DATA MISSING RESEARCH REPORT:

Towards comparable and intersectional data on missing children in the European Union

A project implemented by a consortium led by Missing Children Europe (MCE) in collaboration with Ecorys, Child Focus, Hope for Children and the Missing Persons' Families Support Centre

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Acronyms

CA	Central Authority
EU	European Union
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
ICMP	International Commission on Missing Persons
IDMS	Integrated Data Management System
MCE	Missing Children Europe
MS	Member States
PEN-MP	Police Expert Network on Missing Persons
RQ	Research Question
SES	Socio-economic status
UK	United Kingdom
UMC	Unaccompanied migrant child/children
USA	United States of America

Preface

Every missing child is one too many. Each case tells a story of vulnerability and reveals gaps in the child protection systems meant to keep children safe. Yet in the European Union, the data needed to fully understand, prevent, and respond to this issue remains alarmingly scarce.

Despite the seriousness of the problem, we still do not know how many children go missing in the EU each year. The frequently cited figure—250,000 annually, or one every two minutes—is based on a rough estimate from a 2013 European Commission report. It is the best available, yet it contains outdated data and information. Member States use varying definitions, collect data in different ways, and rarely capture the underlying drivers of disappearance—factors such as violence or conflict in the child's environment, socio-economic challenges or discrimination linked to migration status, race, orientation, or gender identity. Much of the existing research comes from outside Europe and fails to reflect its unique context.

Policy decisions must be grounded in facts—not in assumptions, ideology, or electoral strategy. Evidence-based policymaking relies on credible, relevant data to shape responses that address real needs. In the case of missing children, that means understanding not just how many go missing, but why, and how systems can be improved to prevent it. When we don't collect this data, we lose crucial insight into how to close those gaps in protection.

The DATA MISSING project was developed in response to the limited progress made since the 2013 EU report, which issued 30 recommendations on improving data on missing children. Led by Missing Children Europe (MCE) in collaboration with Ecorys, Child Focus (Belgium), Hope for Children (Cyprus), and the Missing Persons' Families Support Centre (Lithuania), this research project aims to understand the persistent barriers to progress and to offer a realistic path forward. Our findings underscore the complexity of the issue: it is far easier to count stolen bikes than to collect meaningful data on missing children.

Addressing this challenge will not come from a technological solution. It requires a sustained, collaborative effort to harmonise definitions, improve data collection and storage, and ensure both privacy and relevance. Law enforcement, tasked with the search for missing children, is a key data actor and the main partner in this endeavour, but we must be realistic about what they can deliver in terms of disaggregated data. The data they require for an effective search, after all, is different from the data that policy makers and practitioners require for developing prevention measures. Additional methods—such as return-home interviews, longitudinal studies, and targeted research on particularly vulnerable groups like unaccompanied minors and LGBTIQ+ youth—are needed. Ongoing research efforts by MCE and others show that progress is possible.

This report summarises the key findings of the DATA MISSING project and provides concrete recommendations to advance comparable and intersectional data on missing children in the EU. It is a call to action for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners: to treat data as a tool for protection, to ensure no child goes missing without a trace, and to continue the work—together.

Executive Summary

Despite previous efforts, the EU still lacks a coordinated and sustainable system for collecting and reporting data on missing children, which hinders evidence-based policymaking and effective responses. Three key challenges persist. Firstly, data practices remain fragmented, as police, NGOs, hotlines, and authorities use different definitions and data collection methods, hindering comparison and coordination efforts. Secondly, there are gaps in data concerning vulnerable groups. Information on high-risk children, including runaways, unaccompanied migrants, Roma children, and those in institutions, is incomplete due to underreporting and inconsistent definitions. Lastly, coordination and interoperability remain limited because of the misalignment of national data systems.

It is against this background that the current research carried out under the auspices of the DATA MISSING project aims to support the development of sustainable and comparable data collection mechanisms regarding missing children across the 27 EU Member States, focusing on those at risk of violence, particularly vulnerable children who face discrimination. By presenting the findings of the research, this report aims to enhance child protection policies across the EU, contribute to disaggregated and harmonised data on missing children in the EU, and identify remaining gaps and existing challenges in current data practices. To overcome existing challenges, the report recommends the sharing and exchanging of data to facilitate searches, retain comparable, minimally disaggregated data and collect more refined data. In doing so, the report contributes to the shaping of child protection policies rooted in evidence-based practices.

Introduction

In the past decades, very important initiatives have been put forward upholding the rights of the child and the promotion, protection and participation of children. Among the various instruments promoting child-friendly justice systems and addressing child trafficking, as well as child sexual abuse and exploitation, the establishment of the 116000 missing children hotline network in 2007 yielded tangible results in ensuring safety and protection for children.[1] In the 2021 EU Strategy on the rights of the child [2], the European Commission reaffirmed the importance of the hotline network and emphasised the need to continuously improve the missing children hotline through funding and capacity building.

As highlighted in the Council of Europe's Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2022-2027) "violence against children is both a driver and consequence of children going missing and might be linked to multiples causes, such as violence, trafficking, sexual abuse and exploitation (...), mental health, neglect or weaknesses in the child protection system".[3]

The European Commission's Recommendation, issued in April 2024, on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child therefore urges Member States (MS) to "strengthen data collection on children going missing in the Union". It also invites MS to "develop systems of monitoring and evaluation, in line with national and regional competencies, including children's rights and well-being indicators."[4].

Despite these calls, significant gaps remain in the availability of comprehensive data on missing children, which affects the ability of authorities, policies, and legislation to respond adequately to the issue. To effectively respond to the challenges faced by children at risk of going missing, particularly the dangers of exposure to violence, it is crucial to implement strong data collection and reporting mechanisms regarding missing children.

Problem statement

The overall problem is the lack of comprehensive, sustainable and comparable data collection and reporting mechanisms on missing children in the EU which align different data authorities at different levels. As a result, there is no coordinated process of collecting, storing, viewing, analysing and reporting intersectional, disaggregated and comparable data sets on missing children in the EU. Without such data, evidence-based policy making on child protection is significantly limited.

Note that by data collection and reporting mechanisms, we are not referring to a database, nor to a case management system for active missing children cases, nor are we referring to a search tool such as a missing child alert system. Several key challenges were identified that continue to hinder progress towards the envisaged comprehensive and comparable collection and reporting mechanisms and data sets on missing children that are needed for evidence-based policy making on missing children and child protection, and that will be addressed throughout this report.

Key challenge 1: There are differences in data practices, needs and interests of data actors, and collection and reporting mechanisms, protocols and definitions used between data actors within EU Member States. These differences do not allow for comparable data across Europe.

Different data actors have different data practices, needs, interests, skills, awareness, attitudes and motivations. Data actors include stakeholders such as the police, the 116000 hotlines, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and governmental authorities who deal with missing children data. Needs and interests may differ between these data actors. For example, data that is required to trace a child may differ from data that is needed to prevent children from going missing or for evidence-based policy making.[5] Additionally, different data actors use different collection and reporting mechanisms, protocols, and definitions of missing children. Such discrepancies challenge the extent to which data can be compared among the EU 27 MS, which is problematic for gaining a full picture of the current situation concerning missing children in Europe and developing an evidence-based approach to policy making accordingly.[5,7]

Key challenge 2: There is evidence that children's individual and contextual characteristics can render some more vulnerable to going missing and/or to experiencing violence while missing than others. However, data gaps and challenges in systematically collecting data about this relationship persist.

The reasons behind child disappearance may include situations of violence and abuse, including sexual exploitation.[4] Violence against children can be both a driver and a consequence of children going missing. Furthermore, it may intersect with multiple drivers, such as trafficking, sexual abuse and exploitation, mental health issues, neglect or weaknesses in the child protection system.[5] Reliable and comparable prevention data and statistics are necessary to develop evidence-based policies to integrate and strengthen Europe's child protection systems.[7,6] However, such data are

1. Commission Decision on reserving the national numbering range beginning with 116 for harmonised numbers for harmonised services of social value, (2007/116/EC), subsequently amended by Directive (EU) 2018/1972 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2018 establishing the European Electronic Communications Code (Recast)Text with EEA relevance.
2. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Region EU strategy on the rights of the child, COM(2021) 142 final.
3. Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027): "Children's Rights in Action: from continuous implementation to joint innovation" p.10.
4. Commission Recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interest of the child C(2024) 2680 paragraphs 32 and 33.
5. Council of Europe. (2022). Council of Europe strategy for the rights of the child (2022-2027).
6. European Commission Recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child (C(2024) 2680)

Children going missing in migration are particularly vulnerable and statistical data are limited on this group. The journalism project 'Lost in Europe' found that at least 51,000 migrant children have disappeared after arriving in Europe between 2021 and 2023.

not available due to differences in, for example, practices on how to/who is to report children as missing, indicators on which case management data are collected, the mechanisms for collecting and reporting data, the data storage systems used and the use of different categories for missing children.

Furthermore, while some risk factors may overlap between different groups of missing children, some risk factors are specific to particular categories of missing children. For example, children who run away were identified as a particularly vulnerable group in the RADAR project.[7] The high incidence of repeated episodes of running away was especially highlighted, indicating that children are often returned to the same situation without the initial underlying problem being resolved. Issues in the home- school- and institutional environment and individual characteristics such as mental health issues, drug- and alcohol use, and sexual orientation were identified as drivers for running away.[8]

Furthermore, children going missing in migration are particularly vulnerable and statistical data are limited on this group. The journalism project 'Lost in Europe' found that at least 51,000 migrant children have disappeared after arriving in Europe between 2021 and 2023.[9] Reasons for disappearance included human trafficking for economic exploitation.[10] However, it should be noted that it is impossible to currently ascertain the actual number of children in migration going missing due to barriers in data practices and underreporting. The number is therefore expected to be much higher in reality. Childen in migration going missing are outside of the protective system, rendering them at an increased risk of harm, abuse and exploitation.[16,11]

Statistical data is also lacking for Roma children going missing, despite Roma constituting the largest ethnic minority group in the EU. Roma children were found to be disproportionately represented in institutional care and trafficking.[12] This is likely attributed to the disproportionate representation of Roma in high-risk categories, such as family poverty, social exclusion and discrimination.

Children in institutions are generally overrepresented among children going missing. There is also evidence that race and ethnicity play a role.[13]

Although evidence suggests that some (groups of) children are more vulnerable to going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing, the reasons why, the effects and extent of this, and how this link currently is and should be reflected in the data are unclear.

Key challenge 3: There seems to be limited interoperability of missing children data collection and reporting mechanisms and limited, or at least fragmented, coordination of missing children data collection and reporting at the European level.

The need for enhanced alignment, interoperability and coordination among various stakeholders was already identified as a necessity to effectively track and respond to cases of missing children in the 2013 Ecorys study commissioned by the European Commission.[5] Since then, no other study has been conducted on bringing together knowledge on missing children data from all MS.[7]

Although various European networks and international data collection and reporting mechanisms provide promising infrastructures for cooperation[14] little improvement has been made in the past 10 years despite the specific recommendations put forward in the 2013 Ecorys study.. This may imply that responsibilities and tasks regarding missing children data still need to be streamlined, and further capacities need to be built for national authorities to collect, store, analyse and report on missing children data in a more convergent way.

7. RADAR project. Funded by the European Commission's Rights, Equality and Citizenship 2014-2020 Programme.
8. Missing Children Europe. (2021). RADAR Full Research Report. Running Away: Drivers, Awareness and Responses.
9. Lost in Europe. (n.d.). About Lost in Europe. Lost in Europe. Retrieved February 6, 2024, from https://lostineurope.eu/about-lost-in-europe https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/56777/more-than-50000-unaccompanied-child-migrants-missing-in-europe
10. INTERACT project. Funded by the European Commission's Rights, Equality and Citizenship 2014-2020 Programme.
11. Missing Children Europe. (2019). Interact – Towards a more efficient cooperation across borders for the protection of children. Practical guidance on preventing and responding to trafficking and disappearances of children in migration.
12. European Roma Rights Centre (errc). (2021). Blighted Lives: Romani Children in State Care;
13. See also Missing People, THE ETHNICITY OF MISSING PEOPLE 2013.
14. Refer to chapter 2 promising shifts in missing children data practices, section 2.3 Coordination between (inter)national data actors.

As a result of these key challenges, it is difficult for stakeholders, such as Missing Children Europe, its member organisations and the 116000 hotlines, to monitor the situation effectively. The lack of quality data hinders their ability to develop effective evidence-based interventions to prevent and mitigate the reasons for children to go missing and experience violence while missing. It also makes it harder to advocate for evidence based missing children policies and other child protection measures while lacking quality data.

1.1 The current research

This research is part of the DATA MISSING project, implemented by a consortium led by Missing Children Europe (MCE) in collaboration with Ecorys, Child Focus in Belgium, Hope for Children in Cyprus and the Missing Persons' Families Support Centre (MPFSC) in Lithuania.

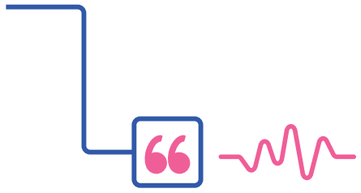
Missing Children Europe (MCE) is the federation for missing and sexually exploited children, representing 35 organisations from 28 European countries, including 22 Member States of the European Union.[15] MCE was entrusted with the coordination of the 116000 hotline network, operated by national organisations in 32 European countries amongst which all 27 EU MS. The hotlines provide around-the-clock support to children and families in crisis. Child Focus, Hope for Children and the Missing Persons Family Support Centre operate the 116000 hotline in their respective countries (Belgium, Cyprus and Lithuania respectively). The hotlines cooperate with law enforcement and receive reports and collect information on missing children to help trace them, advocate for children to be safe and secure, and monitor the situation.

The overall aim of the DATA MISSING project is to contribute to the development of comprehensive and sustainable reporting, data collection and statistical mechanisms on missing children as a consequence of and risk factor for violence in the 27 EU Member States (MS). In doing so, the project particularly seeks to provide a basis to ameliorate policies, legislation and practices to support children at risk of going missing across all fields, such as law enforcement and child protection systems.[16]

In pursuing the overall objective of the DATA MISSING project, the research resulting in this report specifically seeks to

- contribute to robust, comprehensive, disaggregated (e.g. gender, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc), and comparable data on missing children as a consequence of and risk factor for violence in the 27 EU MS;
- develop recommendations on comprehensive and comparable reporting mechanisms and data sets on missing children based on an in-depth gap analysis of 10 EU MS.

In doing so, the research focused on children in vulnerable situations who face discrimination and are at higher risk of violence (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, children in institutions, etc.).



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1.2 Drawing from our previous research

In 2013, at request of the European Commission, Ecorys conducted a study (hereinafter the 2013 Ecorys study)[17] in which quantitative and qualitative data on missing children and missing children data practices were collected and mapped. Based on the analysis of the data collection practices, 30 recommendations were made to provide a premise as to how to improve the data collection mechanisms involved when children go missing in the 27 EU MS (depicted in Table 1.1).

15. Missing Children Europe. (2022). Annual review 2022.
16. Grant Agreement No. 101096817. Funded by the European Commission, DG JUST CERV-2022-DAPHNE.
17. European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice, Day, L, Cancedda, A., Dimitrova, D. et al. (2013). Missing children in the European Union – Mapping, data collection and statistics, Publications Office.

Table 1.1 2013 Ecorys study recommendations

Data collection practices	
Recommendation 1	Always record the year of birth of the child
Recommendation 2	Always record the sex of the child
Recommendation 3	Always record the nationality and migration status of the child
Recommendation 4	Record the type of disappearance through a suitable system of categories
Recommendation 5	Make it possible to identify the number of children involved besides the number of disappearances
Recommendation 6	Always record the setting of the disappearance
Recommendation 7	Always record the relation to the child of the person reporting the disappearance to the police
Recommendation 8	Record the type of abuse the child incurred during the disappearance, if any
Recommendation 9	Record the organisations involved in the search
Recommendation 10	Record the duration of the case
Recommendation 11	Record who found the child
Recommendation 12	Record positive/negative outcomes
Recommendation 13	Record support measures provided after the child is found
Recommendation 14	No minimum duration (24h, 48h) of disappearance, below which a disappearance is not recorded
Operational rules and definitions	
Recommendation 15	Clean up the database periodically and actively follow up solved cases to closure
Recommendation 16	Consolidate local data nationally so that no further threshold is applied
Recommendation 17	Define internationally agreed procedures for entering Article 32 alerts in the SIS II Schengen system database
Recommendation 18	Link up national police databases to SIS II to ensure that missing children are properly searched for in the whole Schengen area
Recommendation 19	Agree data reporting protocols between police and 116000 hotline service providers
Recommendation 20	Adopt operational definitions of missing persons and children
Recommendation 21	Distinguish parental and third-party abductions, and attempted from actual abductions
Recommendation 22	Make it possible to distinguish runaways from other missing children cases
Recommendation 23	Adopt mechanisms for linking police and judicial records
Recommendation 24	Clean up the database periodically and actively follow up solved cases to closure
Awareness-raising and information	
Recommendation 25	Organise communication campaigns on the importance of timely reporting any case of missing children
Recommendation 26	Establish rules and protocols for reporting by care institutions
Recommendation 27	Provide 116000 hotline services for more confidential and psychologically aware communication with parents and children
Recommendation 28	Raise awareness of existing 116000 hotlines among children, families and social workers based on a thorough evaluation of the hotlines' strengths, weaknesses and untapped potential
Recommendation 29	Make missing children statistics publicly available through yearly reports
Recommendation 30	Organise annual incidence surveys

The present research builds upon the 2013 Ecorys study and recommendations. Our baseline premise is that little improvement has been made in the past 10 years, despite the specific recommendations made in 2013[18].

