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# Hidden Chains and Missing Links - Child Trafficking in Romania

## - A Comprehensive Study

January 2025

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The views, conclusions and recommendations in this report are, however, those of the lead researcher and Justice and Care Romania and do not necessarily represent those of the participants mentioned in the report, nor the funder.

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# Executive Summary

This report combines desk and field research that draws on interviews with stakeholders in three counties in Romania (Craiova, Bacău, and Iași) in and develops an overall picture of the state of trafficking in children prevention in Romania. The aim of the report is three-fold. First, it focuses on assessing the scale and the demographic features of the phenomenon. Second, it identifies key areas of vulnerability, as well as awareness levels regarding the risk of trafficking. Finally, it evaluates prevention mechanisms in terms of effectiveness and challenges.

Existing data and respondent information show the following:

## Characteristics of the TIC

- **Official data on TIC provided by the ANITP are open and transparent**, but they **only capture a small proportion** of what is estimated by specialists to be the real face of TIC in Romania. There is a risk that if the data are not supplemented by a more nuanced picture that includes estimates of unreported cases, TIC might not be seen as a priority for authorities.
- Official information shows a **predominance of cases of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation**, with the vast majority of the victims being girls, though there is evidence of a recent increase in cases involving boys.
- The balance in the number of cases leans towards rural areas.

## Areas of vulnerability

- Key areas of vulnerability include several categories that are inter-related and can produce compounded effects: **poverty** (and related issues concerning disorganised families, families with parents working abroad, school abandonment); **unmanaged access to social media**; **the normalisation of sexual violence and exploitation**; and **issues to do with the environment, community or peer groups**.
- Despite registered cases suggesting that families with parents working abroad are not a significant area of concern, interview data suggests more caution regarding this aspect, due to the **often cyclical, informal, and undocumented nature of these migrations for work**.
- **The normalisation of sexual violence and exploitation** is a very concerning area of risk and is worsened by other variables (e.g. lack of sexual education, high rates of domestic violence).

## Awareness

- Awareness of the risks of trafficking among children is limited. There is a superficial understanding, but there is a **lack of a conscious internalisation of the dangers**.
- The level of awareness among adults and the wider community is also low and is hindered by **lack of trust in public institutions, by the taboo nature of sexuality and by the lack of community solidarity and civic sense**.

- In the case of professionals, awareness is also influenced by lack of trust in institutions and by a **lack of understanding of responsibilities associated with specific roles** (e.g. school counsellor). There is also a lack of a consistent victim-focused approach to vulnerable cases.

## Prevention mechanisms and gaps

- **Recent legislative changes have filled a major gap** in the area of trafficking, and of related crimes concerning minors.
- There are still concerns **about the length of judicial proceedings and about the lack of specialisation of judges** in trafficking cases.
- There has been an increase in **collaborative prevention initiatives**, from the information perspective.
- Gaps and areas for development point to resource pressures and the need for more targeted and innovative prevention activities to include **community-level prevention activities focused on direct intervention on identified vulnerabilities, career advice, inclusive initiatives, focus on children's agency, and finally incorporation of awareness and prevention tools into the curriculum**.

## Broader emerging issues

- Unfortunately, there are **no 'silver bullet' solutions**.
- **Collaborative activities in and with the community** are the most effective tools.
- **Presence of external stakeholders** in schools (e.g. ANITP and NGO representatives) gives more credibility to prevention activities.
- **While important, national campaigns and regional campaigns are not as successful in prevention, in the sense that they do not use focused targeting and aim for general information**.
- **Engaging families and communities actively** in prevention strategies is time-consuming and requires on-the-ground presence and trust building to **foster civic sense and solidarity** but can engage otherwise difficult to access vulnerable groups.
- Participation in community-based prevention activities is enhanced by integration with other activities (after-school clubs, tutoring, provision of food), and they can attract vulnerable groups, and **by deploying human resources and capabilities at community level** to assess and work with vulnerable families.
- Prevention activities that incorporate **opportunities for community-based activities** and that focus on **personal development and career advice** can mitigate some of the risks.
- Early identification of risks and risk reduction is time- and resource-intensive. 1-2-1 long-term guidance is important, but this can be enhanced by the development of **community-based networks of support**.
- Information is key, but there is a need for **inclusion into the curriculum in an integrated way that addresses different areas** (health, sex and relationships education, legal education, education relating to different types of risks such as bullying, violence, drug use, trafficking).



# List of Acronyms

<b>ANITP</b>	National Agency against the Trafficking of Persons (Agenția Națională Împotriva Traficului de Persoane)
<b>BCCO</b>	Brigade for Combatting Organised Crime (Brigada de Combatere a Criminalității Organizate)
<b>CJRAE</b>	County Centre for Educational Resources and Assistance (Centrul Județean de Resurse și Asistență Educațională)
<b>DIICOT</b>	Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime and Terrorism (Direcția de Investigare a Infracțiunilor de Criminalitate Organizată și Terorism)
<b>GRETA</b>	Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings
<b>IJP</b>	County Police Inspectorate (Inspectoratul Județean de Poliție)
<b>ISJ</b>	County School Inspectorate (Inspectoratul Școlar Județean)
<b>JCRO</b>	Justice and Care Romania
<b>MNIR</b>	National Mechanism for the Identification and Referral of Victims of Trafficking in Persons (Mecanismul Național de Identificare și Referire a Victimelor Traficului de Persoane)
<b>SNITP</b>	National Strategy against the Trafficking of Persons (Strategia Națională Împotriva Traficului de Persoane)
<b>TIC</b>	Trafficking in Children
<b>TIP</b>	Trafficking in Persons
<b>US-TIP Report</b>	United States' State Department Trafficking in Persons Report

# Introduction

## Context of the Study

Romania is an important source country for trafficking in persons in Europe, in particular for the purpose of sexual and labour exploitation.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, a large number of victims are exploited on the territory of Romania, with labour exploitation of foreign victims on the increase, triggered in part by labour shortages.<sup>2</sup> Within this, child trafficking remains an issue of high concern, in particular due to the apparent lack of progress by authorities in shifting the rate of incidence.

Grounded in this context, this project fits within the framework of the development of Justice and Care Romania (JCRO) programming and activities. At a broader level, it has the potential to feed into responses by other organisations and communities in Romania that focus on combatting human trafficking.

Justice and Care Romania (JCRO) was established in 2020 with the aim of supporting the recovery and reintegration of survivors of human trafficking. Since its foundation, JCRO has been active in establishing partnerships with Romanian government anti-trafficking agencies, including the National Agency against Trafficking in Persons (ANITP), the national rapporteur on trafficking in persons (TIP). It has also provided leadership in strengthening the anti-trafficking sector in Romania, being instrumental in the establishment of ProTECT, a multi-agency national anti-trafficking platform. The next step in the work of JCRO entails the development of a holistic programme focused on addressing child trafficking in Romania, which is based on a collaborative framework for action that brings together a range of relevant stakeholders, including state institutions, NGOs, and community leaders.

