



FROM GROOMING TO ABUSE, EXPLOITATION AND DISAPPEARANCE: PROTECTING CHILDREN ACROSS DIGITAL SPACES

INTRODUCTION

This report explores the phenomenon of grooming and its connection to child disappearance in an increasingly digitalised world. In an era where 97% of young people in the EU use the internet daily,¹ digital spaces have become central to children's social lives. While these environments offer important opportunities, they also expose children to harm, including online child sexual abuse and exploitation.² Often, child sexual abuse and exploitation result from grooming, which **refers to the process by which an offender builds a relationship of trust with a child to sexually exploit or abuse them**. This process can occur online, offline, or across both environments, and its scale is likely underestimated due to underreporting, inconsistent definitions, and its covert nature.

Building on the Comprehensive European Strategy against Grooming and Missing (CESAGRAM),³ Missing Children Europe situates grooming within a broader ecosystem of interconnected risks. Its relationship with child disappearance requires greater recognition: grooming can put a child at risk of disappearance, but a disappearance can also put a child at risk of grooming. As such, grooming can be both a driver and a consequence of missing. Addressing these dynamics calls for a holistic, child-centred approach that integrates prevention, early identification, awareness, and coordinated action.

¹ Eurostat (2025) 97% of young people in the EU use the internet daily.

² Unicef (s.d.) Child Safety Online: Every child must be protected from violence, exploitation and abuse on the internet.

³ Missing Children Europe (2022-2024) Comprehensive European Strategy against Grooming and Missing.

DECONSTRUCTING THE GROOMING PROCESS

Grooming is a complex, adaptive, and often non-linear process that typically involves several steps: initiating contact with a child, building trust and emotional dependency, manipulating the relationship, introducing sexual content, and maintaining control through manipulation coercion, threats, or blackmail for the purpose of sexually abusing or exploiting the child.⁴

Digital technologies now facilitate each stage of this process. Social media, gaming platforms, and messaging applications allow offenders to contact children easily, often anonymously, and to move interactions into private or encrypted spaces.⁵ Emerging technologies, such as generative AI, deepfakes, and “nudifying” tools, are further expanding the means through which offenders manipulate and exploit victims.⁶

As these dynamics continue to evolve, understanding how grooming unfolds is essential for early detection and effective prevention, including identifying children who are the most exposed to grooming, and preventing situations from escalating into child disappearance.

IDENTIFYING CHILDREN MOST EXPOSED TO GROOMING TRAJECTORIES

While grooming can affect any child, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or socio-economic background, certain children face increased exposure. Overlapping individual, familial, and social factors, such as mental health challenges, family conflict, social isolation, or previous experiences of abuse, can increase vulnerability.⁷ When these factors accumulate, the likelihood of grooming, sexual abuse, exploitation, and repeated victimisation rises significantly, as does the risk of child disappearance.

THE LINK BETWEEN GROOMING AND CHILD DISAPPEARANCE

Research from the CESAGRAM project has identified a strong, bidirectional relationship between grooming and children going missing, forming a continuum of risk:

- Grooming as a cause for going missing, where children are manipulated or coerced into leaving home;
- Disappearance as a response to grooming, where children run away due to fear, shame, or distress linked to grooming;
- Grooming as a consequence to going missing, where children who are already missing become more vulnerable to exploitation due to isolation and lack of support.⁸

While grooming often remains hidden and difficult to detect, a reported missing episode can create a window for intervention. When a child goes missing, contact with authorities or support services such as the 116 000 hotlines, may provide an important opportunity to identify underlying risks, including ongoing grooming that had previously gone unnoticed.

However, this opportunity is frequently missed due to the limited awareness of grooming signs among professionals and fragmented data and information systems that fail to connect information across services. As a result, interventions are delayed and the risk of continued or repeated harm increases. Recognising this link, and acting on it, is therefore essential to strengthening both prevention and responses, particularly given the significant and compounding impact that grooming and disappearance can have on children.

⁴ Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, pp. 6 and 26.

⁵ H. C. Whittle et al. (2013) A review of online grooming: characteristics and concerns, Aggression and Violent Behavior, pp. 66-67.