To begin with, when considering the data on missing children and the processes of data collection, sharing, and analysis, we note the same structural issue. There is structural underreporting of missing children, especially regarding certain groups, such as children who go missing in migration. The available data, therefore, do not provide a complete picture of all the children who go missing. This report focuses on the available data regarding missing children.

Secondly, there is no general agreement among stakeholders at the local, national, or European level regarding when a child is considered "missing," what case management data should be collected, and what indicators or methods ought to be used. Consequently, available data on missing children often reflects the specific contexts of data collection rather than providing a comprehensive overview. This becomes particularly concerning when examining the factors that make certain children more vulnerable to going missing or experiencing violence while missing, as there appears to be a lack of consensus on what information about intersecting vulnerabilities should be gathered and how.

These data challenges are further complicated by the fact that the issue of missing children transcends national borders, for example, when children are abducted or trafficked from one country to another or migrating across borders.[5] In such cases, all the difficulties experienced in data collection, sharing and analysis concerning missing children makes it increasingly problematic to compare, use and analyse the available statistical data set in the cross-border context.

Increasing digitalisation has reshaped the dynamics of children going missing, not only by providing new tools to trace and recover them but also by increasing the ways in which they become vulnerable. Many children who run away do so in response to adverse experiences, such as abuse, neglect, family conflict, or problems in care homes or schools. However, in today's digital age, these existing vulnerabilities are amplified. On the one hand, cyberbullying is increasingly seen as a risk factor for running away.[19] On the other hand, because digitalisation increases access to information and interconnectivity with others, new phenomena such as online grooming have increasingly emerged as a factor for children going missing, running away from home, institutions or asylum centres.

Research Goals

Our research aims to delve into current data practices surrounding the phenomenon of missing children across Europe, examining the efficacy of existing data collection and reporting mechanisms. There is a particular focus on children in vulnerable situations who are at a higher risk of going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing due to intersecting vulnerabilities. By mapping out the landscape of data collection, utilisation collaboration and sharing among various stakeholders—including law enforcement, NGOs, and international bodies—this study seeks to identify gaps, best practices, and potential areas for advancement.

This research builds directly on the 2013 Ecorys study, which proposed 30 recommendations to improve missing children's data collection and coordination in the 27 EU MS. A key premise of our work is that despite these recommendations, little structural progress has been made over the past decade.

To meet the aim described above, we pursue three main research questions in our enquiry:

- What has changed in defining, coordinating, collecting, storing and sharing missing children data since 2013 and what challenges remain?
- What are the practices and challenges to reflect the link between intersecting vulnerabilities and children going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing and what is known about this link?
- What are the possibilities to overcome key challenges in missing children data practices and what can we learn from other (EU-level) data coordination- and information systems?

By addressing these questions, this report contributes to the broader aims of the DATA MISSING project: to enhance evidence-based policymaking and improve child protection responses across the EU.

Ultimately, our objective is to contribute to a more effective, efficient, and harmonised approach to mitigating the issue of missing children, ensuring that every child's safety and well-being are protected across the European continent.

1.3 Methodological approach

As mentioned above in 2013, Ecorys conducted a study in which quantitative and qualitative data on missing children and missing children data practices were collected and mapped. On the basis of this study, 30 recommendations were put forward. Given the structural difficulties in collecting data on missing children combined with the limited progress made on the basis of the 2013 recommendations (see recommendations 5 and 7), this study takes a different

18. Missing Children Europe. (2022a). European Statistical System – making it fit for the future. Missing Children Europe's contribution to the consultation.
19. Case studies Poland and Lithuania, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.

approach. We deliberately refrain from relying solely on counting or numerical data due to the inherent problems with comparable data and varying definitions, which can often obfuscate more than illuminate.

In our research, we take a qualitative approach, to better explore the nuanced and multifaceted nature of our stated problem and research questions, allowing for a comprehensive analysis that captures the core of the subject matter in a more subtle manner. We have opted for this strategy as it allows us to better understand the complexities behind the various data practices of the data actors and the difficulties they face. Furthermore, this approach allows us to 'tell the story' behind and unravel the intersecting vulnerabilities of what makes some children more vulnerable to going missing and experiencing violence while missing than others.

Specifically, we use **10 case studies** to deep dive into the national country contexts, offering detailed information about the most important stakeholders, data practices, country-specific challenges and trends in vulnerabilities. Additionally, we conducted a **survey** to gather broad insights from the other 17 EU MS in their data practices, focusing on what has changed in terms of data collection, storing and sharing in the past 10 years and identifying barriers or facilitators for change. Additionally, we undertook **desk research** to consolidate existing knowledge and theories, ensuring our study is grounded in established academic- and grey literature. In the desk research, we focused on what is known about the vulnerabilities of missing children. The research questions and used methodologies are depicted in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Research questions and applied methodologies

Country case studies

In this section we describe the methodological approach used in conducting case studies across ten countries. The methodology was designed to investigate missing children data practices, focusing on identifying practices, promising shifts, experienced challenges, and evidence on intersecting vulnerabilities of missing children. For the purposes of the country case studies, country researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and desk research to answer the three main research questions, focusing on the country level.

Geographical scope

The geographical scope of our case studies is limited to ten European Union Member States out of the EU 27 to better understand the loopholes and difficulties EU MS data actors face when dealing with missing children data.

Country selection criteria

Ten case study countries were selected: Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland and Romania. These countries were preliminarily selected on the basis of the following selection criteria:

a) Highest number of missing children in the EU27 based in on available statistical data;
b) Geographical balance according to vulnerabilities of children (e.g. high number of children in migration, high number of Roma children); and
c) High number of certain categories of missing children where the risk of violence is high (e.g. children who run away and children in migration).

Case studies research team

The ten case studies were performed by ten researchers speaking the local language. We chose this approach because we acknowledge the importance of a nuanced understanding and interpretation of local contexts, legal frameworks, and cultural sensitivities and to ensure stakeholders could be interviewed in their native language. Furthermore, this approach also allowed for national-level desk research in the local language, broadening the inclusion criteria for academic- and grey literature.

Stakeholder mapping and selection of interviewees

The process of selecting interviewees and mapping the key stakeholders was facilitated by Missing Children Europe and the partner organisations in the ten selected countries. The country researchers conducted **scoping interviews** with the partner organisations to conduct a **stakeholder mapping** and gain an initial understanding of the playing field of missing children in that country. A pre-designed template was used to visualise the stakeholder mapping (**Annex A**). Preliminary developed guiding questions were used in the scoping interviews to cover all parts of the missing children data process (**Annex B**). Approximately six key stakeholders were selected per country to be invited for an interview based on the criteria that the interviewees covered different levels, such as:

a) Local level: persons entering data about an active case after a missing child report, for example, the 116000 hotline operators and local police. Also, those directly working with (missing) children, such as social workers and employees in schools;
b) Regional level: In some countries there are governmental or police bodies who coordinate missing children data at the regional or national level;
c) Policymakers (i.e. the government);
d) NGOs or civil society organisations;
e) Knowledge institutions, such as experts on specific vulnerabilities (e.g. gender, migration, Roma children); and
f) Data institutions that manage/analyse missing children data.

The core coordinating team of the research oversaw the stakeholder selection to manage progress and ensure the number and type of interviews were streamlined across the ten countries.

Semi-structured interviews

In total 57 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in the 10 identified countries,. These stakeholders included government officials, police personnel, child welfare experts, academic experts and non-governmental organisations involved in collecting, storing, sharing, analysing and using missing children data (see Annex C for the full list of interviewed key stakeholders). A preliminary developed semi-structured interview guide was used to perform the interviews (Annex D), which were conducted in the local language. The data are collected in accordance with ethical research standards, meaning consent was obtained and confidentiality assured.

Country-level desk research

In addition to the interviews, country-level desk research was conducted by the ten country researchers based on 1) reports and information provided by the identified key stakeholders and 2) national-level desk research to further understand the vulnerabilities of children going missing and contextual information for each country. The desk research was guided by the following questions:

- What is the current state of play in [country] on data on missing children?
- Is there any numerical data on missing children (or categories of missing children)?
- What is known (according to the literature) about the linkages between missing children, data and intersecting (individual/contextual) socio-characteristics for children going missing, being missing and experiencing violence while missing?

Wherever possible, the documentation, reports, and literature provided by the MCE partner organisation were used as a starting point. The following **inclusion and exclusion criteria** were used.

Reports, documentation and grey- and academic literature were **included** if they were aligned as follows:

- Refer to the national level;
- Are written in the English and/or local language;
- Are published after 2013;
- Provide information on the current state of play on missing children data; and/or
- Provide numerical information on missing children (categories); and/or
- Provide information on the linkages between going missing, experiencing violence while missing and intersecting vulnerabilities.

Reports, documentation and literature were **excluded** if they did not align as follows:

- Do not provide information on the national context;
- Are written in another language than English or the local language;
- Are published before 2013 (unless deemed extremely relevant and no updated information is available, in discussion with the coordinating research team); or
- Do not provide information on missing children data practices, challenges, opportunities and/or vulnerabilities of missing children.

Data collection methods included the use of Google Scholar, relevant local databases, other academic databases such as PubMed and references directly collected from the key stakeholders. Snowballing methods were also employed to gain additional information. The following **main keywords** were used in various combinations: Data + database + data reporting + missing + lost + children + gender + country name(s) + gender + ethnicity + migration + gender diversity + LGBTQI + Roma + Sinti + religion + intersectionality + care institution + runaways + child abduction + parental abduction + data protocol + indicators + poverty + mental ability + violence + abuse + risks + vulnerabilities + victimisation.

Analysis and case study reporting

Pre-designed templates were developed for the country researchers to report their findings in a similar matter. These templates included a stakeholder mapping template (**Annex A**) and a template for the final case study report. The complete country case studies can be found in the second part of this report. In addition, two online analysis workshops were organised with all country researchers. These served as a method to compare observations between countries and identify similarities and differences at the international level. The notes from the analysis workshops and the country case studies themselves were used for the final analysis of all collected data.

Survey

An **EU-level survey** was shared with the 17 EU MS that were not included in the ten country case studies (see **Annex E** for the list of countries and organisations). The purpose of the survey was to understand what has changed in the past ten years (since 2013) in the ways data on missing children are collected, stored, analysed, and shared, and how missing children are defined and categorised in the EU. Since collection of case management data was part of the methodology for the ten country case studies, the choice was made to only share this survey with the other 17 EU MS. Furthermore, the survey allowed for gaining a deeper understanding of why (no) changes were made, as it included both closed- and open-ended questions. The full survey can be found in **Annex F**.

The survey was shared with **the organisations operating the 116000 hotline** (and thus mostly member organisations of MCE) in the 17 EU MS that were not included in the ten country case studies. We used **CheckMarket** as a tool for hosting the survey which was distributed via e-mail. In some EU MS, the 116000 hotline is operated by NGOs, in others by the police. MCE facilitated the sharing of the survey with their member organisations. For the countries where the hotline is operated by NGOs, the partners were requested to also forward the survey to local police. The European Commission project privacy notice was attached to the invitation to participate in the survey (**Annex G**). Data were collected in **October-November 2023**. Recipients from **12 of the 17 countries** responded and participated by completing the survey.

Desk research

In addition to the ones conducted by the ten country researchers, desk research was conducted to delve into what is known about the different factors that render some children more vulnerable to going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing than others. The desk research was guided by the following questions:

1. What is known about the link between **intersecting vulnerabilities** (such as ethnicity, ability, migration background, gender identity and sexual orientation) and children going missing, missing and experiencing violence while missing?
2. What are **practices and challenges** to store, analyse and reflect the link between missing children and their **vulnerabilities** in police and hotline data? Why does it matter?

The desk research was conducted according to several **inclusion- and exclusion criteria**. Since information in local languages on the topic of intersecting vulnerabilities was included in the ten country case studies, we chose to conduct a European-level search in the English language. Furthermore, due to the limited availability of information on this topic, we chose to include all information published since 2000. Furthermore, while the initial focus was on European literature, due to limited availability, studies from the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) were also included to determine whether these studies were supported by findings in the European context.

Academic- and grey literature were included based on the following **inclusion criteria**:

- Written in English;
- Containing information on vulnerabilities of (specific categories of) missing children;
- Published in Europe; and
- Published after 2000.

Furthermore, academic- and grey literature were **excluded** if they:

- Were written in other languages than English;
- Did not contain information on vulnerabilities;
- Did not contain information on vulnerabilities in relation to missing children.

Data collection methods included the use of Google Scholar and Leiden Catalogue, the online library from Leiden University. Snowballing methods were also employed to gain additional information. The following **main keywords** were used in various combinations and synonyms: Missing + lost + children + runaways + unaccompanied migrant child + child abduction + parental abduction + risks + vulnerabilities + violence + victimisation + gender + ethnicity + migration + gender diversity + LGBTQI + Roma + Sinti + religion + intersectionality + care institution + data protocol + indicators + poverty + mental ability + abuse. Excel matrixes were developed grouping categories of vulnerabilities per missing children category.

Analysis

The analysis was conducted using three analysis matrixes for each research question to guide the synthesis of the data. The data from the country case studies, the survey and the desk research were gathered in the matrixes to identify common themes, patterns and narratives that emerged from all data. Data from the country case studies were used to answer all three research questions. The survey gave specific information on changes in missing children data practices (RQ1) and the desk research, in addition to what is known regarding the vulnerabilities of missing children (RQ2). Columns were used for missing children in general, and the five categories of missing children used throughout this report, namely children who run away, missing children in migration, international parental abductions, abduction by a third person, and lost, injured or otherwise missing (see the definitions box at the end of this chapter for a full description). This allowed us to make general observations, as well as identify specific changes, challenges, and vulnerabilities of specific groups of missing children. Furthermore, in the analysis matrix for barriers and challenges, colour codes were used to visualise by whom a challenge was experienced (e.g. by multiple stakeholders, the police, NGO, or a governmental authority).

Terminology

During our research endeavour, we devoted great attention to the use of consistent terminology. The below table shows the key terms that were used, and the specific content attributed to them.

Key concepts and definitions

Missing Children: Missing Children Europe (MCE) identifies 5 categories of missing children: runaways, abduction by a third person, international parental abduction, children missing in migration and lost, injured or otherwise missing children.

Children who run away: All children who run away from home or are pushed out of home, or from the institutions where they have been placed.[20]

Abduction by a third person: Children who are abducted by someone other than a parent or guardian.[21]

International parental abduction: "…when one parent takes or keeps their child in a country other than the child's habitual residence without the consent of the other parent with parental custody."[22]

Children missing in migration: "Children who migrated from their country of origin fleeing conflict or persecution in search of survival, security, improved standards of living, education, economic opportunities, protection from exploitation and abuse, family reunification or a combination or a combination of these or other factors. They are considered missing when they are registered with state authorities and go missing from the reception/ accommodation centres provided for them."[23]

Lost, injured or otherwise missing: 'This category of cases includes disappearances for no apparent reason of smaller children who got lost (…) and do not know how to get back to a place. It may concern children who got hurt and cannot immediately be found such as accidents during sports activities or youth camps. It can also include children with a physical or other disability which limits their ability to return home or to the place where their parent or custodian is.'[24]

Data system: a system that aligns different data actors at different levels and enables a process of collecting, storing, viewing, sharing, reporting and analysing intersectional, disaggregated and comparable data based on clear and uniform guidance on collecting data and data quality. Data systems include data collection and reporting mechanisms, statistical systems and datasets. Note that by data system for missing children, we are not referring to a database, nor to a case management system for active missing children cases, nor are we referring to a search tool such as a missing child alert system.

Data actors: defined in this report as stakeholders who enter, use, or share data on missing children. They can do so by, for example, entering data into a system (e.g. local police officers) or by being data users and use data to trace a child, prevent a child from going missing, or produce data reports (e.g. NGOs, police, governmental institutions).

Data practices: the entering, collecting, reporting, storing, sharing and analysing of missing children data.

Intersecting vulnerabilities: include individual socio-economic characteristics (such as gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and health status), characteristics in the environment (such as the home-, school-, and social- environment), and broader societal norms and policy structures, in sum factors that put some children more at risk of going missing than other children.

Reading guide, structure of this report

This report presents the results of the research conducted on the basis of the above methodology The report answers the three main research questions based on all the data collected through the country case studies, survey and desk research. **Chapter 2** describes the promising shifts in data practices, policies, procedures, coordination efforts and awareness. In **Chapter 3** we describe what challenges remain when it comes to data practices and by whom these challenges are experienced. Next, **Chapter 4** describes the specific practices and challenges for collecting data on the intersecting vulnerabilities of missing children and what is known about the link between these vulnerabilities and going missing or experiencing violence while missing. Lastly, **Chapter 5** describes the opportunities to move towards comprehensive and comparable data collection and reporting mechanisms and datasets on missing children and the conclusions and recommendations.