The scoping research is prompted by the gap between, on the one hand, the scale of the phenomenon in Romania, and on the other, by the scarcity of systematic data on the nature and prevalence of human trafficking. The specific focus on the trafficking in children (TIC) in Romania in this study aims to address some of the data limitations. The overall purpose of the research was to investigate the level of prevalence and characteristics of child trafficking in Romania, to assess the level of awareness about the phenomenon and mechanisms aiming at combatting it, and the challenges associated with these processes.

The project took a two-step approach comprising a desk research phase followed by a field research phase. The aim of the desk research was to provide initial findings regarding the nature and scale of the phenomenon of TIC in Romania, and to focus the field research phase onto areas with a high rate of cases. The field research focused on providing an in-depth perspective on the challenges faced by relevant stakeholders that operate in the areas relevant to anti-trafficking and child safeguarding efforts.

The report is organised into eight sections. It starts with a contextualisation of the research and a discussion of the methodological approach. The core sections cover: the prevalence of the TIC in Romania; the demographic characteristics of the victims; areas of vulnerability; the current level of awareness and understanding of human trafficking risks and reporting mechanisms (focusing on children, adults and communities, and professionals); and finally, mechanisms for the prevention of trafficking and gaps. The report ends with a short conclusion and a list of recommendations.

# Research Methodology

## Clarification on terminology

For the purpose of this report, the trafficking in persons (TIP) is defined in accordance with the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (the Palermo Protocol), which came into force in December 2000. The Palermo Protocol defines TIP as follows:

**“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.<sup>3</sup>**

In line with the Protocol, trafficking in children (TIC) refers to the act of trafficking as defined above, where “Child” shall mean any person under eighteen years of age<sup>4</sup>.

The project pursued a mixed-methods approach. The desk research was conducted primarily on grey literature from various national and international organisations working on TIP and child protection, on governmental reports, and finally, on legal frameworks relevant to anti-trafficking and child protection in Romania. It drew primarily on quantitative data, in line with the main purposes of assessing the scale of the TIC in Romania, of identifying key demographic characteristics of victims, of probing existing prosecution, prevention and protection tools, and of shaping the selection of cases for the fieldwork. In addition to the quantitative focus, the desk research traced qualitative the evolutions of the anti-trafficking work in Romania in terms of both legislative changes and inter-institutional dynamics.

Field research constituted the most important aspect of the project. Between May and November 2024, a total of 28 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders were conducted (24 face-to-face and 4 online) in three locations in Romania: Dolj County, Bacău County, and Iași County. Dolj and Bacău were selected on the basis that they are the counties with the highest incidence of cases of TIC over the last five years. Iași was added as a third location as a convenience sample, with a view to providing a point of comparison for Bacău (as they differ in terms of the rate of victimisation, while sharing regional characteristics). The distribution of the interviews are as follows: Dolj – 10, Bacău – 9, and Iași – 9. For purposes of consistency, in each of the three locations, respondents were anti-trafficking specialists in state institutions, child protection specialists in state institutions, education specialists in state institutions, school counsellors (working in urban and rural schools), representatives of NGOs working in areas including anti-trafficking, child education and inclusion, and legal professionals in two of the locations. To ensure the confidentiality of the respondents, all personal information has been removed, and data used in the report is anonymised. Respondents are only identified on the basis of their area of specialisation (e.g. anti-trafficking specialist, education specialist, child protection specialist, school counsellor, NGO specialist).

## Limitations of the study

The project opted for qualitative interviews as a data collection method in order to capture a range of views from different stakeholders with regards to the prevention of TIC, and the challenges and opportunities associated with it. While the data revealed common grounds across the different areas of specialism and geographical locations, the research only identifies particular trends and themes. On the one hand, more comprehensive research is necessary to test the generalisability of some of these points of failure. On the other hand, further qualitative research could expand on the depth and particularity of some of the findings.

# Prevalence of child trafficking in Romania

## Overall scale

Over the last decade, the number of identified trafficked persons in Romania has followed (with some variation) a generally descendent trend, with a high of 880 cases in 2015 and cases standing at their lowest so far in 2023 (451). Within this positive trend, however, the number of identified trafficked children has not followed a similar pattern: there are some visible variations in the last five years (212 cases in 2018, 327 in 2019, 255 in 2020, 282 in 2021, 234 in 2022, and 221 in 2023), but the numbers remain high. Moreover, the number of identified trafficked children as a percentage of overall cases has stayed both high and consistent (with a spike in 2021) (Fig. 1).

Child trafficking as a percentage of total cases

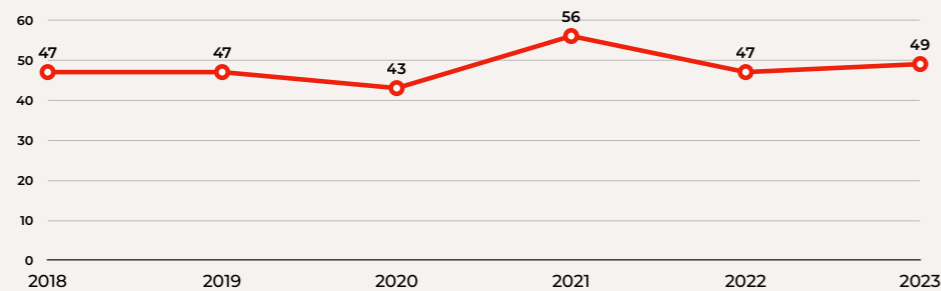


Fig. 1: Data compiled from ANITP Date Deschise 2018-2022<sup>5</sup> and Chera 2024<sup>6</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that the ANITP data only refers to registered cases. It is highly likely that the real number of instances of trafficking in persons (TIP) is significantly larger. In addition, the data available has been subject to challenges, due to potential for under-reporting and incongruence between numbers coming from ANITP and those coming from the DIICOT.

**Concern:** Underestimation of scale can have a potential impact on how the government approaches the issue: the efforts and allocation of funding may correlate with the perceived scale of the problem, with other areas being prioritised at the expense of anti-trafficking efforts.

These issues have been reiterated by the specialists on the ground. In line with the data from the ANITP, respondents have observed a rise in the number of cases of TIC, and there is agreement across the board that the real number is significantly higher. Factors mentioned as barriers to a more accurate estimate of the scale include:

- The increase in the sexual exploitation and abuse of children via online platforms<sup>7</sup> makes detection more difficult.
- The predominance of the 'lover boy' method of recruitment makes it difficult for the persons exploited to recognise their victimhood.

- The identification of cases depends on the effectiveness and professionalism of investigators and of other actors involved in dealing with at-risk and suspected incidents of trafficking.
- The efficiency of trafficking networks in bypassing border control. Here, anti-trafficking specialists from the Dolj County mentioned the existence of known organised crime networks smuggling victims to the United States via Mexico, as well as in Europe (Germany, Switzerland and the UK being mentioned as destination countries), while Europe was mentioned as the main destination by experts in Bacău and Iași.
- An adversarial relationship with authorities means that victims or witnesses are reluctant to come forward.
- The reluctance of communities to notify cases and a tendency toward the normalisation of exploitation hinder prevention.

