is handled on a case-by-case basis. Esperanto can continue to support the young person for two years. The young person can also decide to be referred to a specialized reception center for adult victims of human trafficking, another facility within youth care, or to live on their own. The young adult can also decide to return to their country of origin with the support of Esperanto and a voluntarily return partner (see 5.2.2.1).[330]

5.3. Prevention

5.3.1. Government level

The Belgian federal government has launched and supported several awareness campaigns in partnership with various organizations, including the UN Blue Heart campaign and the model awareness-raising campaign developed by the European Crime Prevention Network. Some efforts also extend to countries of origin. To date, no awareness efforts specifically target children, with the exception developed for Ukrainian youth.[331] Government officials acknowledge the importance of prevention efforts that reach young people where they are,

[325] Ibid.
[326] For more information on the Barnahus model, refer to Council of Europe, Barnahus: a European journey, September 2023.
[327] Interview with researcher.
[328] Interview representative civil society.
[329] Ibid.
[330] Ibid.
[331] Interview government official.

including online.[332] Prevention policies are currently not evaluated at the federal level[333], which limits understanding of their impact and effectiveness.

On the stophumantrafficking.be website, a selection of resources (brochures and videos) about human trafficking can be found. They are intended to inform and raise awareness among professionals, victims and/or anyone who may come into contact with a suspected victim. The resources also pay particular attention to high-risk or targeted sectors.[334]

5.3.2. Civil society

Various prevention initiatives led by civil society primarily focus on raising awareness and providing information. For example, the IOM developed the *Migrant as Messenger* campaign, where trafficking survivors raise awareness within their communities in countries of origin.[335] Child Focus created *Girl Power Squad*, a program designed to empower young girls living in residential institutions.[336] Caritas produced videos explaining the rights of UAC.[337] Fedasil, in partnership with others, developed a handbook with guidelines to recognize signs of human trafficking, distributed to all Fedasil staff.[338] As part of ECPAT's *ReACT* project, several tools have been developed for (potential) child victims, including an e-learning program, explanatory videos, and clear, multilingual leaflets aimed at children at risk (UAC, Belgian, and others).[339] Samilia Foundation goes to schools to conduct information sessions to spread awareness.[340] There are also initiatives aimed at reducing high-risk situations by providing direct support to vulnerable groups. For example, Caritas' *XtraMena* project (see chapter 3).[341] The progressive women's movement *zij-kant*, the organization *Beweging Tegen Geweld vzw* (Movement Against Violence vzw), and Sensoa have launched a self-test that allows individuals to evaluate how well they respect others' personal boundaries.

5.3.3. Law Enforcement

Especially in bigger cities, some projects aim at fostering positive interaction between the police and young people. As previously mentioned, in Ghent, the local police organizes the *Kombi Project*, where the police and youth come together for activities, such as kickboxing. They also setup a *What the Flick* vlog and collaborate with grassroot projects to exchange information and organize themed events. There is also an integration unit that consists of three members whose daily task is to engage informally with community figures such as street workers, often by visiting and having conversations over coffee. This helps them to better understand situations in problematic neighborhoods and act as intermediaries when issues

[332] Ibid.
[333] Ibid.
[334] Belgian Helpline for Victims of Human Trafficking, 'Sources of Information', n.d., accessed May 28 2025, https://www.stophumantrafficking.be/node/7.
[335] Interview representative civil society.
[336] Ibid.
[337] Ibid.
[338] Interview government official.
[339] Ibid.
[340] Interview law enforcement.
[341] Interview representative civil society.

arise. Participation in this unit is open to anyone interested, with trust-building being a key objective.[342]

A law enforcement official emphasized that prevention efforts must also target people who use sexual services, including future clients, especially since adult sex work is legalized in Belgium. Currently, progress in this area is limited, making it crucial to address patterns of pre-prostitution. This approach helps avoid placing undue responsibility on the victims themselves.[343]

6. International cooperation mechanisms

6.1. Prevention

In addition to supporting the UN's Blue Heart Campaign,[344] Belgium actively participates in international platforms, such as the meeting of the EU network of National Rapporteurs and Equivalent Mechanisms and the Benelux working group on human trafficking.[345] In the upcoming EMPACT cycle (2026-2029), the FJP will lead an action plan targeting the exploitation of minors in Europe, with a focus on awareness, training, and prevention for frontline professionals, guided by a multidisciplinary approach.[346]

6.2. Detection

International intelligence agencies may identify links to Belgium, such as the use of a Belgian IP addresses. That information is then forwarded to the Federal PPO, which in turn passes it on to the FJP to draw up an official report. This can also involve the transmission of shared abuse images to the federal PPO for example. These are known as NCMEC (National Center for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children) cases. The suspect's place of residence is then identified, and the case is transferred to the relevant local prosecutor's office, which can then carry out the necessary actions, such as house searches. For instance, there was a recent case where a Belgian suspect had paid to watch live abuse taking place in Thailand.[347]