20. Missing Children Europe. (n.d.). Who are children who run away and why do they run away? Retrieved February 13, 2024, from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/runaways/
21. Missing Children Europe. (n.d.) Criminal Abduction. Retrieved February 13, 2024, from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/criminal_abductions/
22. (p.4)
23. Missing Children Europe. (n.d.) Children in migration. Retrieved February 13, 2024, from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/children-in-migration/ Please note the current preference to children missing in migration encompassing not only unaccompanied minors that go missing, but all children in migration being at risk of separation and disappearance.
24. Missing Children Europe. (n.d.) Lost, injured or otherwise missing. Retrieved February 13, 2024, from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/lost-injured-missing/.

Promising shifts in missing children data practices

What has changed in defining, coordinating, collecting, storing and sharing missing children data since 2013 and what challenges remain?

To understand the current situation, prevailing challenges and how missing children data practices in the EU can be improved, we have mapped the changes that have occurred since 2013, looking at how defining, reporting, collecting and storing intersectional data on missing children in 27 EU MS has developed. We have focused on the period of the last 10 years to gain an overview of how the data practices have changed since the last comprehensive Europe-wide report on missing children data was published.[5] The reported changes in this chapter come from the data collected across 10 EU MS in which an in-depth case study analysis was conducted, along with the information coming from the survey among 116000 hotlines in the other 17 EU MS.[25]

While certain aspects of the missing children data practices remain challenging and still reflect the situation that was present 10 years ago, many promising shifts can be observed across different EU countries reflecting efforts at both the national- and international levels to improve the situation. In a number of countries, **developments in the broader legal and institutional context** in which the missing children data practices take place can be identified. These include changes related to **operational rules and definitions, coordination** efforts between data actors, **increased awareness on the issue of missing children among the stakeholders** involved and the public. While **several direct changes** can be observed in a few EU MS in the way data on missing children is collected, stored and shared, most interviewees and surveyed stakeholders generally report changes effectuated in the last decade to **generally enhance the management of missing children cases, search efforts and coordination.**

Changes that were implemented across the various EU MS can be seen as a response to the persisting need to tackle a particular category of missing children. Some countries, for example, face struggles and focus their efforts on **improving the situation around unaccompanied migrant children**, while others attempt to tackle the persisting issue of children who (repeatedly) **run away**. Other factors that influence the development of missing children data practices include **digitalisation and new technologies**; methods that can be used to detect the child; **changes in data privacy rules and privacy protection policies**; and increased awareness among the public and officials triggering improvements in data practices. In the following section, we describe each of these changes in more detail,[26] before moving on to the prevailing challenges and barriers that continue to persist (Chapter 3).

2.1 Data collection, storing and sharing practices

In three EU countries, changes were identified in case management data indicators that are collected when the child goes missing. Indicators were added to collect more data on missing children by 116000 hotline operators in **Greece**, such as ethnicity, and reason of disappearance,[27] **Spain**, including where the child disappeared from, the number of missing episodes, and timing and duration of disappearance,[28] and **Portugal**, capturing risk factors associated with disappearance, social network profile(s) and phone number.[29]

Practices in collecting and publishing official statistics on missing children were also revised in a few countries. **In Lithuania**, changes were made to the kind of statistical data made publicly available, **distinguishing between the number of missing children and the number of missing children reports** per year. This provides a more accurate picture and reflects the number of children who repeatedly run away which count into the overall number of missing children reports.[30] **In Finland**, in 2015, the Emergency Response Center, which runs the 116000 line, started to **gather numerical statistics** on missing children, and since 2021 includes calls which have not been dispatched to the Police.[31] In **Greece**, since 2020, the Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors collects data from each organisation working in the field of unaccompanied minors and stores it in a unique central database.[32]

Changes in operational systems that facilitate response efforts, which simultaneously facilitate collection of new or additional data on missing children are also observed in several countries. **In Lithuania, the 116000 hotline** was implemented in 2014 to provide support to carers and families and to enhance the tracing and search efforts for the missing child.[29] **In Finland, the information system**, used by the Emergency Response Center to collect data on

While certain aspects of the missing children data practices remain challenging and still reflect the situation that was present 10 years ago, many promising shifts can be observed across different EU countries

25. For the detailed methodology see Chapter 1, section 1.1 Methodological Approach.
26. For a full description of the changes implemented across different EU countries mentioned in this section, please refer to the corresponding country case studies, sub-chapter: "Changes since 2013 in defining, reporting, collecting and storing data on missing children", included in the second part of this report.
27. Case study Greece, chapter 5.3 State of play Greece.
28. Spain survey data.
29. Portugal survey data.
30. Case study Lithuania, chapter 7.3 State of play Lithuania.
31. Case study Finland, chapter 3.3 State of play Finland
32. Case study Greece, chapter 5.3 State of play Greece

missing children, changed in 2019.[30] **In Romania**, a **missing child alert system** was implemented (RO-ALERT) in 2021 to facilitate quicker response and tracing of the missing child. Additionally, a new operation system was implemented to better understand and prevent human trafficking and exploitation of minors.[33]

It is worth noting that, aside from the six above countries, interviewed and surveyed stakeholders in the majority of the other four EU countries in this study did not report that there were significant changes in the last 10 years in the type of missing children data that is collected, stored and shared.

2.2 Legal and policy frameworks, search protocols and operational definitions of missing children

Since 2013, several **legal acts** have been introduced across five countries, which regulate the procedures and actions of different actors involved in active missing children cases and in turn influence which information on missing children is collected during and after the search and by who, and how missing children are operationally defined.

In Belgium, in 2022, the Criminal Policy Service of the Ministry of Justice published a revised protocol for tracing missing people, including children.[34] **In Lithuania**, the police adopted several legal acts in the past decade that more specifically regulate which actions should be taken by police officers, including the Criminal Procedure Code[35] description of the procedure for Lithuanian Police 2015 March 23 order no. 5-V(S)-13(RN)); regarding the initial actions of police officers after receiving a report of a missing person (General Commissioner of the Lithuanian Police 2017 January 2 instruction).[36] **In Italy**, laws were amended to take into account the social relevance of the phenomenon of missing children which led to changes in the roles of the Prefects and the police and simplified operational procedures (this includes Law No. 203 of 2012 and the related Circular 6745 of 2020 with the additional supplement also of 2020).[37] **In Cyprus**, since 2023 missing children cases are officially considered as high-risk, moving these cases from the local police jurisdiction to the jurisdiction of the Police Crime Investigation Department (Police Order 3/53 of July 2023).[38]

In Poland, a change was adopted in how missing children are defined and children who run away are no longer marked as missing children (see textbox below).[39]

Children who run away are no longer marked as missing children in Poland

In Poland, a new act was introduced in 2018 to regulate the procedural issues related to missing persons, including children. Notably, after the 2018 reform, cases of children who run away are distinguished from missing children cases. Children who run away are registered in the police database, but no longer marked as a "missing child".

With the change of legal definition, children who run away are now dealt with by prevention police departments, while cases of missing children are handled by criminal police departments. The reasoning behind this change was that prevention units are trained and equipped with knowledge and experience to deal with cases of "demoralisation of minors."[40] However, this reclassification has important consequences. The scope of search activities is more limited for children who run away than for children marked "missing". While the change aims to align responsibilities with departmental expertise, it risks creating unequal levels of protection depending on how a case is categorised. This approach may, therefore, require further evaluation, particularly in terms of whether it supports or hinders timely and effective child protection responses.

33. Case study Romania, chapter 10.3 State of play Romania
34. Case study Belgium, chapter 1.3 State of play Belgium.
35. Law on the Approval, Entry into Force and Implementation of the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Republic of Lithuania. Criminal Procedure Code. https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.163482/asr.
36. Criminal Police Office. (2018). What to do in the case of a missing child: situation in Lithuania.
37. Case study Italy, chapter 6.3 State of play Italy.
38 Case study Cyprus, chapter 2.3 State of play Cyprus.
39. Case study Poland, chapter 9.3 State of play Poland.
40. Case study Poland, chapter 9.3 State of play Poland.

Besides the above-mentioned adopted legal acts that regulate the procedures and actions taken by law enforcement, several legal changes were made related to other key authorities. **In Finland**, the revision of the Child Protective Services law came into force in 2020, which forbids using private services in searching for children who run away. Additionally, provision 69a on returning a child who has left the institution without permission of the Child Protection Act 417/2007 was added in 2019. This provision outlines the responsibilities and possibilities of institutions in the case of children who run away.[41] **In Greece**, in 2019 European Directions related to unaccompanied migrant children (UMCs) were adopted in the Greek legal framework, and in 2020 the Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors under the Ministry of Migration & Asylum was founded, which collects and stores data on missing unaccompanied minors.[42]

At the European Union level, legislative developments and policy changes can also be identified, particularly related to unaccompanied migrant children. Several EU legal instruments look at the specific situation of migrant children, with a view to preventing them from going missing and falling victim to criminal networks. Under the legislative files within the newly adopted EU Pact for Migration and Asylum[43], some safeguards for children, especially accompanied minors have been introduced. For example, Article 23 of Asylum Procedures Regulation[44] outlines special guarantees for unaccompanied minors. Amongst other guarantees, it specifies that a representative (guardian) should be appointed no later than 15 days from the making of the application. This is consistent with the recast of Reception Conditions Directive[45].

Article 14 of the Trafficking in Human Beings Directive[46] requires Member States to provide specific assistance and support to child victims. In this context, the Guidance issued by the European Commission in relation to Unaccompanied and Separated Children fleeing from war in Ukraine on how the Temporary Protection Directive and relevant EU law is to be understood also needs to be mentioned.[47]

In 2020, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) also called on its Member States to do 'whatever is necessary and required in the best interests of the child' to avoid the disappearance of thousands of child refugees and migrants globally.[48]

More generally, both the EU[49] and the Council of Europe's[50] strategies on the rights of the child mention the issue of missing children. The EU Strategy on the rights of the child in particular underlines the need for reliable and comparable data to develop evidence-based policies.[51] Following up on this, the European Commission's Recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child urges Member States to "strengthen data collection on children going missing in the Union" and invites them to "develop systems of monitoring and evaluation, in line with national and regional competencies, including children's rights and well-being indicators."[52].

2.3 Coordination between (inter) national data actors

Increased cooperation efforts between the data actors at **the national level** were observed in several EU countries. In Cyprus, the police created the Coordinating Office at the police headquarters to monitor cases of missing persons, contributing to increased coordination among different data actors.[53] The establishment of the Coordinating Office came amid a rise in disappearances of Unaccompanied Migrant Children, which may have played a role in its creation. **In Italy**, the establishment of the Missing Persons Extraordinary Commissioner in 2018 has facilitated the coordination of actions, greater dialogue and cooperation between institutions and civil society.[54]

The persisting issue of children who run away (repeatedly), especially from institutional care homes, has pushed Lithuania and Finland to strengthen collaboration efforts between different stakeholders involved. In Lithuania, a working group was organised to develop an "Algorithm for Response to Reports of Missing Children", which brought all the key stakeholders around the table to harmonise the inter-institutional algorithm governing the mandatory actions that each institution must take both when children are reported missing and when they return.[55] Shorter time frames to share the information between organisations were agreed upon. **In Finland**, a guideline on the use of executive assistance in searching for children who run away was issued jointly by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the National Police Board and the Emergency Response Center in March 2022,

41. Case study Finland, chapter 3.3 State of play Finland.
42. Case study Greece, chapter 5.3 State of play Greece.
43. European Commission. (n.d.). Pact on Migration and Asylum. European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en
44. Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union and repealing Directive 2013/32/EU
45. Directive (EU) 2024/1346 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection
46. 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 Directive - EU - 2024/1712 - EN - EUR-Lex
47. European Commission (n.d.). Unaccompanied and separated Children fleeing from war in Ukraine – FAQs on Registration, Reception and Care.
48. Recommendation 2172 (2020) Missing refugee and migrant children in Europe.
49. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS EU strategy on the rights of the child COM/2021/142 final.
50. COUNCIL OF EUROPE STRATEGY FOR THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (2022-2027) "Children's rights in action: from continuous implementation to joint innovation.", Council of Europe, March 2022. https://rm.coe.int/council-of-europe-strategy-for-the-rights-of-the-child-2022-2027-child/1680a5ef27
51. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS EU strategy on the rights of the child COM/2021/142 final.
52. C(2024) 2680, paragraphs 32 and 33.
53. Case study Cyprus, chapter 2.8 Conclusions and discussions.
54. Case study Italy, chapter 6.3 State of play Italy.
55. Office of the Ombudsperson for Child's rights, Activity Report 2021: http://vtaki.lt/lt/vtaki-veiklos-srityss/veiklos-ataskaitos.

which aimed to clarify the division of responsibilities among different actors in runaway cases when there is no imminent threat or danger.[56]

In Romania, a prevention programme has been launched with the aim of encouraging partnership between different involved actors and reducing missing children numbers in the country (see textbox below), through a focus on children missing school, a risk factor for going missing.[57]

E-Romnja Association: Fostering partnerships in Romania

In Romania, the E-Romnja Association, which advocates for the respect, integrity, and dignity of Roma women, started a pilot programme in 2017-2019 (restarted in 2023) to create a partnership between the Police, Social Welfare Services, the Child Protection system and schools. The aim of the programme was to investigate why children drop out of school. It can be seen as a prevention programme that contributes to reducing the numbers of children going missing in Romania and fosters partnerships among different actors.

Besides the above-mentioned efforts at the national level to improve the cooperation between different key stakeholder, several initiatives can be identified **at the European level** which aim at fostering **international cooperation** between actors involved in dealing with missing children cases.[58]

2.4 European and international level search tools, data collection and reporting mechanisms, and networks gathering and exchanging data on missing children

In the last decade, various European and international level tools, platforms and data collection and reporting mechanisms have been established or further expanded directly or tangentially dealing with various aspects of defining, reporting, collecting and storing intersectional data on missing children.

Interpol Yellow Notice

INTERPOL has the mandate to support international searches for missing persons. The INTERPOL Yellow Notice is a global police alert, i.e. a search tool for a missing person. Yellow notices are published for victims of parental abductions, criminal abductions (kidnappings) or unexplained disappearances. The Yellow Notice can also be used to help identify a person who is unable to identify himself or herself and is a valuable law enforcement tool as it can increase the chances of a missing person being located, particularly if there is a possibility that the person might travel, or be taken, abroad. In 2023, INTERPOL issued 2,687 Yellow Notices.[59] While this number gives an indication of trends in missing persons, it is not a reliable indicator of the total caseload of (cross border) cases, because an alert is but one search tool amongst others used by law enforcement and are not issued in every case.

Schengen Information System II

The European Union's Schengen Information System (SIS) is a large-scale IT system managed by eu-LISA, that supports public security and the exchange of information on people and objects between national law enforcement, border control, customs, visa and judicial authorities of the Schengen States. Upgraded in 2003, the second generation of SIS (SIS II)[60] stores alerts which are entered by any country using the SIS. These alerts become available in real-time for all SIS users. Since 2018 the SIS II in addition to existing alerts on missing persons[61] enables national authorities to issue **preventive alerts** in the system to protect people in need including children at risk of (parental) abduction or potential victims of terrorism, trafficking in human beings, gender-ased violence, or armed conflict/hostilities.[62] In 2023[63], 70,182 missing children alerts and 6,011 preventive alerts on children were registered in the SIS II system. The Schengen Alerts are a tool for preventing missing persons or persons at risk of going missing from leaving the Schengen zone unnoticed. The number of alerts registered is, therefore, not a reliable indicator of the total caseload of missing persons in the Schengen zone.

Eurodac

The European Union's Asylum Dactyloscopy Database, also managed by eu-LISA, assists in the processing of EU asylum applications. It is a centralised database that collects and handles the biometric data (fingerprints and facial images) of third-country nationals or stateless persons seeking international protection, or having crossed irregularly the border of an EU Member State, or found illegally staying in an EU Member State, including minors above 6 years.[64] The new Eurodac Regulation (2024) lowers the minimum age for collecting minors' biometric data from 14 to 6 years old, raising ethical concerns about storing sensitive data, privacy issues, and long-term accuracy. Additionally, the regulation permits coercion in exceptional cases, sparking child protection concerns regarding its practical implementation.

The network of Central Authorities (CAs) for international parental abductions

Based on the 1980 Hague Convention,[65] signatory states designate Central Authorities to assist parents who are victims of cross-border child abduction and facilitate the procedure to return the child. Besides working together at the international level, Central Authorities of the EU Member States cooperate closely and intensively[66] in specific return procedures, hence data coordination or exchange occurs on a case-by-case basis. The Hague Conference on Private International law (HCCH), which monitors the application of the 1980 Hague Convention through meetings of the Special Commission (SC), regularly commits studies to gather and analyse available data from the Central Authorities on child abduction cases reported to them.[67]

International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP)

Since 1996, ICMP has worked with governments, civil society organisations, international organisations and others globally to address the issue of people who have gone missing as a result of armed conflict, human rights abuses, disasters, organised crime, irregular migration and other causes. In 2014, legal status was given to ICMP constituting it as a treaty-based international organisation with its system of governance and international capacities. ICMP developed and uses an Integrated Data Management System (IDMS). This online tool is suitable for large amounts of data and makes it easy to read, protect and share data. Data is collected from various countries across the world, including some European countries.

> The Yellow Notice can also be used to help identify a person who is unable to identify himself or herself and is a valuable law enforcement tool as it can increase the chances of a missing person being located

Missing Children Europe and the 116000 hotline member organisations.