Speaking about people's relationship with authorities, one respondent suggested that the communist legacy still informs a level of mistrust in the state.

**'Generally, 50 years of communism have produced a rupture between members of society and authorities. People are still not perceiving [state] authorities as agents of support; rather, they still perceive authorities as the coercive force of the state. Authorities must reconfigure themselves, and rethink their role in supporting communities, including from a communication perspective.'** (Legal Specialist 1)

Reflecting on the difference between registered cases and reality, the difficulty of estimating real numbers, and on the normalisation of exploitation, two respondents noted:

**'We know that somewhere in the range of one in 100,000 traffickers is imprisoned. The registered numbers are not under-evaluated; they are minuscule. We think, and we know from our fieldwork that the real figures are significantly higher.'**

**[The difficulty in estimating accurately] comes from the process of detection, and from the tendency of people to normalise a behaviour that should not be accepted under any circumstances.'** (NGO Specialist 1)

**'What I am doing here is an estimation based on experience. What I have seen in cases of abuse, including trafficking cases, I don't think that registered cases exceed 40% of the total. I think that 40% is generous. From this point of view, the phenomenon is much wider. But as in the case of domestic violence, or violence against children and others, the cases that come out are few, because they require a large dose of courage. This means that neither violence, nor trafficking, nor other forms of abuse are taken seriously.'** (NGO Specialist 6)

There is overwhelming acceptance among specialists that the registered data do not reflect reality, and that the gap in measuring has multiple and compounded causes, which stretch across structural, institutional, social, and cultural dimensions. Equally, it is acknowledged that an accurate measurement is not possible. Nevertheless, there is a need for authorities to recognise the phenomenon 'has spread like a gangrene across communities' and not rely solely on the official ANITP figures (a tendency visible, for instance, within anti-trafficking specialists in Iași).

## Geographical distribution

In terms of geographical distribution, the identified child trafficking cases are relatively heterogeneously spread across the country. For 2023, ANITP has only published an interim analysis, which does not allow for a full geographical breakdown of the cases (consequently not permitting an analysis of the child trafficking cases). Detailed data is available, however, for previous years. Based on this, data for a five-year period is presented here, highlighting for each year between 2018 and 2022 counties with at least ten cases (as a threshold, a minimum of 10 cases can offer a wide enough picture of counties with a high number of cases). Counties that feature in three or more years are highlighted in bold, and those that appear in every year in red (Table 1).

Year	Counties with at least 10 cases
2018	<b>Dolj</b> (20), <b>Bacău</b> (18), Călărași (12), <b>Sibiu</b> (12), <b>Constanța</b> (10), <b>Galați</b> (10), Prahova (10)
2019	<b>Dolj</b> (38), <b>Bacău</b> (30), <b>București</b> (21), <b>Mureș</b> (20), Iași, (18), <b>Galați</b> (16), Argeș (15), Bihor (13), Botoșani (13), <b>Constanța</b> (12), Dâmbovița (12), Prahova (11).
2020	<b>Bacău</b> (21), <b>Dolj</b> (21), Iași, (16), Argeș (15), <b>Mureș</b> (15), <b>București</b> (13), Olt (13), Timiș (12), Ilfov (12), <b>Galați</b> (11), <b>Sibiu</b> (10)
2021	<b>Bacău</b> (24), <b>Mureș</b> (22), <b>Dolj</b> (18), Brașov (18), <b>București</b> (17), <b>Constanța</b> (15), Caraș-Severin (14), <b>Sibiu</b> (13), <b>Galați</b> (11), Alba (10).
2022	Timiș (21), <b>Bacău</b> (21), <b>Constanța</b> (20), <b>Dolj</b> (20), Ilfov (16), Alba (15), Brașov (14), <b>București</b> (11), <b>Mureș</b> (11)

Table 1: Data compiled from ANITP Date Deschise 2018-2022<sup>8</sup> and Chera 2024<sup>9</sup>

While the data shows a diverse spread of cases across the country and between years, there are some outliers: counties with a consistent number of cases every year (Bacău and Dolj).

Cumulatively, for the 2018-2022 period, the top five counties in terms of registered cases of child trafficking are Dolj (117), Bacău (114), București (71), Mureș (70), Constanța (66), while the five counties with the lowest number of registered cases are: Harghita (3), Sălaj (7), Satu Mare (7), Covasna (7), and Ialomița (10) (Fig. 2).

Registered child-trafficking cases by county: 2018-2022

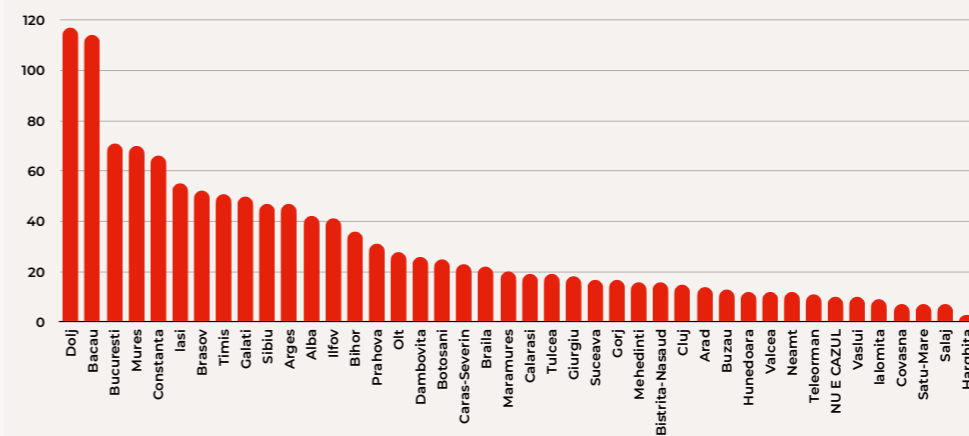


Fig. 2: Data compiled from ANITP Date Deschise 2018-2022<sup>10</sup>

The urban/rural distribution within counties tends to lean strongly towards rural areas, with trafficked cases from urban areas being exceptions (N.B. Bucuresti is counted as an urban-only area).