However, such cross-border case referrals remain too infrequent. A change in mindset is needed to improve international cooperation. Many local investigators and judges still approach cases in isolation, focusing narrowly on resolving individual files without fully recognizing their transnational dimension.[348]

[342] Interview law enforcement.
[343] Ibid.
[344] FPS Justice, 'Action Plan Fighting Human Trafficking', 2021.
[345] Interviews government officials.
[346] Interview law enforcement official.
[347] Interview public prosecutor.
[348] Interview law enforcement official.

The EU Anti-Trafficking Directive 2024/1712/EU[349] foresees the establishment of central authorities or points of contact in each Member State to facilitate international cooperation, though its practical implementation remains uncertain.[350] ECOSOC inspectors regularly attend meetings abroad to prepare cross-border actions, exchange information, and share knowledge with their colleagues. In 2022, ECOSOC teams took part in three Empact Action Days. During this international initiative to combat exploitation, EU Member States jointly conduct coordinated inspections in certain high-risk sectors.[351]

6.3. Investigation

6.3.1. Law enforcement

Cross-border cases are handled by the FJP, who can set up Operational Task Forces (OTFs) to coordinate efforts. Over the past three years, OTFs have been instrumental in identifying linked investigations across both European and non-European countries. This approach enables joint action where commonalities exist.[352]

At the EU level, Europol plays a central role in facilitating cross-border cooperation. It can support OTFs by, for example, hosting liaison offices from EU Member States and some non-EU countries**,** allowing real-time coordination.[353] In 2021, Belgium participated in a coordinated Europe-wide joint action days targeting child trafficking. The actions led to 175 arrests, 78 additional suspects identified and 181 new investigations initiated. Overall, 187 potential victims of human trafficking were identified, 92 of whom were confirmed to be children. Europol coordinated the action days and facilitated the exchange of information between the participating countries. Europol provided analytical and operational support 24/7 and facilitated the real-time exchange of communication between the participating authorities.[354]

Europol's Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA) is the primary tool for exchanging sensitive crime-related information among Europol's liaison officers, analysts and experts, Member States, and Third Parties with which Europol has cooperation agreements/ working arrangements.[355] The Schengen Information System (SIS) complements SIENA by serving as a shared EU-wide database for alerts related to, for example, missing or trafficked persons. In Belgium, competent national authorities, including the local and Federal Police, the Federal Public Service Interior, the Federal Public Service Finance, Federal Public Service Mobility and Transport, and Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation are authorized to enter and consult alerts within this common database.[356]

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[349] Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, as amended by Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024, OJ L, 2024/1712, art. 11.

[350] Interview government official.

[351] Interview with government official.

[352] Interview law enforcement official.

[353] Interview with law enforcement official.

[354] Europol, 'Child Trafficking: 92 Minor Victims Identified Across Europe', July 16 2021, accessed May 28 2025, https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/child-trafficking-92-minor-victims-identified-across-europe.

[355] Europol, 'Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA)', March 6 2025, accessed May 28 2025, https://www.europol.europa.eu/operations-services-and-innovation/services-support/information-exchange/secure-information-exchange-network-application-siena.

[356] Migration and Home Affairs, 'Schengen Information System', n.d., accessed May 28 2025, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/schengen-information-system_en.

At the international level, INTERPOL, a platform for information exchange and coordination, works closely with the EU.[357] The INTERPOL National Centre Bureau (NCB) in Brussels is part of the International Police Cooperation unit in the Federal Police.[358] By providing the globally sourced intelligence they need around the clock, the Belgian NCB enables police officers nationwide to detect, investigate and prevent the flow of illicit goods along trafficking routes in and around the country.[359]

Another example, in 2024, Belgium participated in major coordinated effort with Romania, Europol, and INTERPOL, led by Austria, in which Frontex spearheaded an international operation involving 40 countries to disrupt criminal networks. The large-scale operation focused on dismantling networks involved in sexual exploitation, forced criminality, and forced begging.[360]

Despite calls from human rights organizations urging the Belgian Parliament to reject a new decree permitting the deployment of Frontex personnel on Belgian soil, the measure was adopted in April 2025 under clearly defined conditions. [361] The proposal, which grants Frontex similar powers to those of the Federal Police, sparked concern among civil society groups over the agency's autonomy and adequacy of safeguards against abuse. These concerns were underscored by findings from the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), which revealed Frontex's involvement in illegal pushbacks and its failure to report or assist boats in distress, practices that violate migrants' fundamental rights.[362] Under the new decree, Frontex may now assist Belgium in operations such as controlling its external borders. [363]