Missing Children Europe is the European Federation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children connecting 32 grassroots organisations across Europe. Missing Children Europe coordinates the operation of the 116000 hotline providing a free and 24/7 service to children (at risk of) going missing and their families. The hotline is a European universal number reserved since 2007[68] and is regulated by the EU prescribing for the Member States to ensure that end-users have access free of charge to a service operating a hotline available on the number '116000' to report cases of missing children and entities operating the hotline receive resource funding. The applicable legal regime was strengthened in 2018.[69] Since 2014, MCE annually publishes a report on figures and trends on missing children from the hotlines network.[70]

56. Sosiaali-ja terveysministerio. (2022). Ohjeistus eri toimijoiden vastuista luvatta sijaishuoltopaikastaan poistuneen tai sinne palaamatta jättäneen lapsen palauttamiseksi sijaishuoltopaikkaansa (Instructions on the responsibilities of various actors for returning a child who has left their foster care placement without permission or has failed to return there).
57. Case study Romania, chapter 10.3 State of play Romania.
58. Police Expert Network – Missing Persons (PEN-MP). (n.d.). Establishment PEN-MP. Retrieved from https://www.pen-mp.eu/about-pen-mp/
59. INTERPOL. (n.d.). Yellow Notices. Retrieved from https://www.interpol.int/en/How-we-work/Notices/Yellow-Notices/View-Yellow-Notices
60. Regulation (EC) No 1987/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 December 2006 on the establishment, operation and use of the second generation Schengen Information System (SIS II).
61. Council Decision 2007/533/JHA of 12 June 2007 on the establishment, operation and use of the second generation Schengen Information System (SIS II).
62. Regulation (EU) 2018/1862 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 November 2018 on the establishment, operation and use of the Schengen Information System (SIS) in the field of police cooperation and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, amending and repealing Council Decision 2007/533/JHA, and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1986/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Commission Decision 2010/261/EU.
63. Data from January 2023 – September 2023.(European Commission, 2023).
    Note: The top 4 MS that create preventive alerts for minors are FR, DE, BE and CH
64. Regulation (EU) 2024/1358 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on the establishment of 'Eurodac' for the comparison of biometric data in order to effectively apply Regulations (EU) 2024/1351 and (EU) 2024/1350 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Directive 2001/55/EC and to identify illegally staying third-country nationals and stateless persons and on requests for the comparison with Eurodac data by Member States' law enforcement authorities and Europol for law enforcement purposes, amending Regulations (EU) 2018/1240 and (EU) 2019/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Regulation (EU) No 603/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council
65. Convention oof 25 October 1980 on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.
66. Council Regulation (EU) 2019/1111 of 25 June 2019 on jurisdiction, the recognition and enforcement of decisions in matrimonial matters and the matters of parental responsibility, and on international child abduction (recast).
67. HCCH Prel. Doc. No 19A of September 2023, Global Report – Statistical study of applications made in 2021 under the 1980 Child Abduction Convention by Prof Dr. Nigel Lowe & Victoria Stephens, accessed via: https://assets.hcch.net/docs/bf685eaa-91f2-412a-bb19-e39f80df262a.pdf
68. Decision 2007/116/EC of 15 February 2007 on reserving the national numbering range beginning with "116" for harmonised numbers for harmonised services of social value. See also Directive 2009/136/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 November 2009 amending Directive 2002/22/EC on universal service and users' rights relating to electronic communications networks and services, Directive 2002/58/EC concerning the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy in the electronic communications sector and Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004 on cooperation between national authorities responsible for the enforcement of consumer protection laws.
69. Directive 2009/136/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 November 2009 amending Directive 2002/22/EC on universal service and users' rights relating to electronic communications networks and services, Directive 2002/58/EC concerning the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy in the electronic communications sector and Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004 on cooperation between national authorities responsible for the enforcement of consumer protection laws.
70. Missing Children Europe. (n. d.). Annual reports. Retrieved August 16, 2024 from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/annual-reports/

European Guardianship Network

Formally established in 2019, the Network assists in the professionalisation of guardianship systems in the EU Member States, especially tackling the challenges of guardianship for children in migration. The EGN is a membership based network, which provides a forum enabling to develop best practices leading to better outcomes for children and the guardianship services which work with them.[71]

Police Expert Network on Missing Persons (PEN-MP)

PEN-MP is a European network of police-experts covering more than 34 EU- and non-EU countries, which was launched in 2016[72] and where expertise on missing persons investigations is shared.[73] This collaboration contributes to cross-border cooperation in international cases.

Lost in Europe

Lost in Europe is a not-for-profit cross-border journalism project which investigates and uncovers the stories of child migrants going missing after arriving in Europe. Every three years, they collect and publish Member States' data on the disappearance of migrant children.[74]

2.5 Awareness-raising and information

Finally, in some countries, stakeholders reported that the **awareness among the officials and the general public has increased about the issue of missing children**. For example, **in Cyprus**, wide public media coverage of missing events (such as the "Orestis case"[75]) gave rise to an investigation into the way missing persons' cases are handled, triggering the re-assessment of the protocols and actions on missing persons. Attention has also increased to the persisting issue of children running away, often repeatedly and disproportionately, from institutions (e.g. **in Belgium, Finland, Lithuania**).[76] Moreover, attention has increased to the issue of children going missing during migration. For example, in Cyprus where, the disappearance of 14 UMCs was intensely discussed in the Standing Committee on Human Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women.[77]

Public campaigns have also contributed to **public involvement** in missing cases which was indicated by stakeholders as being a positive contribution to solving cases (e.g. in Lithuania, Poland, Romania).[78] Stakeholders also reported **increased awareness of the importance of prevention efforts** to prevent children from going missing and/or being (sexually or economically) exploited. For example, in **Romania**, increased awareness of human trafficking and exploitation was identified by stakeholders, including actively running different prevention initiatives (e.g. young children are increasingly taught how to avoid 'the Loverboy method', which is a common grooming tactic for human traffickers).[79]

2.6 Conclusions on the changes in missing children data practices since 2013

Since 2013, **several promising changes have been observed in different EU countries**, which is a result of efforts on both national- and international level to improve the situation.[80] In terms of **data collection, storing and sharing practices, improvements include**:

(1) 116000 hotline operators adding indicators to collect more in-depth case management data on missing children (reported in Greece, Spain, and Portugal);
(2) updates in the way official statistics on missing children is collected and published (reported in Finland, Greece, Lithuania).[81] For example, in Lithuania the number of children involved has been separated from the number of disappearances and made publicly available (which was one of the recommendations provided in the 2013 Ecorys study);
(3) developments in operational systems that facilitate response efforts and new or additional data collection mechanisms (reported in Finland, Lithuania, and Romania).[82]

Since 2013, **changes have been implemented in the legal- and policy frameworks and operational rules and definitions** related to missing children across EU Member States. New and updated legal acts were introduced, which, in most cases, better define and regulate the procedures, steps, and responsibilities of different stakeholders involved. In turn, these also impact what information on missing children is collected and by whom (reported in Belgium, Cyprus, Italy, Finland, Greece, Lithuania. Poland).[83]

There have also been **new developments in fostering cooperation between different data actors on both national and EU levels**. Increased cooperation has been reported in Cyprus, Italy, Finland, Lithuania, and Romania.[84] At the European level, many new initiatives have been launched that promote international cooperation, such as the Police Expert Network on Missing Persons (PEN-MP), Lost in Europe and the European Guardianship Network.[85]

Additionally, the increased **awareness among the officials and the general public on the issue of missing children and the importance of prevention**[86] efforts have been observed, including public campaigns that increased public involvement (reported in Belgium, Cyprus, Lithuania, Poland, Finland, and Romania).[87]

Above mentioned changes that were implemented across the various EU MS can be seen as a response to the persisting need to tackle a particular category of missing children. Some countries, for example, face struggles and focus their efforts **on improving the situation around unaccompanied migrant children**, while others attempt to tackle the persisting issue of **children who repeatedly run away**. Other factors that influence the development of missing children data practices include **digitalisation and new technologies**, methods that can be used to detect the child; **changes in data privacy rules and privacy protection policies**; and increased awareness among the public and officials triggering the improvements in data practices. While changes have been made to improve the situation, challenges and barriers related to missing children data practices continue to prevail. We explore the different barriers that data actors across EU Member States continue to encounter in the following chapter.

Lost in Europe is a not-for-profit cross-border journalism project which investigates and uncovers the stories of child migrants going missing after arriving in Europe. Every three years, they collect and publish Member States' data on the disappearance of migrant children.

71. European Guardianship Network. (n.d.). European Guardianship Network. Retrieved February 13, 2024, from https://www.egnetwork.eu/.
72. Politie Nederland. (2023, December 7). Politie Nederland voorzitter internationaal netwerk persoonsvermissingen [Police Netherlands chair international network of missing persons]. Retrieved February 13, 2024, from https://www.politie.nl/nieuws/2023/december/7/00-politie-nederland-trapt-voorzitterschap-internationaal-netwerk- persoonsvermissingen-af.html.
73. Police Expert Network – Missing Persons. (n.d.). Missing persons: Together we care. Retrieved from https://www.pen-mp.eu/
74. Lost in Europe. (n.d.). Data and Statistics Investigation. Retrieved from https://lostineurope.eu/investigations/data-and-statistics-investigations
75. Cyprus serial killer Nikos Metaxas handed seven life sentences', BBC news, 24 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48744157>. https://politis.com.cy/301762/article.
76. Case studies Belgium, Finland, Lithuania, section 'State of play'.
77. Case study Cyprus, chapter 2.3 State of play Cyprus.
78. Case studies Lithuania, Poland and Romania, section 'State of play'.
79. Case study Romania, chapter 10.3 State of play Romania.
80. For a full description of the changes implemented across different EU countries mentioned in this section, please refer to the corresponding country case studies, sub-chapter: "Changes since 2013 in defining, reporting, collecting and storing data on missing children", included in the second part of this report.
81. Case study Greece, chapter 5.3 State of play Greece; Survey data Spain and Portugal.
82. Case studies Finland, Greece and Lithuania, section 'State of play'.
83. Case studies Finland, Lithuania and Romania, section 'State of play'.
84. Case studies Belgium, Cyprus, Italy, Finland, Greece, Lithuania and Poland, section 'State of play'.
85. Case studies Cyprus, Italy, Finland, Lithuania and Romania, section 'State of play'.
86. Case studies Belgium and the Netherlands, section 'State of play'.
87. Case studies Belgium and the Netherlands, section 'State of play'.

Barriers and challenges in missing children data practices experienced by data actors

What has changed in defining, coordinating, collecting, storing and sharing missing children data since 2013 and **what challenges remain?**

Besides the several promising developments in the last 10 years discussed in the previous section, challenges and barriers in missing children data practices remain, limiting the opportunity for data actors to enter and process intersectional prevention and case management data on missing children. In this section, we focus on those challenges in relation to missing children data practices, which are reported by different interviewed stakeholders across 10 country case studies. These are the challenges that the stakeholders experience in their data practices related to missing children's cases and which they themselves identify as creating barriers in their daily work. After covering the barriers as experienced and reported by the stakeholders, we will move to discussing in more detail the prevailing data challenges specifically focusing on intersecting vulnerabilities (in Chapter 4).

It is worth noting that each country has its country-specific challenges. For example, in France, there is a common misconception amongst parents that there is a mandatory 48-hour waiting time before contacting the police. In Romania, the need for improving IT infrastructure among police is reported. The more specific challenges related to each country's context can be found in corresponding country case studies (see "Section 10.5 Key barriers and challenges in the data pathway"). In the below section, we provide a synthesis of those challenges that repeatedly come up and are mentioned by stakeholders across several MS.

3.1 Reported challenges in missing children data practices

Data protection and privacy rules pose a barrier to data sharing.

Data protection and privacy laws complicate what data can be collected and shared and in what form data are allowed to be shared. This was frequently mentioned as a barrier by various stakeholders in several countries (**Finland, Belgium, Lithuania, Cyprus, Greece, the Netherlands and France**).[88] It has been increasingly relevant since 2018 when the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)[89] became effective in the EU. The need to abide by data privacy rules, as well as ethical considerations, lead stakeholders to question what data should be collected and shared. This is despite the fact that GDPR rules do allow for the sharing of children's data for child protection reasons, such as in ongoing cross border missing cases, and should therefore not function as a barrier for data exchange where the failure to do so would cause the safety or wellbeing of a child to be compromised, such as in active missing cases.[90] What GDPR does prohibit is the development of a centralised European database on all missing children cases, but this is technically not needed for management of active cases if there are good protocols in place for data-sharing between relevant actors. More relevant to the subject of this report, GDPR does not hinder the collection and comparison of statistical data on missing children from each Member State.

The absence of centralised, uniform, and interoperable data systems at national and local levels hampers a comprehensive understanding of the missing children situation.
In some countries, the absence of a centralised or uniform data collection and reporting mechanism on missing children was reported as a barrier to collecting country-wide data (**Finland, the Netherlands and Belgium**).[91] Also, the lack of interoperability of different local data collection and reporting mechanisms was identified by stakeholders as an issue for both prevention and search efforts (**France, Belgium, Romania, and Italy**).[92]

These barriers exist at the national level but subsequently have consequences for the possibility of gaining a complete picture at the European level or at the international level. Certain stakeholders suggested there should be a dedicated EU-level database for missing children data (**Romania**).[93]

As mentioned before, the EU SIS and Interpol Yellow Notice platforms are search tools which only hold information on cross border cases in which a(n) (preventive) alert was issued. Additionally, GDPR contributes to the lack of uniformity in data collection by preventing the centralisation of case-level data at the EU level.

High-quality individual data entry practices could be better facilitated.

The quality of the available missing children data is dependent on how data is entered into the system. Several countries reported that the ways in which data is entered can differ in quality and quantity, which, in turn, threatens the usability, coherence and comparability of available data (**France and the Netherlands**). This risk can be mitigated through training and operational protocols. However, insufficient specialised training for high-quality data entry was expressed as an issue by the **Greek** police. In Greece, the lack of a structured framework for data collection was also expressed by the NGO operating the 116000 hotline.

Challenges in (cross-border) cooperation persist that slow down procedures and hinder (international) data sharing.

At the national level, a lack of collaboration (for example, between the police and the 116000 hotline) was mentioned as a barrier that slows down procedures (**Greece, Italy and Romania**). Furthermore, several countries mentioned the challenges related to cross-border collaborations. For

88. Case studies Finland, Belgium, Lithuania, Cyprus, Greece, the Netherlands and France, section 'Key barriers and challenges in the data pathway'.
89. Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation).
90. For more information on GDPR as a barrier to information sharing in cross border cases of missing children, see Missing Children Europe, Practical guidance on preventing and responding to trafficking and disappearances of children in migration, pp 81-87. Accessed 18 February 2025: https://missingchildreneurope.eu/?wpdmdl=1323
91. Case studies Finland, the Netherlands and Belgium, section 'Key barriers and challenges in the data pathway'.
92. Case studies France, Belgium, Romania and Italy, section 'Key barriers and challenges in the data pathway'
93. Case study Romania, chapter 10.8 Conclusions & discussion.

example, in **Belgium**, the police identified cross-border collaborations as challenging due to different rules and procedures that apply between (neighbouring) countries. A respondent from the Missing Persons Unit explains that the Dutch police can generally act faster than the Belgium police, which complicates collaboration in cross-border cases.[81]

This is particularly relevant and becomes an important barrier for solving cases that concern unaccompanied migrant children (UMCs). Currently, there is no systematic exchange of the whereabouts of UMCs between EU MS. This means that **if a child disappears in one country and is signalled in another country, this is not systematically communicated**, and the child remains listed as missing in the country from which it went missing. If the police believe a child went abroad, the EU's SIS and Interpol's Yellow Notice channels can be used to signal the profile of the missing child in other countries. However, according to the Belgian Guardianship Service, updates on whether the child was found do not often occur. An MCE study from 2018 suggests that this may be the case because often these channels are not checked when a child arrives in a country.[95]

Specific challenges related to entering and sharing data on unaccompanied migrant children persist.

The matter of unaccompanied migrant children and barriers to cross-border collaboration is further complicated by the fact that **many UMCs use aliases and different birth dates when arriving in another country.** Reasons for this are poorly understood, but likely associated with the lack of knowledge and trust in government authorities and police officials.[96] Context specific challenges for UMCs were specifically noted by stakeholders in Greece and Italy. For UMCs, Greece is often considered as a transit country. To cross the border and move to the rest of Europe, they often change their names which complicates identification and the tracing of their whereabouts.[97] Furthermore, in Italy, due to the reduction in reception centres, the goals and needs of UMCs are decreasingly met (e.g. studying, finding a job or reuniting with family). According to key stakeholders, this increases the likelihood for UMCs to go missing.[98]

Official missing children data only provide information on those children that are reported as missing. The challenge of underreported missing children persists.

Missing Children Europe understands migrant children are considered missing 'when they are registered with state authorities and go missing from the reception centre or accommodation provided for them'. However, incomplete and inconsistent reporting makes it difficult to fully grasp the picture, making thus centralised data collection and sharing crucial.