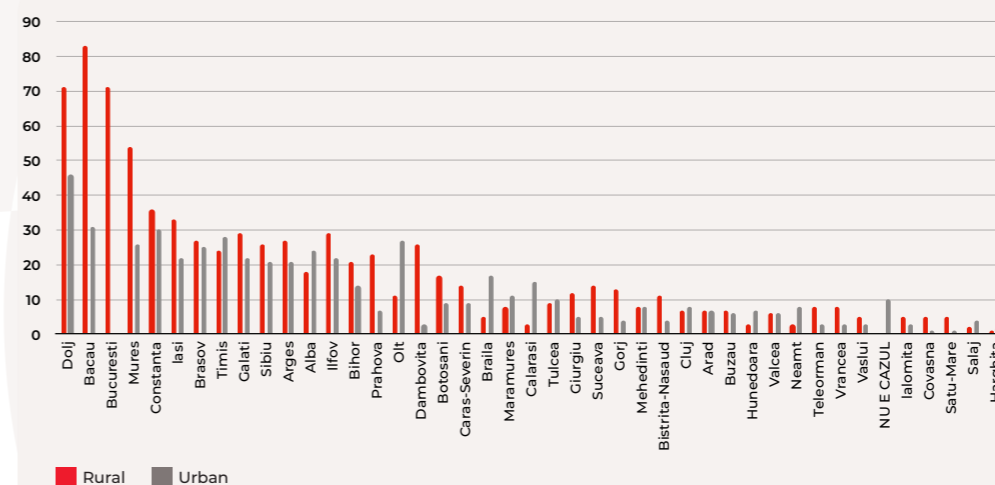


Fig. 3: Data compiled from ANITP Date Deschise 2018-2022<sup>11</sup>

Comparing the distribution of cases across counties with levels of poverty and wealth does not provide evidence of consistent patterns. In terms of GDP/capita<sup>12</sup>, Bucuresti is the wealthiest region in Romania (while being the third highest in terms of the number of victims). Timiș, Brașov and Constanța are also among the wealthiest counties (ranking 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, respectively), while at the same time accounting for 8<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> positions, respectively, in terms of number of victims. At the other end of the spectrum, Bacău (2<sup>nd</sup> in terms of number of victims) is also among the poorest counties (7<sup>th</sup> from the



bottom). On the other hand, counties such as Vaslui, Botoşani, and Suceava (the bottom three counties in terms of wealth) situated in the same region (North-East) account for a much smaller number of victims.

In terms of broader differences, there is a clear correlation between areas with a higher number of registered cases and regions that score high on poverty. Eurostat data from 2023<sup>13</sup> shows that both the South-West Oltenia region (which includes Dolj County) and the North-East region (which includes Bacău and Iaşi) are among those at the highest risk of poverty and social exclusion (with the South-East also featuring prominently). This is in the wider context where Romania occupies first place in the European Union in terms of the proportion of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion<sup>14</sup>.

Evidence from the fieldwork raises further questions on how official data should be used. Two specific aspects are picked up by the respondents:

- Not all ANIPT regional centres report data in a similar way. Specifically, some include the (recently growing) cases involving online child sex abuse materials among the reported numbers, and some do not. This results in a distortion of reported numbers across regions (with those including this category showing higher figures). Importantly, in all three regions covered in the field research, ANITP figures include cases that involve online child sex abuse materials.
- A higher number of registered cases does not necessarily mean a higher incidence of trafficking. As some respondents pointed out, it may instead show different rates of efficiency and success in identification by anti-trafficking actors.

Speaking about the situation in the Dolj County, a respondent observed:

**'Unfortunately, the Dolj County has ranked first in recent years [in terms of numbers of reported victims]. There is a dilemma here. This may say both that the police have done their job, and that there are a lot of cases.'**  
(NGO Specialist 1)

Conversations with several respondents indicate the need to nuance the discussion about the ANITP figures. There are suggestions that a higher number of reported cases may point to a higher rate of identification, while counties with a smaller number of registered cases may have a lower (and more inefficient) rate of identification. The situation in the Dolj County is particularly relevant for this discussion. Respondents from across anti-trafficking, child protection, education and NGO sectors in the county suggest strong inter-institutional collaboration in terms of both activities in the field and strategic approach. Beyond the inter-institutional collaboration, ANITP representatives have been involved in sharing good practice and mentoring projects in other regional centres. It is therefore plausible that the number of recorded cases only tells half the story about the trafficking levels in each region.

By contrast, this is not the case in all the regions covered by the fieldwork. In Iaşi, for example, specialists in child protection dealing with children in care observed that when notifying the BCCO or the IJP about suspected cases, the response is often inadequate. Usually, the police and organised crime agencies quote absence of evidence and procedural limits; in the meantime, the risks and concerns regarding some of the minors in care persist.

The centralised reporting process from the ANITP offers transparent and detailed data and is a crucial tool in providing a picture of the anti-trafficking landscape. However, the data should be understood in the context of its limitations.

**Issue to consider:**

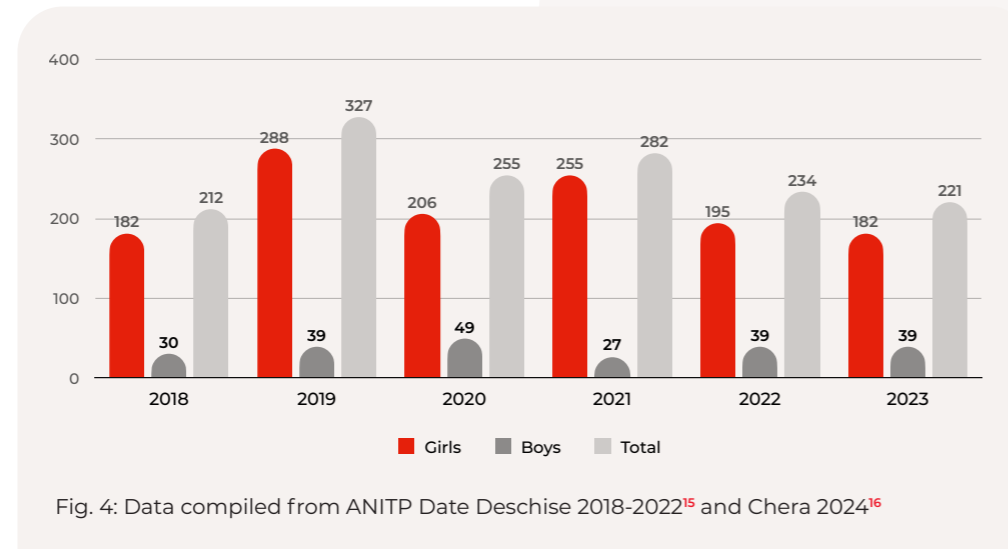
- **A consistent approach to recording cases across all regional ANITP centres is needed.**
- **Further qualitative research could probe deeper into the official ANITP figures in terms of what they uncover about the success of anti-trafficking work.**



# Characteristics of child trafficking in Romania

## Gender Distribution

Unlike in the case of the adult victims of trafficking, where gender distribution is slightly more balanced, in the case of child trafficking, the vast majority of the victims are girls. This has remained consistent across years (where roughly between one in eight and one in nine victims are girls) (Fig.4).