6.3.2. Judicial authorities

The Federal Public Prosecutor's Office cooperates with Eurojust in cross-border criminal cases, facilitating coordination between judges and prosecutors from different countries.[364] It is possible for Belgian prosecutors to contact their counterparts in another Member State, carry out investigative measures abroad, and then refer the case back to Belgium. However, this process can be time-consuming and largely depends on the willingness and capacity of colleagues in the other country.[365]

While some cases progress smoothly, others are more challenging.[366] Cooperation is generally strong in cases of sexual exploitation but tends to be weaker in financial crime investigations. When it comes to international cooperation outside the EU, particularly with some Asian countries, the process becomes even more complex and less predictable.[367] Efficiency tends

[357] Interview law enforcement official.
[358] Interpol, 'Belgium', n.d., accessed May 28 2025, https://www.interpol.int/Who-we-are/Member-countries/Europe/BELGIUM.
[359] Ibid.
[360] Frontex, 'Frontex Teams up to Combat Human Trafficking', June 24 2024, accessed May 28 2025 https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-teams-up-to-combat-human-trafficking-Y4Mt2H.
[361] Belga News Agency, 'Frontex is allowed to operate actively on Belgian territory', 25 April 2025, accessed 1 October 2025, Frontex is allowed to operate actively on Belgian territory.
[362] The Brussels Times, 'Belgium considers deploying Frontex agents at Brussel-midi station', 2 May 2025, accessed 1 October 2025, Belgium considers deploying Frontex agents at Brussels-Midi station.
[363] Belga News Agency, 'Frontex is allowed to operate actively on Belgian territory'.
[364] Interview law enforcement official.
[365] Ibid.
[366] Interview public prosecutor.
[367] Interview law enforcement official.

to improve when investigators can travel abroad, allowing for direct assessment, clearer communication, and more effective coordination.[368]

While Belgium has liaison magistrates to facilitate contacts between prosecutors in different countries with other countries and such practice is considered to be good[369], much of the cooperation still depends on individual magistrates' personal networks, which is seen as a structural weakness.[370] Strengthening direct contact between magistrates remains an essential way to improve cross-border collaboration.[371]

Some interviewees pointed to successful examples of EU-level cooperation. One case involving sexual exploitation of Chinese nationals required coordination between Belgium and Poland, with Eurojust and Europol playing a central role. A specific Eurojust task force enabled targeted action and contributed to the successful resolution of the case. These experiences underline the practical benefits of structured and up-to-date networks in tackling the transnational nature of human trafficking.[372]

6.5. Victim support

Two of the three recognized specialized reception centers for victims of trafficking, Payoké and PAG-ASA, collaborate with LaStrada International, a European NGO Platform against human trafficking, addressing trafficking in Europe, while Sürya provides training in Luxembourg. Pagasa participates in groups where other centers participate in Europe.[373]

Collaboration with centers or authorities in other countries is infrequent but generally effective when it does occur.[374] In 2019, the "Koutcha Project" was launched through a collaboration between the organizations KOUTCHA (France), ESPERANTO (Belgium), and ECPAT France. Co-funded by the European Commission's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the project began in November 2019 in response to the urgent need to provide child victims of human trafficking with safe and secure accommodation, tailored multidisciplinary care, and long-term support for social integration in host societies. It also aims to reduce the risk of re-exploitation in France.[375]

The initiative ran for four and a half years and made it possible, among other things, to mobilize the experience of the Esperanto center in Belgium to prepare for the opening of a specialist center in France. As part of the project, a webinar was held to engage participants from various European countries. Additionally, a practical guide was developed to support the creation of Esperanto centers in other countries.

Civil society stakeholders emphasized the potential value of establishing an international network of NGOs working on child trafficking. This could include an online platform, functioning

[368] Interview public prosecutor.
[369] Ibid.
[370] Interview public prosecutors, civil society representatives.
[371] Interview law enforcement official.
[372] Ibid.
[373] Interview civil society representative.
[374] Ibid.
[375] ECPAT France, 'from the design to the creation of a safe and secure centre dedicated to the care of child victims of human trafficking', n.d., accessed 30 September 2025, Guide-Koutcha_English_webVF.pdf.

as a regularly updated repository of contact information, which could offer immediate consultation and cross-border cooperation.[376]

The type of support provided by the IOM varies significantly from country to country. In general, all non-Belgian victims who are identified in Belgium are eligible for reintegration support, funded by Belgium. In addition, further support may be available from the victim's country of origin, but this depends on the policies and capabilities of that specific country. For example, the Philippines has the highest number of returnees. The Philippine government is very proactive, which allows the IOM to implement additional reintegration projects, including family mediation support, collaboration with local NGO's for job fairs. In contrast, in countries such as China, no additional reintegration support is available beyond what Belgium provides.[377]