As already identified at the start of the research project, structural underreporting of missing children is a known issue. This challenge was identified by multiple interviewed stakeholders. For example, in the **Netherlands**, it was highlighted that not all children who go missing are reported. In Belgium, this is the case for an unknown number of UMCs who are not registered in Belgium and live under the radar. This is especially observed among Maghrebian street youth, who travel across different countries in Europe without being registered.[84] Furthermore, cultural differences were observed as potentially influencing reporting practices. For example, in Belgium, where the police identified that gender (and age) may influence the reporting behaviour of parents or caregivers, with them worrying quicker about their teenage daughter than their teenage son. Additionally, the Belgium police observed that in some cultures it is more common for children to play on the street at night than in others. This could contribute to differences in how quickly parents or caretakers report their child as missing.[99]

Varying definitions of missing children provide ambiguities in the responsibilities and procedures that need to be followed. Also, different definitions do not allow consistent comparison and aggregation of country-level data.

In several countries, stakeholders report having difficulties in how missing children are defined, which influences the responsibilities and procedures that need to be followed (Belgium, Italy, Lithuania Poland). For example, in Lithuania, current legislation does not clearly define who is a missing child and what the separate categories of missing children are. From the operational perspective of initiating a search for a child and the subsequent actions, this might not be seen as problematic. However, some of the stakeholders indicate that when it comes to the preventative actions and support needs of children, defining clearly who a missing child is, separating different categories of missing children, such as children abducted by a parent, and children who (repeatedly) run away from other cases, could help to have a common language and clear understanding among the various actors involved in the search for children in active cases and/or in the follow-up and safeguarding of the child after a case is closed, as well as for prevention purposes.

The fact that countries across the EU define and therefore report missing children data differently does not allow cross-country comparison and aggregation of country-level data. This becomes particularly apparent when looking at how children who run away are captured in the data across countries. While in some countries children who run away count into official missing children data statistics, in others they are not included (e.g. Finland) or no longer categorised as missing children (e.g. Poland). Additionally, stakeholders from various countries observed that children who run away from institutions are disproportionately represented in the number of missing children. When children repeatedly run away, this poses the question of whether to count the child as one missing child, or whether to count each missing episode separately (as one child can be reported missing thirty times). The EU Member States have different approaches to this and do not always further specify what is meant with the reported number. Such differing approaches both challenge the comparability of the data and leave room for different interpretations.

To overcome all these challenges, stakeholders would need to:

1. share and exchange data to facilitate the search in active cases;
2. retain comparable, minimally disaggregated data (for example by age and gender) on the overall caseload of missing children; and
3. collect more refined data on the interplay between vulnerabilities, missing episodes and outcomes for children, information usually gathered through return home interviews, where these exist, after a child has been found.

3.2 Conclusions on the challenges in missing children data practices

The above-mentioned challenges include the recurring barriers reported by the interviewed stakeholders that reflect the views of national data actors in the 10 MS. **Data protection and privacy rules** are perceived to create a barrier to data sharing for different actors involved (observed in Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands). Stakeholders also identify the need to improve **individual data practices to enhance the data quality** (observed in France, Greece, the Netherlands); challenges in national and international **cooperation procedures and protocols that hinder (international) data sharing** (observed in Belgium, Greece, Italy, Romania); specific challenges related to **entering and sharing data on unaccompanied migrant children** (observed in Belgium, Greece, Italy); and the **issue of underreporting** of missing children (observed in Belgium, Greece, the Netherlands).

It is apparent that differences exist in data practices, in the needs and interests of different data actors, and in the systems, protocols and definitions used by different data actors within EU Member States. Thus, currently not one consistent and comprehensive missing children data mechanism exists that would allow for coherent data collection on missing children across EU Member States. There is a **lack of nationally centralised missing children data retention and/or collection mechanisms** (observed in Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands), a lack of **interoperability of local data collection/retention mechanisms for both prevention and search efforts** (observed in France, Belgium, Romania, and Italy), and **varying (or absent) missing children definitions**, provide ambiguities in the responsibilities and procedures that need to be followed (observed in Belgium, Italy, Lithuania, Poland).

The absence of centralised national data retention and collection mechanisms in some countries prevents cross-country comparison and aggregation of country-level data. The differing definitions and reporting of missing children data among EU countries, in turn, currently hinder the development of a comprehensive and comparable EU-level dataset on missing children.

95. Case study Belgium, chapter 1.5 Key barriers and challenges in the data pathway. This was confirmed in the INTERACT study by Missing Children Europe where table top simulation exercises on children in migration going missing across borders demonstrated that in none of the 6 countries involved did actors check the SIS database upon arrival of a child to see if it was missing from elsewhere, nor did any of them communicate across borders for child protection purposes. See Missing Children Europe, Interact: Towards a more efficient cooperation across borders for the protection of children in migration from trafficking and exploitation Report on multi-agency practical simulations on fictional cases in Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, The United Kingdom and Sweden, pp 32-33. Accessed 18 February 2025: https://missingchildreneurope.eu/?wpdmdl=1324
96. Case study Belgium, chapter 1.5 Key barriers and challenges in the data pathway.
97. Case study Greece, chapter 5.5 Key barriers and challenges in the data pathway.
98. Case study Italy, chapter 6.5 Key barriers and challenges in the data pathway. See also Missing Children Europe. (2016). SUMMIT: Safeguarding Unaccompanied Migrant Minors from going Missing by Identifying Best Practices and Training Actors on Interagency Cooperation.
99. Case study Belgium, chapter 1.5 Key barriers and challenges in the data pathway.

Disaggregated data needed to understand the link between missing and intersecting vulnerabilities

What are the practices and challenges to reflect the link between intersecting vulnerabilities and children going missing and/or experiencing violence while missed and what is known about this link?

An episode of going missing can be seen as a signal of underlying issues.[100] It can also be the start of a period of marginalisation and exclusion, which can have an impact throughout the life- course on their opportunities, income, health, etc. All children who go missing are vulnerable. Some go missing because of their specific vulnerabilities, linked to individual or social characteristics. Others find themselves in vulnerable situations such as abuse, exploitation, or neglect.[101] Being vulnerable means they are at risk of coming to physical and/or emotional/psychological harm. The assessment of risk of harm in missing person investigations is particularly important, because it provides the basis for how cases are prioritised and how resources are allocated.[102] It also offers us a better understanding of prevention and aftercare actions and strategies.

In this chapter, we focus on the current practices and challenges experienced by stakeholders when it comes to collecting, storing, sharing and analysing data on intersecting vulnerabilities. Next, we report on what is known about the link between intersecting vulnerabilities and children going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing. The findings of this chapter are based on the ten country case studies (including the desk research on this topic), the survey and the additional EU-level desk research.

4.1 Current practices on data reflecting intersecting vulnerabilities

From the reported data practices, we observe that **currently there is very little systematic data collection on intersecting vulnerabilities** of missing children across the EU (reported in all 10 country case studies: Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland and Romania).

Data on age and gender are generally collected systematically, but more specific data on the child's contextual situation (e.g. home—school, and social environment) and personal characteristics (e.g., attitude, sexual orientation, (mental) health indicators, and character) are not.[103]

The exact data indicators that are collected when a child is reported missing are usually described in the guidelines of law enforcement (police) which undertakes search efforts. The purpose of such data is to facilitate the search and finding of the child as quickly as possible.

100. For extensive research on the link between going missing and underlying adverse childhood experiences, see Missing Children Europe, RADAR Full Research Report Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses, April 2021, accessed 18 February 2025: https://missingchildreneurope.eu/?wpdmdl=2507.
101. Hayden, Carol & Shalev, Karen. (2016). The blue light social services? Responding to repeat reports to the police of people missing from institutional locations. Policing and Society. 28. 1-17. 10.1080/10439463.2016.1138475.
102. Shalev Greene, K., & Alys, L (Eds.). (2016). Missing Persons: A handbook of research (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315595603.
103. Case studies Belgium, Cyprus, Finland and France, section 'Data pathway and stakeholders' and case study Lithuania chapter 1.3 State of play Lithuania.

Based on the interviewed stakeholders in the 10 country case studies, the following data is being collected when the child is reported missing:

- **Personal information and details:** child's name; age, gender, place of residence;, social security number, address and telephone number, nationality;[104]
- **Physical appearance and features:** physique, height, posture, skin colour, hair style, eye colour, tattoos, clothing worn at the time of the disappearance/accessories, salient features, any special signs, personal belongings, documents, photos and other elements useful for identification;
- **Other data that can be helpful in finding the child:** possible route and addresses where someone may go (e.g. previous place of residence; place of residence of the parents; other addresses of trusted people), means of transportation (e.g. walking, biking); in case of a motor vehicle, the registration number, etc;
- **The circumstances of disappearance:** time when and district where the person was last seen and other circumstances of disappearance that can help find the child.

The record of the circumstances of disappearance may include information on specific vulnerabilities of the child. For example, **in Belgium**, police may collect information about the particularities of the (social) context of the child that may be the basis for the disappearance (e.g. tensions with family or friends, disagreements, tensions with third parties).[105] **In Lithuania**, it was explained by the police officer that the information about the circumstances of disappearance is gathered, according to which police can assess whether the child ran away, or was perhaps a victim of criminal activity, or simply did not return home on time or escaped from the care home.[106] **In the Netherlands**, it was reported that if the missing child had previously run away, then the police officer who collects the data can elaborate on the previous incident by writing freely in a block of text.[107] **In Finland**, information on the child's circle of friends, and who they were last seen with, is also gathered. This helps in determining possible links to crime or drugs and thereby, with determining the urgency of the case.[108] **However, all of this information which captures the circumstances of disappearance and may include information on the child's situation and various risk factors, is registered in the free fill-out form (detailed comments are recorded) but is not classified or categorised. It is seen as a case-specific description needed for the search of the child**. It is therefore information that is difficult to retrieve from the system.

Additionally, some of the information which includes data on intersecting vulnerabilities might be collected after the child returns, by those institutions and actors which take actions to provide the needed support to the child and the family. For

104. Nationality is not collected across all interviewed countries. As a standard data indicator it was reported in Cyprus and the Netherlands.
105. Case study Belgium, chapter 1.4 Data pathway and stakeholders.
106. Case study Lithuania, chapter 7.4 Data pathway and stakeholders.
107. Case study Netherlands, chapter 8.4 Data pathway and stakeholders.
108. Case study Finland, chapter 3.4 Data pathway and stakeholders.

example, in Lithuania when a child goes missing, besides the police, the State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service is immediately informed. When agency specialists receive information from the police about the missing child, they arrive at the location and first speak to the legal guardians of the child (parents), once the child returns, they also separately speak with the child and listen to the child's account of what happened. They carry out what is called a child's situation assessment, in which "risk and protective factors" are being evaluated (these include risk factors related to the child's functioning, the social environment, to legal guardians of the child, etc).[108] While outside of the scope of the interviewed 10 EU countries, it is worth adding that a similar practice is also observed in the UK, where there is a requirement that all minors should be offered a return home interview (RHI) within 72 hours of returning from a missing episode. The aim is to better understand the reasons for going missing and, where needed, take actions to safeguard the young person and reduce the likelihood of them going missing again.[109]

Overall, stakeholders across countries indicated that information about a child's situation and various risk factors, for example, history of substance use, health issues, delinquency, and victimhood due to previous criminal acts, are generally gathered through observation, but are not considered defined indicators in terms of data collection.

4.2 Challenges for systematic data collection on intersecting vulnerabilities

There are several reasons behind the lack of extensive systematic data collection on intersecting vulnerabilities. Firstly, different data actors do not share the same goals and needs when it comes to collecting data on intersecting vulnerabilities. This is because the data that are necessary to trace a child are not per definition the same data that are necessary to prevent children from going missing and experiencing violence while missing. As explained in the above section current data practices are focused on the information that is necessary to trace the child (observed in all 10 country case study countries). There is no felt need to change these data practices as they serve the purpose of tracing missing children. For example, in Poland the police officer acknowledged that expanded missing children data and their disaggregation could be useful for monitoring social trends and prevention, yet it is not a task of a criminal department (which is responsible for solving missing children cases).[110] Similar views were expressed by MCE's member organisations operating the **116000 hotline**.[111]

Moreover, **given the already mentioned barriers and challenges** described in the previous chapter (especially surrounding privacy laws), collecting prevention data on intersecting vulnerabilities is even more challenging. This is the case, for example, in France, where data directly showing racial or ethnic origins and the processing of data concerning sexual orientation are prohibited by the constitution. Such data can only be saved if it is directly linked to the disappearance or when directly linked to objective and permanent physical characteristics.[112] **In Greece**, it was also reported that the national database does not register information about intersecting vulnerabilities. According to the Hellenic Police, this is done for ethical and privacy reasons because disclosure of such data could be disadvantageous for the children themselves.[113] **In Finland**, for example, the police are not allowed to record ethnicity as a standalone category in the system. Yet it could be included in the description (free fill out form), as it can aid with the identification of the missing child.[114] In Romania, interviewed stakeholders also pointed out that the protection of personal data law creates a barrier to collecting data on risk factors and intersecting vulnerabilities since processing personal data can only be done for the purposes of preventing offences and carrying out activities for maintaining and ensuring public order and safety.

While, currently, prevention data on intersecting vulnerabilities are not systematically collected across EU countries, there is evidence (both anecdotal and from international studies) that some children are more likely to go missing and/or experience violence while missing than others (described in detail in section 4.3). Furthermore, the phenomenon of missing children is persistently prevalent, especially for some categories. For example, there is a consistently high reporting of children who (repeatedly) run away, especially from institutions, in several EU MS.[115] The fact that many children (repeatedly) go missing **urges the need for a better understanding of what makes these children do so.** Additionally, stakeholders are increasingly aware of children going missing in migration.[116] However, there are persisting data gaps on these children's whereabouts and drivers for going missing.

If we better understand why children go missing and/or experience violence while missing, **stakeholders working with and for missing children could be much more effective** in their efforts to prevent children from going missing, trace those who are missing and support those who are found.

108. Case study Lithuania, chapter 7.4 Data pathway and stakeholders.
109. Laura Boulton, Jessica Phoenix, Eric Halford & Aiden Sidebottom (2023) Return home interviews with children who have been missing: an exploratory analysis, Police Practice and Research, 24:1, 1-16, DOI: 10.1080/15614263.2022.2092480.
110. Case study Poland, chapter 9.6 Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities.
111. Data from EU 17MS survey.
112. Case study France, chapter vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities. and:Article 6 de la loi n° 78-17 du 6 janvier 1978 relative à l'informatique, aux fichiers et aux libertés. Engl. Law article regarding informatic, files and freedom. Retrieved from: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/article_lc/LEGIARTI000037822942
Décision no. 2007-557 DC from 17 November 2007: https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/decision/2007/2007557DC.htm.
113. Case study Greece, chapter 5.6 Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities.
114. Case study Finland, chapter 3.6 Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities.
115. Case studies Belgium and Finland, section 'State of play'; Case study Cyprus, chapter 2.6 Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities; Case study the Netherlands, chapter 8.4 Key barriers and challenges in the data pathway.
116. Case studies Belgium, Greece and Italy, section 'State of play'.

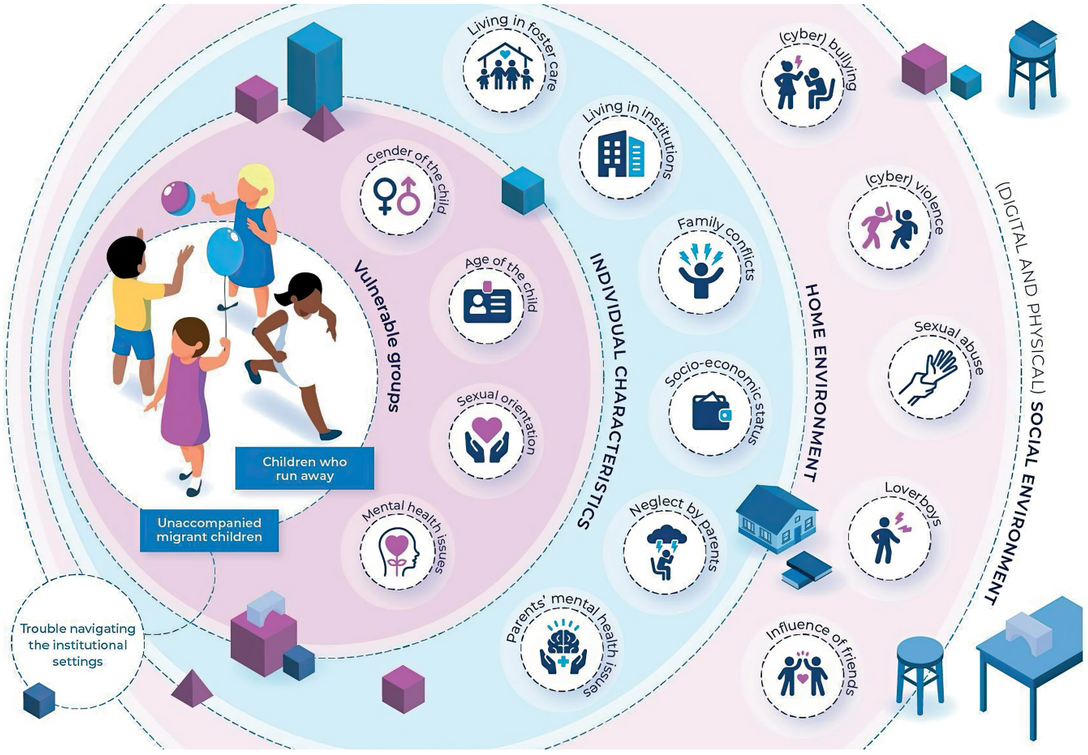
4.3 What is known: the link between intersecting vulnerabilities and missing

First of all, it should be noted that **children who are missing are per definition more vulnerable** to (sexual) violence and/or (economic) exploitation.[117] Additionally, it is known that there are individual- and environmental factors that render some children more vulnerable to going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing than others.