Consistent with the registered data, the gender distribution of the children who are victims of trafficking leans overwhelmingly towards girls. The increase in sexual exploitation via online platforms strengthens this pattern. That being said, several respondents have noticed an increase in the recent years of cases of sexual exploitation involving boys. A child protection specialist pointed out that boys in care are increasingly at risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation:

**'I wouldn't like us to fall into the trap that only girls can be victims of traffic. We have boys in our care system, and older boys are coming to take them out; they run away with them and stay over at their place and at the place of single men[...] We have raised the alarm about some of these cases involving both girls and boys, and there have been instances in Iași where some trafficking networks have been uncovered and prosecuted.'** (Child Protection Specialist 3)

## Age

For the 2018-2022 period, age distribution reveals some patterns of difference between genders. For girls, the 15 to 17 age interval is the most numerous (with more than 200 cases for each year), with high occurrences, as well, in the age 13 group (100) and age 14 group (160). In the case of boys, the 13 to 14 age interval is the most numerous (with 34 and 31 cases, respectively) (Table 2).

Age	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Girls</b>	5	2	1	2	6	6	9	3	8	14
<b>Boys</b>	8		3	1	3	1	5	4	4	6
<b>Total</b>	13	2	4	3	9	7	14	7	12	20

	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	Grand Total
<b>Girls</b>	24	63	100	160	237	232	254	<b>1126</b>
<b>Boys</b>	16	10	34	31	22	20	16	<b>184</b>
<b>Total</b>	40	73	134	191	259	252	270	<b>1310</b>

Table 2: Data compiled from ANITP Date Deschise 2018-2022<sup>17</sup>

There is some curious regional clustering in the lower age group. Cases involving one-year-olds are all but one (out of 13) occurring in the Mureș County (the one exception is Cluj, which involves an attempt at exploitation). Moreover, Mureș also accounts for the overwhelming majority of cases involving trafficking of children under ten years (of the total of 71 cases between 2018 and 2022, 23 are from Mureș, followed at some distance by Timiș with 9, and Sibiu and Suceava with 5 each). The distribution by gender in the 1 to 9 age group is also more even (relative to the significant difference in the overall figures), with 42 girls and 29 boys.

## Form of exploitation

In terms of forms of exploitation, in the 1 to 9 age group, forced begging (32 cases) and sexual exploitation (29 cases) are dominant, with forced labour (6 cases) and attempt at exploitation (4 cases) completing the picture.

From age 10 onwards, the dominant form shifts to sexual exploitation, with girls making up the vast majority of the cases. While cases of boys trafficked for sexual exploitation exist (82), those involving girls (942) make the difference to the total of 1024.

The breakdown of all cases between 2018 and 2022 involving children of all ages reflect the disproportional predominance of cases involving girls (only in relation to forced labour are there more cases involving boys than girls) (Fig. 5).

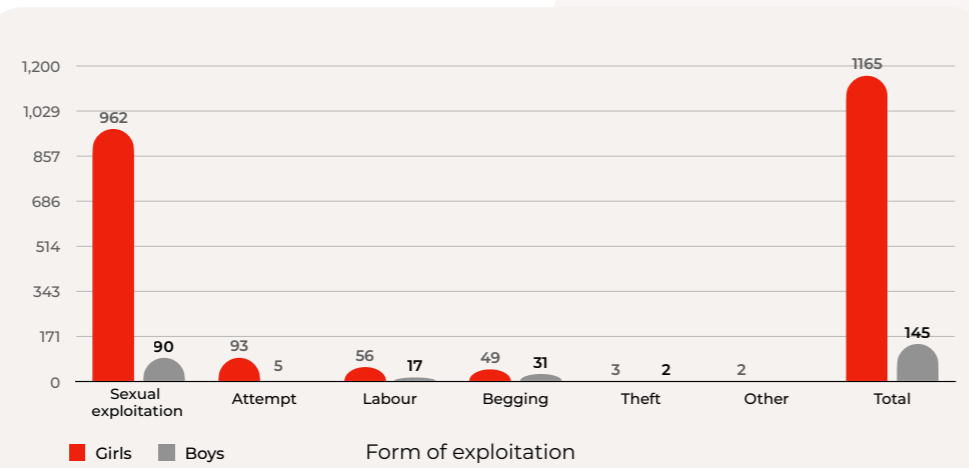


Fig. 5: Data compiled from ANITP Date Deschise 2018-2022<sup>18</sup>

## Mode of recruitment

During the five-year period investigated (2018-2022), the preferred recruiting mode was in person (with over 700 of the victims being approached face-to-face). Online recruiting ranked second (with 224 cases), and – at the other end of the spectrum – only three cases were recruited via advertisements in the printed press. The low incidence of printed press recruitment is arguably explained in this case by the fact that the victims are minors. Also, this method is more likely to be used in employment offers that lead to labour exploitation.

Geographically, Mureş County accounts for the largest number of cases of begging (more than a quarter of the total), which aligns with the data on cases involving very young children. There are no other outliers in the other categories: the largest number of cases of sexual exploitation occur in counties that have, overall, the largest number of cases.

The 'lover boy' method remains the dominant method of recruitment for sexual exploitation, as ANITP data shows and as documented in other studies on child trafficking in Romania.<sup>19</sup> Consistent with these findings, 2018-2022 data show that 532 out of 1310 of the victims were recruited by friends, with another 132 recruited by partners(/husbands/wives), amounting to around half of the total number of victims. On the other hand, about a quarter of the victims (369) were recruited by people they did not know. Finally, most of the young children were recruited by relatives.

This is largely confirmed by the field research. The 'lover boy' method remains the main tool for recruitment for the purpose of sexual exploitation. While characteristic for victims of all ages, this is particularly significant in the recruitment of minors. Respondents agreed that this method is particularly insidious because it exploits emotional and psychological vulnerabilities. On the one hand, there is also evidence that the online medium has gained ground as a platform for recruitment, because contact with the potential victims can happen much more easily.

## Education

For 2018-2022, as expected, the level of education correlates with the age of the victim, especially at the lower age end of the spectrum. At the other end, however, in the 14-17 age group, ages that align with high school in Romania, the largest category is that of children who attained secondary school (equivalent of eight years of schooling in Romania), at around 561, more than double the number of children in high school – around 226. The third largest category among the 14–18-year-olds is that of primary school level of education (four years of schooling) – with around 128, followed at some distance by children with no schooling (35) and those with vocational studies (20). It is worth pointing out that the education data provided by ANITP for this period is – at times – imprecise, so these figures need to be considered with some reservations: while the rough differences between groups are plausible, the exact figures are not necessarily so (for instance, the data list some 7 9-year-old old victims in the high-school category, etc.). The prevalence of secondary school education within the 14-17 age group suggests that school abandonment is directly linked with recruitment into trafficking and exploitation. Romania maintains one of the highest percentages of early leavers from education and training in the European Union (15.6% in 2022) (Fig. 6).