⁶ Internet Watch Foundation (2023) How AI is being abused to create child sexual abuse imagery, p. 8.

⁷ H. Whittle et al. (2013) A review of young's people vulnerabilities to online grooming, Aggression and Violent Behavior, p. 136-141.

⁸ Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, pp. 10-12.

THE IMPACT OF GROOMING AND CHILDREN GOING MISSING

Grooming can result in multiple forms of sexual abuse and exploitation, including the production of child abuse material, sexual extortion, and, in some cases, trafficking or criminal exploitation. In online contexts, harm can persist over time, particularly when images or videos are created and shared, exposing victims to ongoing victimisation.⁹

The consequences for children are often severe and long-lasting. Victims may experience shame, guilt, anxiety, depression, and trauma-related symptoms that persist over time. These impacts can also manifest behaviourally, through self-harm, substance misuse, and socially, through isolation, stigma, and difficulties in forming trusting relationships.¹⁰ These impacts extend beyond the child to their immediate environment, including family members and caregivers, who may experience guilt, confusion, and challenges in providing appropriate support.

When grooming is linked to disappearance, these harms are often intensified. Missing episodes increase exposure to additional risks, deepen trauma, and complicate recovery. Repeated disappearances, coupled with inadequate or stigmatising responses, can further entrench cycles of harm and disengagement from support systems.¹¹ Insights from Missing Children Europe's network highlight the cumulative and long-term nature of these impacts, underscoring the need to strengthen responses to online grooming and children going missing.

RESPONSES TO GROOMING

Despite the scale and complexity of the issue, responses across Europe remain fragmented and insufficiently coordinated.



Legal and policy frameworks provide an important foundation, but significant gaps persist. These include limited criminalisation of grooming when it involves children above the age of consent in their respective countries, insufficient recognition of online-only grooming, a lack of harmonised definitions and data collection, and limited capacity to detect grooming behaviours in digital environments.



Prevention efforts are often short-term and underfunded, and do not consistently adopt a child-centred approach. Awareness among children, caregivers, and professionals also remains uneven. At the same time, many digital platforms have yet to fully implement safety-by-design measures, missing key opportunities to reduce exposure to risk at the source.



Reporting mechanisms are underused, often due to barriers such as shame, fear, and lack of trust. Existing tools may also be difficult to access or ineffective. While helplines and hotlines play a crucial role in providing support, they frequently face structural and funding constraints.



Multi-agency cooperation is needed to ensure effective responses, but it is currently hindered by fragmented systems, unclear roles, and limited information-sharing between stakeholders.

⁹ Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, pp. 29-32.

¹⁰ Missing Children Europe (2024) Online Grooming & Going Missing: The Voices of European Survivors, pp. 19-22.

¹¹ Missing Children Europe (2021) RADAR: Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses, pp. 73-77.

RECOMMENDATIONS



LEGAL AND POLICY MEASURES AT EUROPEAN LEVEL

- EU co-legislators and Member States: Criminalise grooming for all children under 18, regardless of age of sexual consent, and explicitly recognise online-only abuse.
- EU co-legislators: Mandate detection of grooming behaviours within the proposed EU Regulation on combating child sexual abuse to prevent enforcement gaps.
- Member States, with EU coordination: Harmonise data collection through comparable annual reporting based on shared indicators and protocols.



PREVENTION AND EARLY IDENTIFICATION

- Member States: Strengthen digital literacy and sexuality education, alongside mandatory trauma-informed training for professionals.
- Online platforms: Implement safety-by-design principles, including privacy-by-default and child-friendly reporting tools.



CHILD-CENTRED REPORTING AND SUPPORT

- Member States: Ensure access to confidential, low-threshold reporting and support across multiple channels.
- EU institutions and Member States: Secure long-term funding for helplines, hotlines, and Safer Internet Centres.



MULTI-AGENCY RESPONSE

- Platforms, law enforcement, and child protection authorities: Formalise cooperation through clear referral pathways and real-time information sharing.
- Member States, with EU coordination: Bridge online and offline protection systems for consistent child-centred responses.



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