The underlying drivers for going missing are generally a complex combination of intersecting and compounding vulnerabilities that relate to the categories of missing children differently. For example, an unsafe home environment might increase the risk of a child running away but is less likely correlated to the risk of being abducted by a third person. Similarly, being an unaccompanied migrant child (UMC) often comes with its own set of risks, such as situation-specific mental health effects, exposure to human trafficking and sexual- and economic exploitation.[118,119]

Based on available grey- and academic literature and anecdotal evidence from the 57 interviews conducted in the ten country case studies, several individual and environmental characteristics were identified as risk factors for going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing.[120] The **individual risk factors** include gender, age, sexual orientation, mental health issues and substance abuse by the child. Risk factors in the home environment include conflicts in the family, neglect, physical- or sexual abuse, divorce, lack of acceptance, substance abuse and/or mental health issues by parents or caregivers and socioeconomic status (SES). Furthermore, risk factors in the **(digital and physical) social environment** include (cyber) bullying a nd (cyber) violence, sexual abuse, the phenomenon often called "loverboy" which is, in fact a form of grooming, and the influence of friends. Lastly, there are **specific groups of (missing) children** rendered more vulnerable to going missing and experiencing violence while missing. These include children who run away, unaccompanied migrant children, children in institutions, LGBTIQ+ children and Roma children.[121] These risk factors are described in more detail in the following paragraphs and are depicted in **Figure 4.1**.

Figure 4.1 Examples of individual risk factors and risk factors in home- and social environment



117. International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children. Protecting Children on the Move: Understanding and Addressing the Risks of Abuse, Exploitation, and Going Missing during Migration 2022, See also Missing Children Europe Facts and Figures https://missingchildreneurope.eu/child-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation/
118. Case study Belgium, chapter 1.6 Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities.
Décision no. 2007-557 DC from 17 November 2007: https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/decision/2007/2007557DC.htm.
119. Missing Children Europe. (2016). SUMMIT: Safeguarding Unaccompanied Migrant Minors from going Missing by Identifying Best Practices and Training Actors on Interagency Cooperation.
120. Missing Children Europe. (2021). RADAR Full Research Report. Running Away: Drivers, Awareness and Responses.
121. Missing Children Europe. (2021). RADAR Full Research Report. Running Away: Drivers, Awareness and Responses, p12, p42,

Individual characteristics

The first individual factor that might play a role in going missing is the **gender of the child**. In the available data on missing children by the Missing Persons Unit in Belgium, gender differences were found. Boys seem to be highly represented in all age categories, except in the age group 13-17 years. However, no gender differences were observed by key stakeholders in France, the Netherlands and Lithuania.[122] Furthermore, reporting behaviour in Belgium may be influenced by the gender of the child and thus influence what is reflected in the reported numbers.[123] Additionally, trends were observed by stakeholders in terms of the age of the child. Key stakeholders in Cyprus, Finland and Lithuania observed adolescents (12-18 years) as more likely to run away than younger children.[124] Age was also observed to be a risk factor for children in migration (see Chapter 4.3.4).[125] **Sexual orientation** was also observed as a risk factor for going missing. Stakeholders in Belgium, Poland and France indicated that LGBTIQ+ children are disproportionately overrepresented in missing cases, especially among runaway children.[126,127] A UK study found that the odds of a case involving a transgender child going missing were 4.91 times higher in the 2020 lockdown compared with the same time in 2019.[128] The unique vulnerabilities which LGBTIQ+ children and young people experience may mean they are overrepresented amongst the missing person population.

Other individual characteristics such as **mental health issues** and **substance abuse by** children were also indicated as potential risk factors for going missing. Under mental health issues, psychological disorders and complex traumatic experiences were also noted. Both mental health issues and substance abuse were particularly linked with children who run away.[129] These characteristics are often intersecting and compounding with other vulnerabilities and can, in some instances, be seen as outcomes of (for example) an unsafe home- or social environment, rather than a cause of going missing.

The abovementioned individual characteristics are intersecting and compounding, with other individual characteristics, and with vulnerabilities in the home and social environment of the child. Ongoing research needs to be continued to better understand the link between gender, age, sexual orientation and mental health issues (including substance abuse) going missing, how these factors intersect with other risk factors and how correlations may differ per missing category.

Home environment

An **unsafe home environment** was strongly emphasised as an important risk factor for children to go missing[130], especially as a driver for running away.[131] Factors mentioned by key stakeholders as contributing to an unsafe home environment include conflicts or dysfunctionalities in the family, lack of emotional connection, neglect by caregivers, lack of acceptance (for example, due to sexual orientation), domestic violence (including physical and psychological violence), sexual abuse, divorce, substance abuse of parents or caregivers and/or having parents with mental health issues.[132]

In line with this, stakeholders in Romania indicated that **children in foster care** are one of the most at-risk groups of young people and are most likely to run away. This occurs often as a way of signalling distress and dissatisfaction.[133] Furthermore, according to key stakeholders in Belgium and Lithuania, **children who run away from institutions** are disproportionately represented in missing children data.[134] The most common reasons why children run away come from problems they experience either in their home, at their school, or in the care home they are living in. How a runaway child is welcomed back plays a critical role in the likelihood of their being a repeat incident of running away or not.[135]

Furthermore, unaccompanied minors were also observed as a group likely to run away from institutions.[136] Indicating that being a unaccompanied minor and living in an institution can be intersecting vulnerabilities. More detailed descriptions of the vulnerabilities of children who run away children and unaccompanied minors can be found in sub-chapter 4.3.4.[137]

Lastly, we received **contradicting accounts on the relation of socioeconomic status (SES) and going missing**. In Romania, France and Lithuania key stakeholders observe that poor SES increases the risk of going missing.[138] However, in Belgium and Poland, key stakeholders indicate that children go missing from all SES levels.[139] Whether SES correlates with going missing and if this correlation is stronger for specific groups of missing children remains uncertain and needs further research.

The digital and physical social environment

Besides the home environment, influences in children's social environment can render them at an increased risk of going missing. For example, **sexual abuse** (both in the home and social environment) was mentioned as a risk factor for running away by key stakeholders in Lithuania, Greece and Belgium.[140] In Belgium, specifically, female children who run away whilst living in institutions, often coming from unstable families, were observed to be at an increased risk of being approached by perpetrators of grooming (a phenomenon often termed "loverboys"). This subsequently increases their risk of going missing.[141] The **influence of** friends was also observed to be a risk factor for going missing by key stakeholders in Lithuania.[142]

Furthermore, bullying and violence, both physical (especially in the school context) and in the online space, were observed to be important risk factors for going missing. **Cyber violence** was particularly noted as increasingly putting children at risk of going missing by key stakeholders in Lithuania and Italy.[143] More research is needed to better understand the role of the digital environment as it can be both a risk factor and a search tool. On the one hand, it can increase the risk of going missing through online grooming and cyberbullying and facilitate children while missing in their travels. On the other hand, digital innovations can facilitate tracing the missing child.

Groups of children rendered more vulnerable

Children who run away are identified as a particularly vulnerable group.[144] The high incidence of repeated children who run away is especially highlighted, indicating that children are often returned to the same situation without the initial underlying problem being resolved. Issues in the home- school- and institutional environment and individual characteristics such as mental health issues, drug- and alcohol use, and sexual orientation were identified as drivers for running away (Missing Children Europe, 2021). High incidences of children who run away were identified in, for example, Belgium, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Poland and Finland.[145]

Bullying and violence, both physical (especially in the school context) and in the online space, were observed to be important risk factors for going missing. Cyber violence was particularly noted as increasingly putting children at risk of going missing

Children going missing in migration are particularly vulnerable and data are limited on this group because not all children in migration who go missing are noticed and if a missing episode is noticed it is not always reported. There is anecdotal evidence of UMCs living under the radar and travelling throughout Europe.[146] Lost in Europe found that at least 51,000 migrant children have disappeared after arriving in Europe between 2021 and 2023.[147]

The underlying reasons for children in migration to go missing can overlap with other groups of missing children, but some characteristics are specific to this group. For example, trouble navigating the institutional settings of European countries, distrust in authorities and specific traumas and exposure to human trafficking countered during their travels.[148] These negatively influence children's capability to navigate the complex systems and legal frameworks surrounding migration. The fear of deportation, occasionally fed by lack of adequate information and mistrust in authorities especially for those approaching their 18th birthday, is an important reason for children to go missing and move into illegal mobility.[149] Providing children in migration with good information on procedures, waiting times and how to ask for assistance, were observed to decrease the risk of going missing from reception facilities.[150]

Other reasons for UMCs going missing include human trafficking and economic exploitation.[15] For example, in the Netherlands, a trend is observed of UMCs from specific countries of origin going missing. These include Nigerian girls and Indian- and Vietnamese boys. The case of the Nigerian

122. Case studies France, Netherlands and Lithuania, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'
123. The notion that gender may play a role in risk factors for going missing is supported by Warren and colleagues (2016) who analysed 463 child abduction cases in the United States and found that victims were predominantly female. However, evidence is slim and no literature was found on the matter for European countries. It is unknown whether girls are more at risk of being abducted by a third person in (some countries in) Europe as well. More research is needed into the role that gender might play as a risk factor for going missing for the different missing categories.
124. Case studies Cyprus, Finland and Lithuania, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'
125. Two studies from the USA found that younger ages were observed for abduction cases (by family members) (Miller et al., 2008; Walsh et al., 2016). Indicating that whether age is a risk factor for going missing, and at what age risks are highest, depends on the type of disappearance.
126. Case studies Belgium, Poland and France, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
127. Similar findings were found in the USA, were LGBTIQ+ youth are overrepresented among homeless youth (Cunningham et al., 2014; Narendorf et al., 2015).
128. Freya O'Brien, Craig Collie, Karen Shalev Greene & Susan Giles (2022) The impact of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions on missing person reports, Policing and Society, 32:8, 997-1011, DOI: 10.1080/10439463.2021.1999448.
129. Case studies Poland, Lithuania, Greece and Italy, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'
130. Case studies Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Poland and Romania, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
131. Case studies Belgium, Finland and Lithuania, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
132. These findings are supported by findings from the EU funded RADAR project, see Missing Children Europe. (2021). RADAR Full Research Report. Running Away: Drivers, Awareness and Responses, and by tliterature from the USA and the UK, where the likelihood of children running away was found to increase due to physical- and emotional abuse (Gambon et al., 2020; Edinburgh et al., 2013; Malloch & Burgess 2011; Mitchell et al., 2012), high-conflict and low-warmth family environments (Rees, 2011), arguments/problems at home (Malloch & Burgess, 2011), mental health issues or substance abuse of parents (Rees & Rutherford, 2001), and disrupted families and/or children with only 1 parent (Sanchez et al., 2006) or divorced parents (Metlzer et al., 2012).
133. Case study Romania, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
134. Case study Belgium, section 'State of play Belgium' and case study Lithuania, section 'Changes since 2013 in defining, reporting and storing data on missing children'.
135. Missing Children Europe. (2021). RADAR Full Research Report. Running Away: Drivers, Awareness and Responses.. Retrieved August 16, 2024 from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/radar/.
136. Case studies Cyprus, Greece, Belgium and Italy, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
137. Missing Children Europe. (2021). RADAR Full Research Report. Running Away: Drivers, Awareness and Responses. Retrieved August 16, 2024 from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/radar/.
138. Case studies Romania, France and Lithuania, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
139. Case studies Belgium and Poland, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities.
140. Case studies Lithuania, Greece and Belgium, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'
141. Case study Belgium, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
142. Case study Lithuania, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
143. Case studies Lithuania and Italy, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'
144. Missing Children Europe. (2021). RADAR Full Research Report. Running Away: Drivers, Awareness and Responses. Retrieved August 16, 2024 from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/radar/.
145. Case studies Belgium, Netherlands, Lithuania, Poland and Finland, section 'State of play'.
146. Case study Belgium, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'
147. Lost in Europe (2024). Data and Statistics Investigations. Retrieved February 19 2025: https://lostineurope.eu/investigations/data-and-statistics-investigations
148. Missing Children Europe. (2016). SUMMIT: Safeguarding Unaccompanied Migrant Minors from going Missing by Identifying Best Practices and Training Actors on Interagency Cooperation. Retrieved August 16, 2024 from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/summit-project/.
149. Case studies Cyprus, Netherlands, Belgium, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
150. Case study Italy, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.

girls went to criminal court and led to the exposure of a large **human trafficking network**. As for the Indian- and Vietnamese boys, it is hypothesised that their disappearance is related to drug production/trafficking related to the United Kingdom. However, the actual situation remains uncertain.[151] Concern over the fate of these children relates to the increasing crossover between the smugglers who bring these children to Europe in risky and dangerous circumstances and the traffickers who then force these children into sexual and labour exploitation as well as criminal and begging rings.

The reasons for migrant children's disappearance may also include poor reception conditions; a lack of child-friendly information; inefficient family reunification and guardian-appointment procedures; fear of detention or deportation; the desire to join family or friends in another country; and violence and abuse, including illegal adoption and trafficking.[152]

Lastly, there is contradicting evidence on the vulnerabilities of **Roma children**. Roma constitute the largest ethnic minority group in the EU. Roma children were found to be disproportionately represented in institutional care and trafficking.[18] This is likely attributed to the disproportionate representation of Roma in high-risk categories such as family poverty, social exclusion and discrimination. Whether Roma children are also disproportionately likely to go missing remains unknown.

In some countries, Roma children were identified to be at a higher risk of going missing. For example, when children are 'hidden' from Child Protective Services,[153] or 'honour kidnappings' when there are conflicts between Roma families.[154] However, in Poland, being a Roma child was identified as a protective factor. The underlying reasons are the strong social cohesion that gives children a sense of belonging and thus less motive to run away.[155] Further research is needed to further explore that **being a Roma child can be both a risk and a protective factor**, depending on the categories of missing children and the national context.

While considerable efforts have been made to understand why some (groups of) children are more vulnerable to going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing, the reasons why, the effects and extent of this, and particularly how this link is currently and in the future could or should be reflected in the data on missing children needs further investigation.[157]

The link between intersecting vulnerabilities and experiencing violence while missing

Besides the risk factors for going missing, there are also intersecting vulnerabilities that render some missing children more vulnerable to experiencing violence while missing. Firstly, gender seems to play a role in the risk of sexual exploitation. According to key stakeholders, **female children who run away and children in migration are more likely to be sexually exploited,**[157] **whereas migrant boys are more likely to be economically exploited**.[158] Secondly, **LGBTIQ+ children were observed to be at a higher risk of sexual exploitation** than other groups of children who run away.[141,159,160] Thirdly, missing children who were known substance abusers, were observed as being more vulnerable to sexual- and criminal exploitation.[142]

Lastly, **specific groups of missing children were perceived as more at risk of violence and exploitation**. For example, being a **Roma child** was observed in Romania to increase the likelihood of victimisation.[141] Furthermore, **children who ran away from institutions** were observed to be at a higher risk of getting involved or falling victim to, criminal activities[161] or being sexually exploited.[141,162]

151. Case study Netherlands, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'
152. Missing Children Europe. (2016). SUMMIT: Safeguarding Unaccompanied Migrant Minors from going Missing by Identifying Best Practices and Training Actors on Interagency Cooperation. Retrieved August 16, 2024 from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/summit-project/.
    Missing Children Europe, Lost in Migration: Working Together in Protecting Children from Disappearance. Conference Conclusions (2017). European Parliament (2023). Disappearance of migrant children in the EU. At A Glance.
153. Case study Romania, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
154. Case study Finland, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
155. Case study Poland, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
156. Missing Children Europe. (2016). SUMMIT: Safeguarding Unaccompanied Migrant Minors from going Missing by Identifying Best Practices and Training Actors on Interagency Cooperation. Retrieved August 16, 2024 from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/summit-project/.
    Missing Children Europe. (2021). RADAR Full Research Report. Running Away: Drivers, Awareness and Responses.Retrieved August 16, 2024 from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/radar/; Missing Children Europe (2024). CESAGRAM.Online Grooming & Going Missing: the Voices of European Survivors. Retrieved February 19, 2025, from https://missingchildreneurope.eu/cesagram/

157. Case studies Romania, Belgium and Italy, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'
158. Case study Italy, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'
159. This was also observed in by Whitbeck and colleagues (2010) in the USA.
160. Studies in the USA and the UK found that UMCs are generally at a higher risk of being (sexually) exploited and physically abused (Digidiki & Bahbha, 2018; Freccero et al., 2017; Lay & Papadopoulos, 2009). Although these studies do not link the abuse to going missing, such exposure may render them more vulnerable to experience (sexual) violence while missing as was observed for children who run away.
161. Case studies Lithuania and Romania, section 'Vulnerabilities, diversities and intersectionalities'.
162. This is supported by a study conducted by Meltzer and colleagues (2012) in the UK, who found that children who run away are at an increased risk of being exploited or victimised. Furthermore, Tyler and colleagues (2013) found that, among children who run away in the USA, being sexually abused prior to running away increases the risk of sexual abuse during running and of traded sex, especially for female adolescents who ran away before.