### Early leavers from education and training, 2022

(% of population aged 18-24)

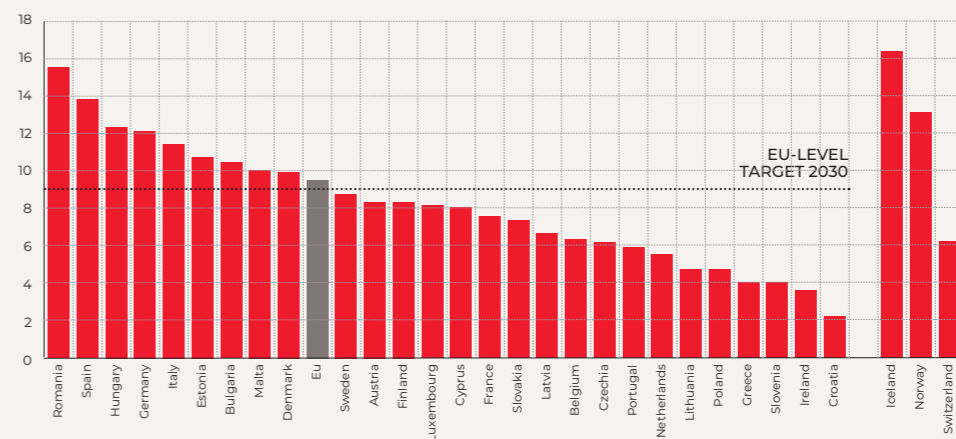


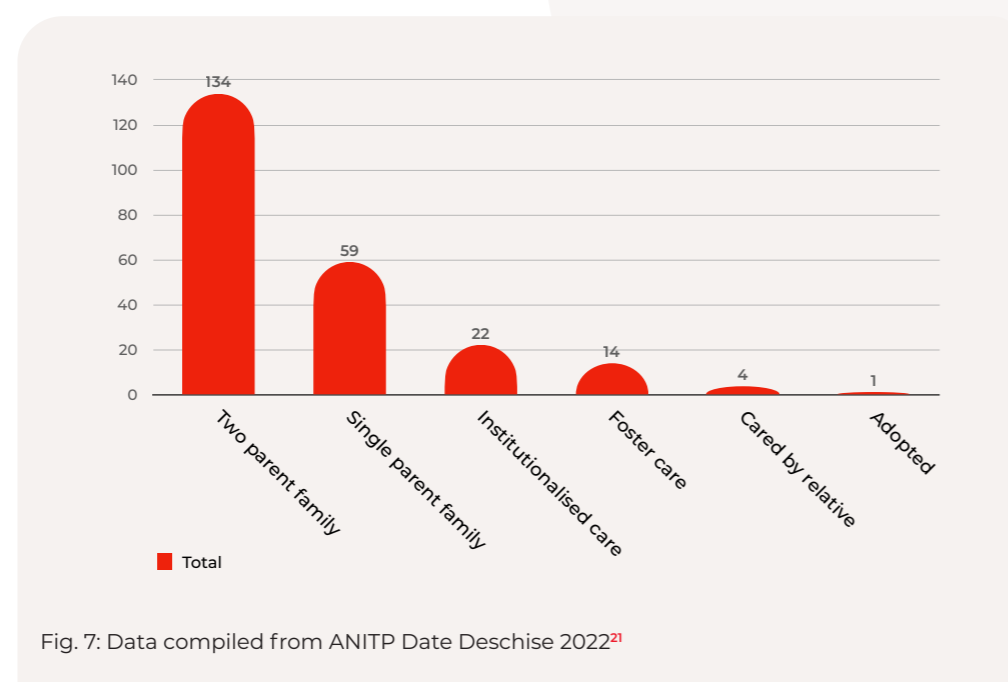
Fig. 6: Source: Eurostat, Early Leavers from Education and Training<sup>20</sup>

The high rates of school abandonment (especially in rural areas) suggest that leaving education early generates a significant area of vulnerability for children. Thus, the role of education in reducing risks is clear, and preventative work requires strong and proactive engagement by schools and education authorities, not only in terms of the continuation of education, but also in terms of access and inclusion.

## Family circumstances

An important variable in understanding the child trafficking phenomenon and in assessing areas of victim vulnerability is the family environment within which victims are situated. While ANITP provides comprehensive data on registered cases that is freely available electronically, covering records since 2015, it is only much more recently (2022), that data on the category of 'family circumstances' have been added.

2022 data (Fig. 7) relating to minors shows a significant predominance of cases where both parents were present: more than half of the victims (134 out of 234) come from such circumstances.



Only four victims were in the care of relatives. This is particularly surprising: Romania is a country of emigration, with large numbers of the working-age population migrating abroad. As a result, various issues concerning children that have been left in the care of relatives (often grandparents) because both parents are working abroad have been thoroughly documented in the literature<sup>22</sup>. The interim analysis for 2023<sup>23</sup> looking at the total number of registered victims of trafficking (both adults and minors) shows a similar picture: the largest category by far is that of two-parent families (251 out of 451 cases), followed by single-parent families (92 out of 451 cases). Again, victims that were cared for by relatives are not very numerous (14 out of 451). In both sets of data, the number of victims that were in care (institutionalised and foster care taken together) form a substantial portion of the total number, which suggests the need for social services and child protection authorities to consider more effective mechanisms for reducing risks.

Field research provides some nuance to these figures. In several cases, respondents have pointed out that children left behind by those who have emigrated for work are particularly vulnerable. Importantly, however, official

figures about children with parents working abroad do not tell the whole story. One respondent pointed out that in Iași, the number of such cases reported to schools dropped from around 13,000 five or six years ago to just over half in the previous year.

**'It is not clear whether this is a significant drop, or rather there are undeclared cases. This is because, in the meantime, the state has established some obligations for parents who go abroad, and one important requirement is that they need to establish a legal guardianship, to leave responsibility for their children to someone. This is a legal process, a formal one that needs to be carried out[...] Some parents, though, may perceive this as a burden. There might be costs and time associated with it, having to go to a notary, etc. Or they might not wish to do that, because if you effectively transfer guardianship, you lose control over your parental rights for that period [...] On the other hand, this might be a deterrent for the person assuming responsibility. This could go both ways.'** (Education specialist 2).

Return migration represents an interesting category, which is often not captured. There is an increase in the number of families that left the county for employment purposes, taking their children with them, and later returned to Romania. Reintegration of children in the educational system raises difficulties of adaptation, because children in these situations are not considered a separate category receiving special attention (such as those left behind in the care of relatives by parents working abroad).

### Issues to consider:

- **The main recruitment methods increase vulnerability. The 'lover boy' method and the growth in online interactions provide easy access to potential victims and their personal information, exposing their vulnerabilities.**
- **The pattern remains that most victims are recruited by someone they know.**
- **In TIC, girls represent the overwhelming majority of the victims, but there is a slight increase in the number of boys recruited for the purpose of sexual exploitation.**
- **Registered cases of trafficking of children who are left in the care of relatives by parents working abroad are few. However, this should not be taken at face value, as the low figures may hide informal arrangements prompted by changes in education policy.**
- **There is a clear link between trafficking and school abandonment, and Romania scores extremely high in the latter category.**
- **Reintegration of return migration children in the educational system is limited and may expose risks.**



# Areas of vulnerability

Effective preventive strategies rely on a clear identification of areas of vulnerability. Existing data highlight poverty and lack of education as fundamental structural risk factors that may lead to trafficking. In addition, data from the fieldwork point to several other causes for concern: the widespread access to social media exposes young people to new and enhanced risks. Respondents also paid specific attention to the normalisation of sexual violence and exploitation. Finally, the environment, community and peer groups can be factors of risk. It is also important to highlight the intersectional nature of these areas of vulnerability.