The IOM also assists Belgian victims who have been exploited abroad and wish to return home. However, this assistance is not financed by the Belgian government. Instead, it is covered by the country where the exploitation took place, provided that country has a reintegration program in place.[378]

Only two countries, Sweden and Finland, have specific reintegration programs to support Belgian victims of trafficking returning to Belgium. For returns from other countries, victims often depend on the IOM's limited emergency support, which is not always available. In such cases, they must turn to Belgian support systems such as OCMW or *Centrum voor Algemeen Welzijn* (CAW). Accessing these services can be difficult due to the need for an official address and the ongoing housing crisis.[379] Sometimes, non-profit organizations temporarily offer their own address as a reference, but this is not a structural solution.

Belgium supports the UN Trust Fund for Victims of Human Trafficking.[380]

7. Conclusions and recommendations

This country report provided a comprehensive analysis of Belgium's response to child trafficking. It drew on desk research and field work, including a national stakeholder meeting, focus groups, and interviews. Insights were gathered from 31 participants representing diverse sectors, offering a balanced perspective on the realities of implementation. Key findings and recommendations are:

→ Belgium has made significant, sometimes even proactive efforts, for instance regarding EU legislation. However, trafficking remains a complex issue requiring coordinated, multi-level action across sectors, supported by well-resourced and knowledgeable actors with the right mindset and tools.

There is a particular need for targeted awareness campaigns focused on children. These should address potential victims, particularly high-risk groups, while

[376] Interview civil society representative.
[377] Ibid.
[378] Ibid.
[379] Interview civil society representative.
[380] FPS Justice, 'Action Plan Fighting Human Trafficking', 2021, https://www.dsb-spc.be/doc/pdf/NAP_TIP_2021_2025_ENG.pdf.

acknowledging that all children are vulnerable. Campaigns must also inform potential perpetrators about illegal behaviors.

→ More resources also needed to support children in youth services, law enforcement, judiciary, reception centers, and civil society. Specialized, case-based training on trafficking, especially child trafficking and the psychological elements that come with it (such as trauma-bonding), should be, by preference, structurally integrated into higher education curricula and include accessible online components to address staff turnover, for example.

→ Human Rights Due Diligence can serve as an effective preventive tool, helping companies to establish robust mechanisms to identify, prevent, mitigate, and address human rights violations within their operations and supply chains. Similarly, e-learning tools developed by organizations such as Child Focus can play a valuable role in strengthening detection efforts.

→ The advanced use of technology by victims and perpetrators complicates victim identification, investigation, and prosecution. Investments are needed in investigative technology, human resources, and potentially legal framework adjustments. Multidisciplinary and cross-border cooperation is critical for effective investigations.

→ Identification efforts must account for trauma, trauma bonding, fear, and survival mechanisms such as lying, which may hinder victim cooperation. Investigative and legal processes should be sensitive to these factors, and a child-friendly tool to guide children through procedures is recommended.

→ Successful cases like Esperanto and Meza highlight the importance of specialized centers for victim recovery. It is therefore essential to invest in care facilities that are specifically tailored to the unique needs of the victim's profile. More specialised facilities are needed in Belgium, particularly for grooming victims and male victims of trafficking. The Project Koutcha guide is a recommended resource for establishing such centers.

→ Equally important is the provision of aftercare. Therefore, sustained investment in youth and healthcare sectors is essential to ensure smooth transitions for vulnerable children. In the absence of specialized centers, juvenile judges and youth services must also be equipped to provide safe and right placements. Solving the ongoing reception crisis in Belgium is urgent, as it endangers children and violates laws.

→ Improving data accuracy and reviewing anti-trafficking policies are vital to secure effective responses and resources. Systematic involvement of specialized centers when trafficking signs appear, alongside secure, privacy-respecting data-exchange mechanisms could enhance coordination. Protocols used by Child Focus or platforms like MyEldo may serve as good practices.

→ Local frontline workers (hospital staff, family planning, sexual assault centers) and sectors such as transport, finance, and academia remain under-involved in anti-trafficking efforts. Their inclusion is equally important for a holistic approach.

→ The national referral mechanism should be made accessible, concise, and easy to navigate. It is important to clearly outline the roles, competencies, and expectations of each sector involved, with a dedicated section focused specifically on children. The newly revised directive in Belgium could be highlighted as a good practice in this regard. Effective dissemination is essential, ensuring that the mechanism reaches all

relevant stakeholders, including at the community level, to support its implementation across local contexts.

→ Assistance should be financed by the Belgian government to enable Belgian victims exploited abroad to return to Belgium.