4.4 Conclusions on the missing children data practices and challenges, including intersecting vulnerabilities

Given the reported missing children data barriers and challenges that different stakeholders experience (elaborated in Chapter 3), particularly related to privacy laws, the absence of centralised or uniform national data collection and reporting mechanisms in some of the countries, and varying existing definitions of missing children, **developing comprehensive and comparable reporting mechanisms and data sets on missing children at the European level that would include intersectional data on vulnerabilities of missing children, is a complex issue to be tackled**. From the reported data practices, the lack of data on children going missing from vulnerable situations and at higher risk of discrimination and violence can be observed, with very little **systematic data being collected on intersecting vulnerabilities** of missing children across the EU. Besides including characteristics such as age and gender, other personal and background characteristics would provide specific prevention data on the contextual situation of the missing child (e.g. home- school, social environment, sexual orientation; (mental) health indicators, attitude, etc) are not systematically collected.

Since the existing evidence suggests that children's individual and contextual characteristics make some children more vulnerable to going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing than others (as described in section 4.3), understanding and having systematic data collection and reporting mechanisms that would capture these factors, would improve efforts in preventing children from going missing, tracing those who are missing, and providing adequate support to those who are found. **More disaggregated data, which would capture the risk factors related to different individual characteristics, factors related to home, (physical and digital) social environment, is needed to better understand and respond to the needs of children going missing and at higher risk of discrimination and violence**.

Systematically collected data on risk factors, as described above, would also help EU national authorities in deciding when to issue preventive alerts through SIS II to protect vulnerable children. This could also inform the European Commission in developing rules on the categorisation of the types of cases of missing children, in relation to whom EU Member States shall enter data on SIS. In this way, preventive alerts can be issued by the national authorities accompanied by the necessary relevant data, which is aligned at the EU level whether they are children who run away, unaccompanied children in the context of migration and children at risk of parental abduction.

It is important to mention that the data which is needed to trace the child is not necessarily the same data that is required to design effective prevention measures to overcome children going missing and experiencing violence while missing or provide needed support after they return. **While the current missing children data practices largely reflect the goal of collecting the information which is needed to trace the child, considering the incorporation of more elaborated data on intersecting vulnerabilities assumes widening the scope and purpose of the missing children data collection and reporting mechanisms**. However, currently, there is no consensus and equally recognised need among different stakeholders across EU MSs on how to create shared and /or interoperable, let alone comprehensive missing children data collection and reporting mechanisms, which would also include data on intersecting vulnerabilities.

Besides the risk factors for going missing, there are also intersecting vulnerabilities that render some missing children more vulnerable to experiencing violence while missing.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Moving towards comprehensive and comparable reporting mechanisms and data sets on missing children in the EU

What are the possibilities to overcome key challenges in missing children data practices and what can we learn from other (EU-level) data coordination- and information systems?

As explained in our introduction, the need for a better alignment of the different reporting systems and protocols, and improvements in interoperability and coordination among different data actors to effectively track and respond to cases of missing children were identified in 2013. The resulting recommendations made at that time to enhance the situation are still relevant a decade later, with little improvements being observed across EU Member States. As stated earlier, comprehensive, reliable and comparative data sets on missing children are still lacking at the European level today, since the different data authorities at different levels do not collect, report, or store intersectional data on missing children in a disaggregated and comparable way.

Recent developments, including strengthened data privacy laws and digital transformation, further complicate these data challenges on missing children.

To support the development of comprehensive, comparable and sustainable data collection and reporting mechanisms on missing children, as a consequence of and risk factor for violence, the present research study was conducted covering 27 EU Member States, which is a part of the DATA MISSING project, implemented by a consortium led by Missing Children Europe (MCE) in collaboration with Ecorys, Child Focus (CF), Hope for Children (HFC) and the Missing Persons' Families Support Centre (MPFSC).

The key aim of the study was **to contribute to comprehensive and comparable reporting mechanisms and data sets on missing children. and to enable alignment between current practices of different actors regarding their reporting, storing, analysis and sharing of intersectional and comparable data on missing children in the EU**. This research can be seen as another attempt to bring together knowledge on missing children data in the EU Member States a decade after the 2013 Ecorys study. The particular focus of the current research was **on children in vulnerable situations who are at a higher risk of going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing due to intersecting vulnerabilities**.

The research was based on the qualitative approach, employing the triangulation of various data collection methods. This included **10 case studies** (Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland and Romania) to deep dive into the national country contexts, offering detailed information about the most important stakeholders, data practices, and country-specific challenges. Case studies were based on **interviews** with key stakeholders and **national-level desk research**. An **EU-level survey** to gather broad insights from the other 17 EU MS in their data practices was also conducted among organisations operating the 116000 hotline, focusing on what has changed in terms of data collection, reporting, storing, and sharing in the past 10 years and identifying barriers or facilitators for change. Additionally, comprehensive **EU-level desk research** was undertaken to consolidate existing knowledge, ensuring the study is grounded in established academic- and grey literature.

5.1 Key findings

Although missing children data practices remain challenging and largely reflect the situation that existed 10 years ago, several promising shifts were identified across different EU Member States as a result of both national—and **international-level efforts to improve the situation**.

Improvements in the data collection, storing and sharing practices included:

- Addition of indicators to collect more case management data on missing children by 116000 hotline operators (reported in Greece, Spain, and Portugal);
- Changes in collecting and publishing official statistics on missing children (reported in Finland, Greece, Lithuania). For example, in Lithuania, it was made possible to identify the number of children involved besides the number of disappearances (which was one of the recommendations provided in the 2013 Ecorys study[163]);
- Changes in operational systems that facilitate response efforts and new or additional data collection mechanisms (reported in Finland, Lithuania, and Romania).

Since 2013, **changes in the legal- and policy frameworks and operational rules and definitions** were observed at national and European levels. A number of **legal acts** were introduced across seven surveyed countries, which regulate the procedures and actions of different actors involved, clarify responsibilities, what information on missing children is collected and by who (reported in Belgium, Cyprus, Italy, Finland, Greece, Lithuania, Poland). At the European level, legislative developments and policy changes were also identified. For example, several directives look at the specific situation of migrant children, with a view to preventing them from going missing and falling victim to criminal networks, such as Article 24 of the Reception Conditions Directive,[164] Article 25 of the Asylum Procedures Directive[165] and Article 14 of the Trafficking in Human Beings Directive[166] Since 2018, the Schengen Information System II (SIS II), in addition to existing alerts on missing persons,[53] enables national authorities to issue **preventive alerts** in the system to protect people in need including children at risk of abduction or potential victims of terrorism, trafficking in human beings, gender-based violence, or armed conflict/hostilities.[167]

163. European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice, Day, L., Cancedda, A., Dimitrova, D. et al. (2013). Missing children in the European Union – Mapping, data collection and statistics, Publications Office
164. Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast).
165. Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast).
166 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.
167. Regulation (EU) 2018/1862 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 November 2018 on the establishment, operation and use of the Schengen Information System (SIS) in the field of police cooperation and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, amending and repealing Council Decision 2007/533/JHA, and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1986/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Commission Decision 2010/261/EU.

Current data practices are focused on the information that is necessary to trace the child. However, the data that are necessary to trace a child are not per definition the same data that are necessary to prevent children from going missing and experiencing violence while missing

The 2021 EU Strategy on the rights of the child in particular underlines the need for reliable and comparable data to develop evidence-based policies, and particularly emphasises the importance of the hotline network and emphasised the need to continuously improve the missing children hotline through funding and capacity building.[168] The 2024 European Commission Recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems builds on this and urges Member States to "strengthen data collection on children going missing in the Union" and invites them to "develop systems of monitoring and evaluation (…) including children's rights and well-being indicators."[169]

Additionally, **increased cooperation efforts between the data actors at the national level** were reported in several EU countries (reported in Cyprus, Italy, Finland, Lithuania, and Romania). New initiatives were also identified **at the European level aimed at fostering international cooperation** between actors involved in dealing with missing children cases (such as the Police Expert Network on Missing Persons (PEN-MP) and the European Guardianship Network).

Finally, stakeholders reported the increased **awareness among the officials and the general public on the issue of missing children and the importance of prevention efforts** to prevent children from going missing and/or being (sexually or economically) exploited (Belgium, Cyprus, Lithuania, Finland, Romania). Public campaigns contributed to **public involvement** and had a positive contribution to solving missing children cases (e.g. in Lithuania, Poland, Romania).

Challenges in missing children data practices continue to persist. Interviewed and survey stakeholders identified various barriers experienced in their various data practices related to missing children cases:

- **Data protection and privacy rules pose a barrier to data sharing** (reported in Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Greece, Lithuania, and the Netherlands).
- **The absence of a centralised or uniform missing children data collection and reporting mechanism** at the national level limits the possibility of gaining a complete picture of the situation (reported in Belgium, Finland, and the Netherlands).
- **The lack of interoperability of data collection and reporting mechanisms was** identified by stakeholders as an issue for both prevention and search efforts (reported in France, Belgium, Romania, and Italy).
- **The need for better facilitation of high-quality individual data entry practices was recognised** (reported in France, Greece, and the Netherlands).
- **Challenges in (cross-border) cooperation** slow down procedures and hinder (international) data sharing (reported in Belgium, Greece, Italy, Romania).
- **Specific challenges related to entering and sharing data on unaccompanied migrant children persist** (reported in Belgium, Greece, Italy).
- **Underreporting of missing children remains a challenge** (reported in Belgium, Greece, and the Netherlands).
- **Varying definitions of missing children (of the absence of them) provide ambiguities in the responsibilities and procedures that need to be followed** (reported in Belgium, Italy, Lithuania, and Poland).

The above challenges reported by various data actors, support the claim that differences exist in data practices, needs and interests of data actors, as well as the systems, protocols and definitions used across EU MS. Specifically, without an agreed upon definition or comparable official data, children who run away, who consistently make up more than half of all missing children cases reported to the 116000 hotlines since 2014[170], have become an overlooked and misunderstood group. This has left child protection systems currently unable to effectively ascertain the actual figure of children in migration who go missing, as there is no consistency among MS and among professionals in the definition of 'missing children in migration', and data is not collected in a systematic, uniform and comparable way across MS and stakeholders.

168. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Eu strategy on the rights of the child COM/2021/142 final.
169. European Commission Recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child (C(2024) 2680), paragraphs 32-33.
170. Missing Children Europe (2023). Figures and Trends 2022.

collection and reporting mechanisms in some countries is a key issue. Additionally, countries across the EU define, record and report missing children data differently. This inconsistency prevents cross-country comparison and aggregation of country-level data. As a result, it is not currently possible to create a comprehensive, reliable and comparable EU-level dataset on missing children.

Given the already mentioned barriers and challenges, achieving comprehensive and comparable data collection and reporting mechanisms on missing children at the European level - **which would also incorporate data on intersecting vulnerabilities of missing children for the purpose of prevention** - pose even greater challenges. From the reported data practices, we observe that currently, **there is very little systematic data collection on intersecting vulnerabilities** of missing children across the EU, pointing to the lack of data on children going missing from vulnerable situations and at higher risk of discrimination and violence. **Data on age and gender are generally collected systematically**, but more specific data on the contextual situation of the child (e.g. home, school, and social environment) and other personal characteristics (e.g. *race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, mental health*) are not.

Based on available grey- and academic literature and anecdotal evidence from the 57 interviews conducted in the ten country case studies, there is evidence that children's individual- and contextual characteristics render some children more vulnerable to going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing than others. The underlying drivers for going missing are generally a **complex combination of intersecting and compounding vulnerabilities that relate to the categories of missing children differently**. Specific groups of children are more vulnerable to going missing and experiencing violence while missing, including children who run away, unaccompanied migrant children and Roma children. Several characteristics were identified as risk factors for going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing: (1) **individual risk characteristics** (e.g. gender, age, sexual orientation, mental health issues and substance abuse by the child); (2) **risk factors in the home environment** (e.g. conflicts in the family, neglect, physical- or sexual abuse, divorce, lack of acceptance, substance abuse and/or mental health issues by parents or caregivers and socio-economic status (SES)); (3) **risk factors in the (digital and physical) social environment** (e.g. (cyber) bullying and (cyber) violence, sexual abuse, the influence of friends, and grooming).

By understanding why children go missing and/or experience violence while missing, **stakeholders working with and for children (at risk of) going missing, could be much more effective** in their efforts to prevent children from going missing, trace those who are missing and support those who are found. More disaggregated data, which would capture the above-mentioned risk factors, is needed to better understand and respond to the needs of children going missing and at higher risk of discrimination and violence.

Current data practices are focused on the information that is necessary to trace the child. However, the data that are necessary to trace a child are not per definition the same data that are necessary to prevent children from going missing and experiencing violence while missing. There is not yet a shared view and felt need among different stakeholders across EU Member States on how to develop systematic, comprehensive and comparable data collection and reporting mechanisms and data sets which would also include data on intersecting vulnerabilities. Yet in the absence of such data, it is difficult for stakeholders, such as Missing Children Europe, its member organisations and the 116000 hotlines, to monitor the situation, develop effective evidence-based interventions in order to prevent and mitigate the reasons for children to go missing and experience violence while missing and to advocate for evidence based missing children and other child protection policies while lacking quality data.

5.2 Recommendations to enhance and facilitate comprehensive and comparable reporting mechanisms and data sets on missing children at EU level

Given the developments and persisting challenges in the missing children data practices across EU Member States, this report issues three headline recommendations for national and EU policymakers to facilitate the further development

By understanding why children go missing and/or experience violence while missing, stakeholders working with and for children (at risk of) going missing, could be much more effective in their efforts to prevent children from going missing

towards improved comprehensive and comparable reporting mechanisms and data sets on missing children at EU level.

1. High quality and consistent data collection at the Member State level, removing national level barriers, need to be ensured

The different countries, different contexts, and different categories of missing children produce different stories and data pathways. They call for tailor-made solutions and in-country efforts. Many national-level challenges persist, such as the absence of centralised or uniform national missing children data collection and reporting mechanisms; the lack of interoperability between data collection and reporting mechanisms; the need for training of national-level stakeholders on high-quality data collection and individual data entry practices; varying definitions of missing children, creating ambiguities in the responsibilities and procedures that need to be followed; and the lack of collaboration between different country-level stakeholders. **These challenges need to be addressed first, before comprehensive and comparable data collection and reporting mechanisms at EU-level be achieved**.

More knowledge sharing, both between actors within countries and between countries, would help to remove country-level barriers. For example, the revised GDPR was perceived by actors in all countries as the major barrier to data sharing. Stakeholders are extremely careful when it comes to what data they are allowed to collect and share in line with privacy laws. FRA provides clear guidelines with regard to data collection and -sharing in line with GDPR in cases of children deprived of parental care found in another Member State than their own. MCE's INTERACT handbook applies those guidelines to cases of children missing in migration, accompanied by a checklist for those considering to share data in view of cross border cooperation on a case.[171] The interviews conducted as part of this study, however, demonstrated that further development of clear European-wide (or EU-level) guidelines on data collection and sharing in all active cases of missing children, in combination with awareness raising and training would be useful.

2. More resources, leadership and coordination efforts are needed at the EU level to make comprehensive reliable and comparable EU-wide missing children datasets available

More investments and resources are needed at the EU level to improve the data management system on missing children, enabling more effective and comprehensive reporting, storing, analysing and sharing intersectional and comparable data on missing children. Such improvements would help close data gaps, enhance prevention efforts, and support advocacy and policy development aimed at protecting vulnerable children.

EU-level coordination efforts must be reinforced to make comprehensive and comparable reporting mechanisms truly actionable. While a broad infrastructure already exists—ranging from legal frameworks to data systems and networks—the current lack of alignment, clarity on responsibilities, and limited resource allocation hinder its effectiveness. These challenges should serve as a catalyst for further EU-level action to ensure these systems function in a coherent, synergistic manner. Such action could draw inspiration from recent complex initiatives aimed at improving data collection for vulnerable groups of children. For example, the Data Care project by Eurochild and UNICEF has made strides in developing better data protection frameworks for children, ensuring that sensitive data is managed securely while also allowing for cross-border data sharing.[172] Similarly, the International Classification of Violence against Children (ICVAC) developed by UNICEF seeks to standardise how data on violence against children is collected, reported, and used across different regions, creating a more unified approach to addressing this critical issue.[173] These efforts demonstrate the potential of coordinated actions to overcome existing barriers, and they could inform future EU-wide strategies for better data alignment and sharing.

It is essential that we make use of existing national and EU-level infrastructure and available knowledge to increase collaboration and efficiency and to promote the dialogue between the various stakeholders involved. This is particularly important to missing children cases which include a cross-border component.

The responsibilities and tasks regarding the EU-level missing children data still need to be streamlined and further capacities need to be built for national authorities to collect, store, and analyse missing children data in a more convergent way. Building such comprehensive and comparable data collection and reporting mechanisms and datasets needs to be a joint effort at the EU level.

3. More systematic research is needed to identify what makes children more vulnerable to going missing and/or experiencing violence while missing, and to collect more intersectional data on these vulnerabilities across EU Member States.