## Poverty

As suggested earlier, areas where there is a high number of cases tend to correlate with poverty and social exclusion (both overall and specifically with regards to children at risk). Respondents overwhelmingly recognised this as one of the main structures of vulnerability. The issue was particularly acute in rural areas, although there is recognition that the problem is also visible in peripheral urban areas.

It is important to note that even in rural areas, there are crucial differences between communities, and this depends largely on the proximity or distance to important sources of employment. Rural areas in Bacău County, for instance, have a high level of poverty. There are occasional exceptions to that. One respondent pointed out that while deprivation is high in surrounding areas, the community in which they worked was non-typical, due to the presence of a large company providing working opportunities for people in the neighbourhood (School Counsellor 2).

While these are exceptions, the pattern more visible in rural areas is one of scarcity of jobs, reliance on welfare support<sup>24</sup>, generational poverty and a certain level of resignation and acceptance of this situation. As a result, young people see any offer, no matter how far-fetched (whether in the form of a relationship, or a way to earn money), as a means to build a different life and to escape the vicious cycle of poverty. This creates a significant risk of recruitment, trafficking, and exploitation of young people.

Despite low official numbers of victims who are in the care of relatives, the issue of parents working abroad was raised by respondents as a significant phenomenon, stemming from poverty and lack of work opportunity. Correct estimation of this is difficult because of the often informal, undocumented, and cyclical nature of these movements. As one respondent pointed out about a community they were working with:

**'From that community, people are going to France for work as if they were going – I don't know – somewhere nearby. In some of the houses we went to talk to people, they were coming and going. People were saying "look, I'm leaving for France", or "I'm coming back tomorrow"; The conversation happened as if they were talking about Suceava [a nearby county]'. (NGO Specialist 8)**

## Issues of concern:

**The combined effect of poverty and the attraction of higher earnings working abroad generates compounded levels of vulnerability:**

- **First, cyclical undocumented migration leaves unsupervised children vulnerable and hidden from state authorities and support mechanisms.**
- **Second, the prospect of escaping the cycle of poverty exposes children to the risks of being recruited for trafficking purposes.**
- **Third, people taking their children with them cyclically when going abroad leaves minors vulnerable and hidden from protection mechanisms.**
- **Fourth, respondents pointed out that often informal, undocumented arrangements between parents and people known to them to send their children either for casual daily work (e.g. in agriculture) in neighbouring areas, or even abroad (e.g. babysitting arrangements, etc.), expose children to the risk of being trafficked.**
- **Fifth and most worryingly, several respondents stated that poverty leads to situations where parents are complicit in the trafficking and exploitation of their children. As one respondent noted about cases where minors inexplicably have money and expensive goods and even support their parents financially: 'Parents effectively turn a blind eye because they need the money, and they are not interested in where their children go and what they do' (NGO Specialist 1).**

Lack of education constitutes a multi-layered area of vulnerability. High levels of school abandonment, especially in the rural areas, are often linked to poverty and social exclusion and exposes young people to trafficking. Respondents highlight a strong link between family contexts and education:

- Higher rates of school abandonment occur in cases of disorganised families, one-parent families and families engaged in (circular) migration for work, due to parents' absence from the educational process.
- Generational lack of education is another prominent feature. As one respondent noticed, 'There is often a reticence from parents to keep children in the educational system' (School counsellor 3). Given the reliance on subsistence agriculture, children are often taken out of the education system beyond primary school, to contribute to the family workforce.
- Lack of career-focused education that would encourage young people to break out of the cycle of poverty leaves them exposed to unrealistic promises by recruiters and traffickers.

## Social media

Access to social media presents another critical area of risk. Respondents pointed out that social media and broader online access is widely available, even in rural and prevalent poverty and social exclusion areas. Managing children's access to online materials appropriately has several barriers observed by respondents:

- Lack of supervision in disorganised families gives children unbridled access.
- Elderly relatives caring for children whose parents are working abroad lack technical skills and awareness of the dangers risks children face.
- Even with the best intentions, parents and educators are technologically unequipped to support children in safely navigating the online space.
- Lack of parental education often prevents parents from forming a trusting relationship with their children. Two types of behaviours raise challenges: **an overly permissive approach exposes children to risks that parents are not aware of**, and, by contrast, **a very restrictive approach alienates children, who then find refuge in 'virtual friends'**.
- Children in care are particularly exposed: while state-provided access to new technology for educational purposes is a positive development, difficulties in managing children's access heightens the risks.

As a result, respondents identified a range of areas of increased vulnerability that can expose children to traffickers:

- While technologically advanced, children are not prepared cognitively and emotionally to process some of the information they get exposed to on social media.
- Linked to this, in search of communities of peers, children reveal personal information that makes them much easier targets for traffickers, who can exploit them emotionally by offering them the perception of understanding and support.
- As one respondent pointed out, children in care are even more vulnerable because 'they already have in their psychosocial baggage a deficit of affectivity and of a strong attachment to a person they can trust and are looking for this kind of affection outside' (Child Protection Specialist 3).
- More broadly, moral values promoted via social media and media in general (and that are replicated more widely in society) point to oversexualised behaviours, to over-emphasis on materialistic interests, and increasingly younger children are socialised within this framework.

### Issues to consider:

- **The need for digital education at all levels: children, parents, educators, and child protection workers.**
- **Children education on managing personal information and privacy.**

## Normalisation of sexual violence and exploitation

Linking together aspects relating to poverty, education, and social media, one of the most serious areas of vulnerability identified by respondents relates to **a growing tendency for normalising abnormal behaviours, in particular in relation to sexual violence and exploitation**. This happens within a wider context of a high rate of domestic violence against women Romania, the country which also occupies the lowest position in the Gender Equality Index in the EU<sup>25</sup>. Based on information from respondents, it is difficult to overestimate the risks posed by this phenomenon, which manifests in different ways.

One level relates to cases of exposure to sexual behaviour or more serious cases of abuse taking place within the family. Several respondents raise concerns about situations – especially in disorganised and dysfunctional families, in the context of alcohol or drug abuse – where children are witnessing adults engaged in sexual activities or are themselves subjected to sexual abuse. One respondent mentioned several cases, including one, where the child was witnessing their mother engaging in video chat internet pornography, with other cases in which a child was subjected to sexual abuse by a member of the extended family, and the victim was blamed by the parents. Finally, there are also cases in which sexual abuse by members of the family does not even register as abuse for the victims, who may not even realise what is happening (School Counsellor 6). In addition to the trauma and abuse suffered by children in such cases, they become sexualised in an abusive way, stigmatised, and desensitised to sexual violence and thus vulnerable to further exploitation.