Given the lack of systematic and comprehensive analysis across the EU Member States on the children going missing from vulnerable situations and at higher risk of discrimination and violence, more research is needed to better understand the link between going missing (and experiencing violence when missing) and intersecting vulnerabilities. More research on the contextual factors, risks and drivers is needed on both individual Member State and EU levels. This would assist in improving and building data practices that take intersecting vulnerabilities into account, in turn allowing for monitoring of the situation and design of the needed preventative measures.

In order to have systematic data on missing children which includes data on intersecting vulnerabilities, there needs to be an effort at the national Member State level to build in such data mechanisms in their national missing children reporting, storing, analysing and sharing data practices. Additionally, in order to develop comprehensive missing children data collection and reporting mechanisms and data sets which are comparable across EU countries, EU-level action is needed to promote the importance of collecting such data and to provide resources to build such EU wide collection and reporting mechanisms.

Improvements in missing children data collection and reporting mechanisms across EU countries would enhance the understanding of drivers and consequences of children going missing, including the link with preventing and combating all forms of violence. This would provide a basis for improved policies, legislation and practices to support children (at risk) of going missing across all fields, such as law enforcement and child protection. In this way, all actors involved could be better equipped to strengthen efforts to prevent and support child victims of violence by reinforcing integrated child protection systems at the national and local levels.

In order to have systematic data on missing children which includes data on intersecting vulnerabilities, there needs to be an effort at the national Member State level to build in such data mechanisms in their national missing children reporting, storing, analysing and sharing data practices

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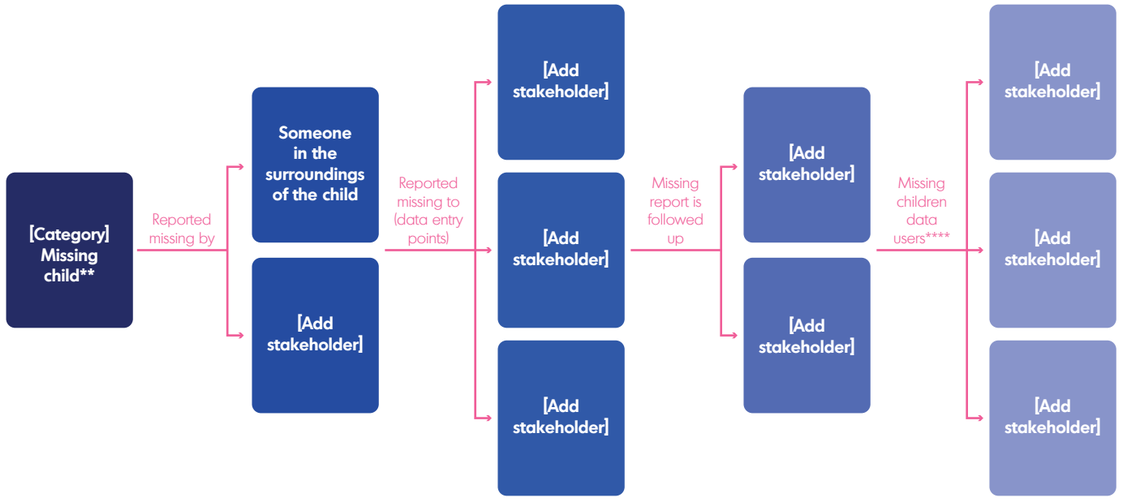
Annexes

Annex A. Stakeholder mapping template



*Kindly add boxes and arrows to most accurately represent the data pathway in your country
** Note that there are likely different data pathways for the different categories of missing children (For example: different authorities handling data for migrant children than for runaways). If so please make multiple pathways.
*** Who takes the lead of the missing children report? Followthe data; who communicates with whom? Who adds data aboutthe missing child?
**** e.g. people or institutions that store/ process/ analyse/ make decisions based on missing children data. Where is the data stored?

Annex B. Guiding questions scoping interview

1. If a child goes missing, who reports them as missing? (e.g. a parent/caretaker/ an institution/ a school/ a refugee center/ a caring facility);
2. To whom do they report a child as missing? (e.g. to local/national police or the 116000 hotlines / another hotline);
3. After a child has been reported missing, what happens? Are missing children cases picked up by local police themselves or is there a separate department?
4. Is there any collaboration?
5. Does this differ for the 'type' of missing child? (i.e. children who run away vs unaccompanied migrant children);
6. Are there any other organisation that collect/process/analyse data on missing children? (e.g. NGOs; private organisations; educational/knowledge institutions; statistical institutions)

Annex C. List of interviewed key stakeholders

Country	Interviewed stakeholders (organisations)	Number of interviewees
Belgium	1. Child Focus Belgium (NGO) – 116000 operator	1
	2. Criminal Policy Service (Dienst Strafrechtelijk Beleid)	2
	3. Guardianship Service (Dienst Voogdij)	1
	4. The local police	1
	5. The federal police, Missing Persons Unit (Cel Vermiste Personen)	1
	6. Central Authority	1
Cyprus	7. Police Office for the Coordination of Missing Persons' Management	1
	8. Ministry of Justice and Public Order (MJPO)	1
	9. Social Welfare Services (SWS)	1
	10. Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (SPAVO)	1
	11. "Hope For Children" CRC Policy Center (HFC)	1
Finland	12. Emergency Response Center (Hätäkeskuslaitos)	1
	13. Abducted Children NGO (Kaapatut Lapset Ry)	1
	14. National Police Board (Keskusrikospoliisi)	1
	15. Ministry of Justice	1
	16. Finnish Immigration Services (Migri)	1
	17. Wellbeing Services of Pirkanmaa 9Pirkanmaan hyvinvointialue)	1
France	18. Droit D'Enfance Foundation 116000 hotline	2
	19. Manu Association (NGO)	1
	20. Central Office for the Suppression of Violence against Persons (OCRVP)	2
Greece	21. Hellenic Police	1
	22. The Smile of the Child (NGO) – 116000 operator	1
	23. Orlando (NGO) - LGBTIQ+ community	1
	24. Arsis (NGO) – social support youth and refugees	1
	25. Juvenile Probation Service of Athens	1
Italy	26. Psicologi per i popoli / Consulta del Commissario straordinario di Governo per le persone scomparse (Psychologists for the Peoples/ Consultation of the Extraordinary Government Commissioner for Missing Persons)	1
	27. Kivanis / Consulta del Commissario straordinario di Governo per le persone scomparse (Kivanis / Advisory Council of the Special Commissioner of Government for Missing Persons)	1
	28. Penelope Scomparsi Uniti /Consulta del Commissario straordinario di Governo per le persone scomparse (Penelope Missing Persons United/ Consultation of the Extraordinary Government Commissioner for Missing Persons)	1
	29. Croce Rossa- RFL / Consulta del Commissario straordinario di Governo per le persone scomparse (Red Cross - RFL /	1
	Consultation of the Extraordinary Government Commissioner for Missing Persons)	
Lithuania	30. Lithuanian Criminal Police Bureau	2
	31. Ministry of the Interior	1
	32. Ministry of Social Security and Labour	1
	33. State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour	1
	34. Office of the Ombudsperson for Child's rights	1
	35. Missing persons' families support centre (NGO)	3
	36. Save the Children (NGO)	1
Netherlands	37. Guardianship Service (NIDOS)	1
	38. The national police	2
Poland	39. Police departments	2
	40. Hotline operator	2
	41. Roma Council	1
	42. UNICEF Romania	1
	43. The Romanian Police	1
	44. Save the Children Organisation	1
	45. E-Romnja Association	1
	46. Association E-Liberare	1
	47. Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities	1
		Total 57

Annex D. Interview guide country case studies

Introduction

Welcome to this interview. We greatly appreciate your time and participation and value your expertise and unique insights in the field of data on missing children. We are conducting this study for the European Commission as part of the DATA MISSING Children project. The aim of this study is to understand how we can improve the processes of collecting, storing, exchanging and analysing data on missing children.

We expect the interview to take approximately one hour. During this interview, we will be exploring various topics that draw upon your valuable experience and knowledge. Your contributions will play a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of this study.

As an expert in your field, your perspective is highly valuable. Feel free to provide insightful responses based on your experience and expertise. We encourage you to share your thoughts openly and honestly.

Rest assured that your privacy and confidentiality are of utmost importance to us. All information shared will be treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for the purposes of this research. Participation is voluntary, and you have the right to choose not to answer any question or withdraw your consent at any time. Your personal information will not be linked to your responses and will be treated with the utmost care.

I will take notes during the interview. *If recorded, ask permission*.

If you have any concerns or questions regarding privacy or the handling of your data, please let us know. We are committed to ensuring that your rights and privacy are respected throughout this interview process.

1. **Could you please explain how often and in what ways you use, search for, or come across missing children data?**
   In the literature, we find five categories of missing children, namely runaways, parental abductions, abduction by a third person, missing unaccompanied migrant children and lost, injured or otherwise missing children.

2. **What definitions of missing children does your organisation use? Why yes/no**

- Do you agree with these categories? Why yes/no

We are looking at the process of missing children data from the moment a child is reported as missing. We want to know which data are collected and by whom, where the data travel to and who uses the data. We have drafted a pathway to visualise this process and I would like to fill in the different stakeholders involved in the different stages

optional: share the screen with pathway and fill in together.

3. **Could you tell me what happens from the moment a child is reported as missing?**

- If a child goes missing, to whom in your country can they be reported? (e.g. data entry)
- What information is collected and by whom, where and how is it stored?
- Who follows up on these data?
- Are there any collaborations between stakeholders? (e.g. police and hotline)
- Are there any other people or organisations that contribute to these data, or use them for other purposes? (e.g. data users)
- Where is your organisation located in this data flow?

We hear stories indicating that there may be links between certain contextual factors and characteristics of the child and the risk of going missing. Some children may also be more likely to experience violence while being missing than others.

4. **What do you know about these links?**

- For example ethnicity and race, migration background, gender (identity) and sexual orientation, (dis)abilities, living/family situation, living in institutions, age, socio-economic context, religion, nationality, language, etc.;
- Do you have any evidence on these links?

5. **Are there any other contextual factors that increase or decrease the risk of children going missing and/or experiencing violence while being missing?**

6. **Looking at the collection, storage and data analysis practices on missing children data, what are the main challenges?**

Check on challenges in terms of:

- Data collection on vulnerabilities;
- Definitions/indicators used for data collection;
- Data collection, reporting, and sharing practices;
- Data actors' needs, interests, skills, awareness, motivation, attitude;
- Data comparability;
- Data quality/consistency;
- Data frequency;
- Technological/IT infrastructure;
- Cooperation/collaboration between data actors;
- Resource capacity;
- Sharing of best practices.

7. **What is going well in terms of missing children data collection, storage and data analysis practices? (e.g. best practices)**

Check on enablers in terms of:

- Data collection on vulnerabilities;
- Definitions/indicators used for data collection;
- Data collection, reporting, and sharing practices;
- Data actors' needs, interests, skills, awareness, motivation, attitude;
- Data comparability;
- Data quality/consistency;
- Data frequency;
- Technological/IT infrastructure;
- Cooperation/collaboration between data actors;
- Resource capacity;
- Sharing of best practices;

8. **In the past 10 years, do you know of any changes in reporting practices in your country in terms of:**

- Awareness among the different stakeholders about the importance of good data on missing children?
- The different definitions and indicators that are used to collect data?
- The different reporting systems and protocols that are used?
- Data on intersecting vulnerabilities?
- Interoperability of different data collection mechanisms?
- Coordination among different stakeholders?
- Have there been any other changes? (e.g. new organisations entering the scope, others leaving)

9. **What, in your opinion, would be the ideal situation when it comes to the ways in which missing children data are handled in your country? What do you need to help you do your job better?**

10. **How can the ideal situation that you described be achieved?**
    A. What is needed and by whom to achieve the ideal situation?
    B. Are there any good practices or examples we can learn from?
    C. What could your organisation do? What could others do? (e.g. the European Commission or Missing Children Europe)

11. **What are opportunities to align the data collection, processing and reporting practices?**

Do you have any questions for me? Or, is there something you wish to share, want me to know that we didn't discuss yet and you had expected me to ask about maybe?

Annex E. 17 EU Member States surveyed

Country	Organisation
Austria	Rat au Draht
Bulgaria	Nadja Centre Foundation
Croatia	Centar za Nestalu
Czech Republic	Cesta z krize, z.ú.
Denmark	Børns Vilkår
Estonia	Lasteabi.ee
Germany	Vermisste Kinder
Hungary	Kék Vonal
Ireland	Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
Latvia	Latvian State Police
Luxembourg	L'Office National de l'Enfance
Malta	Malta Police Association
Portugal	Instituto de Apoio à Criança
Slovakia	Linka detskej istoty
Slovenia	Zavod 116
Spain	Fundación ANAR
Sweden	SOS Alarm

Annex F. Survey missing children data: changes since 2013

Survey missing children data: changes since 2013 Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey for the DATA MISSING children project. It will take about 5-10 minutes. The purpose of this survey is to understand what has changed in the past 10 years (since 2013) in the ways that data on missing children are collected, stored, analysed, and shared. All of your answers are private and confidential. If you have any questions about this survey please feel free to reach out to Michelle Willems (michelle.willems@ecorys.com). This project is funded by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST), under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Value Programme (CERV).

Introduction

1. **What organisation do you work for?**

2. **In what country do you work?**

3. **How are you involved with missing children data in your work? (multiple answers possible)**
   - ☐ My organization collects data/information on missing children
   - ☐ My organization manages data/information on missing children
   - ☐ My organization stores data/information on missing children
   - ☐ My organization analyses data/information on missing children
   - ☐ Other, please specify

Changes in how missing children are defined

4. **Have changes been made since 2013 in the ways a missing child is defined in your organization?**
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Yes, please specify
   - ☐ I don't know

5. **Have changes been made in the categories used to define missing children in your organization since 2013?**
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Yes, please specify
   - ☐ I don't know

6. **Why do you think (no) changes have been made in the ways missing children are defined and categorised in your organization?**

7. **Have changes been made since 2013 in the ways a missing child is defined in your country?**
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Yes, please specify
   - ☐ I don't know

8. **Have changes been made in the categories used to define missing children in your country?**
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Yes, please specify
   - ☐ I don't know

Why do you think (no) changes have been made in the ways missing children are defined and categorised in your country?

Changes in procedures after a child is reported as missing

10. **What information does your organization collect about missing children? (multiple answers possible)**
    - ☐ Date when the child went missing
    - ☐ Sex
    - ☐ Gender
    - ☐ Age
    - ☐ Nationality
    - ☐ Migration status (if applicable)
    - ☐ Where the child is from
    - ☐ Where the child was last seen
    - ☐ Information on the setting of the disappearance (e.g. home, school, public places, residential care institutions)
    - ☐ Timing and duration of disappearance
    - ☐ Year of birth
    - ☐ Age (in year)
    - ☐ Age (in categories e.g. 5-10 years)
    - ☐ Physical appearance that help to identify the child (e.g. birth mark, clothes, etc.)
    - ☐ (Probable) type of disappearance
    - ☐ Number of missing events
    - ☐ Number of missing children cases
    - ☐ First time child went missing / number of missing event
    - ☐ Disappearance involving more than one child
    - ☐ Relation of the child to the person who reports them missing (e.g. parent, guardian, institution, referral by 116000 hotline)
    - ☐ Organizations involved in the search
    - ☐ Other, namely
    - ☐ None of the above, because
    - ☐ I don't know

11. What information is collected by your organization when a child is found? (multiple answers possible)

- ☐ Why the child went missing
- ☐ How the child was found (and by whom)
- ☐ Information on preventing future missing events
- ☐ Whether the child incurred any type of abuse during the missing event
- ☐ Date when the child was found
- ☐ Health conditions of the child
- ☐ Support measures provided after a child was found
- ☐ Other information, namely

☐ None of this information is collected, because

12. Have any of the indicators for information on missing children been added since 2013?

- ☐ No, we have used the same indicators to collect information on missing children since 2013
- ☐ Yes, new indicators have been added. Please specify which ones were added and why each indicator was added
- ☐ I don't know

13. Are you aware of any changes since 2013 in how information on missing children is managed and stored in your organization?

- ☐ Yes, we use different systems to store our data now. Please specify
- ☐ Yes, we use different data protection measures now. Please specify
- ☐ Yes, we update data more frequently now. Please specify why
- ☐ Yes, we update data less frequently now. Please specify why
- ☐ Yes, other change(s) in data management and/or storage of data. Please specify
- ☐ I am not aware of any changes in how data on missing children is managed and stored. Please specify

14. Are you aware of any changes in how information on missing children is shared by your organization with others since 2013?

- ☐ Yes, data on missing children are shared more frequently. Please specify why and with whom
- ☐ Yes, data on missing children are shared less frequently. Please specify why
- ☐ Yes, there are new ways to make data sharing easier. Please specify
- ☐ Yes, data sharing has become more difficult. Please specify
- ☐ I am not aware of any changes in how information on missing children is shared. Please specify

15. Why do you think (no) changes were made since 2013 in the ways missing children data are reported, managed, shared and/or stored?

Changes in numbers of missing children since 2013

16. Do you think the number of children that go missing each year has increased, decreased, or remained stable in the past 10 years in your country?

- ☐ No
- ☐ If yes, can you specify why you think this is the case?

17. Do you have information on the number of children that went missing/ were reported as missing (in 2022, or the most recent year)?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, namely

18. Do you feel the number(s) of missing children cases your organization has accurately represents the number of missing children in your country? Please specify why you think so.

Your responses have been registered! Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey, your input is valuable to us.

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