With regards to early sexualisation and normalisation of abnormal or exploitative sexual behaviour, social media (as well as TV, music, etc.) also play a significant role. Respondents observed that children at increasingly younger ages are exposed to these values: through music videos that glorify misogyny and abusive treatment of women, or influencers that push similar messages.<sup>26</sup> While this specific trend is not unique to Romania, it is important to bear in mind that it is happening within the existing context of domestic violence and sexual violence mentioned earlier.

**The normalisation of some of these types of sexuality has led to the increase, for instance, in sexual abuse and exploitation through internet platforms.** The link between this normalisation on the one hand and poverty and the desire to escape it on the other, means that online sexual exploitation is not perceived as exploitation. Instead, it may appear to some extent more 'acceptable', and recruitment for this purpose has become more widespread, while at the same time having the potential to lead to other types of exploitation (e.g. sex work) and violence.

Another related concern raised by respondents is **the absence of sexual education in schools**, while discussions about sexuality remain taboo in many families, particularly in rural areas. This has been an ongoing issue that has ramifications in other directions<sup>27</sup>, and the introduction of sexual education in the curriculum has been so far prevented by strong public opposition fuelled

by conservative and religious groups. As a result, respondents noted several consequences that lead to risks:

- In the absence of sexual education or open discussions with family members that would enable them to navigate difficult phases in growing up, children resort to the internet to find answers to their questions. This leads to a distorted picture of sexuality and of sexual expectations, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation.
- Unrestricted access to social media has led to a rise in 'sexting' (online exchange of images with a sexual character) among young people, with one respondent pointing to a case involving children as young as six or seven years old (School Counsellor 4). This generates peer pressure for young people to conform to these practices, as a way of being 'cool'.
- Peer learning also acts as a framework for children to explore sexuality, which, combined with the other facts above, further normalise sexual exploitation (of girls in particular).

Speaking to the last point, a respondent pointed to the following case:

**'In one case, a girl was telling me about her friend, whose boyfriend was asking her to have sex with his mates, so that he could show off with her' (School Counsellor 6)**

Normalisation of sexual deviance, violence and exploitation is linked to another growing vulnerability, which is exploited effectively by traffickers. It is much more difficult for victims to recognise their victimhood. A combination of desensitisation, normalisation and stigmatisation exposes young people to increased risks, makes identification of cases of trafficking more difficult and prevents victims from seeking help.

#### **Issues to consider:**

- **The need for education of children in areas such as sexual education and criminological/legal education (alongside digital and privacy education mentioned earlier).**
- **Given public opposition to sexual education in school, perhaps an anti-trafficking approach to the issue, or one focused specifically on a criminological approach, might offer a solution.**

## **Environment, community, and peer groups**

Urban-rural differences correlate with different types of risks shaped by environment and communities. In terms of environment, urban areas offer more opportunities for recruitment by strangers<sup>28</sup> both in person (via clubs and places where young people socialise) and online (because of an easier access to move from the online interaction to face-to-face). In the rural area, the recruiter is usually a member of the extended family or circle of friends, who exploits certain vulnerabilities.

Other differences refer to the community settings: in urban areas, the more atomised way in which families operate, the lack of supervision of children, and the peer group increase risks. As a respondent put it: 'You are more anonymous in a block of flats. This means that you are more difficult to find.

In local [rural] communities, though, you are easier to find (Child Protection Specialist 2).

Respondents differed in the way they assessed the role of the rural communities in relation to vulnerabilities. One respondent pointed out that in the rural areas, the smaller, more tightly connected nature of the social context means that the community may often function as an extended family and offer a degree of protection, reducing the risk of recruitment for the purpose of trafficking (NGO Specialist 1). Most responses, though, while recognising the tightly knit character of rural communities, where 'everybody knows everybody', observed that the approach is one of taboo, silence, stigmatisation, and victim-blaming.

**'The community space does not help at all, because the community space is generally critical; it functions based on prejudices and marginalises. There isn't a mentality of collective support. Rather, there is a mentality based on "exterminating the viruses". These "viruses" are seen as isolated cases that must have done something wrong to get themselves into these situations.'** (School Counsellor 1)

Thus, in rural areas, with tighter communities, the social stigma has a much more powerful effect. In urban areas, due to the phenomenon of normalisation, which renders some forms of sexual exploitation more 'acceptable', victims often accept their situation. This is particularly visible in the case of adult victims, who remain in their exploited situation, because alternative ways of earning a living are seen as worse.

One interesting area in between the rural-urban divide, and which is not captured in the ANITP data, was the transition zone: rural area children boarding in urban high schools. One respondent identified this as a separate area of concern that requires attention. Young people (girls especially) in this situation are highly vulnerable. The absence of the family (and community) framework places them in a situation of loneliness and open to forming new social relations that expose them to risks. In addition, the desire to integrate in the urban social space adds further risks (Anti-trafficking Specialist 1).

#### **Evidence of good practice:**

- **A regional initiative in Dolj Country to tackle this vulnerability led to targeted special activities of information and prevention aimed specifically at high schools in Craiova with boarding facilities.**



# Awareness and understanding of risks of trafficking and exploitation

At national level and through its regional offices, the ANITP coordinates action on combatting trafficking through partnerships with a large number of state institutions and NGOs.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the ANITP, in collaboration with other state institutions and different organisations, has organised a large number of information and awareness-raising campaigns focusing on all aspects of human trafficking, in addition to campaigns aimed at raising awareness of the free Helpline number 0800 800 678 available for information and advice regarding trafficking prevention:

- Campaigns aimed at reducing demand for different types of exploitation ('Your money enriches traffickers ... Your money kills souls'; 'Exploitation kills souls - national online campaign'; 'Do you choose to cherish or to crush?'; 'Know your rights, respect your obligations').
- Awareness-raising campaigns focused on labour exploitation and begging: ('The right to work is yours. Do not sell it to traffickers'; 'Do not beg, ask for help'; 'Working without legal forms - one closer step to becoming a victim of trafficking'; 'Beware of "perfect" opportunities with "perfect" jobs').
- General information campaigns about the risks and consequences of trafficking ('The two-faced man'; 'Trafficking in persons forgives no one'; 'Project Freedom tour').
- Campaigns focusing specifically on the trafficking and exploitation of children ('Where begging starts, childhood ends'; 'Use the internet carefully... trafficking in minors has a hidden face'; 'Don't ignore the invisible girl, her story can become your story too').<sup>30</sup>

Different NGOs are also responsible (independently or collaboratively) for campaigning and activities aimed at preventative work.

There is a strong focus in the activities of ANITP and of anti-trafficking NGOs on information and awareness-raising campaign that cumulatively reach large audiences. Nonetheless, evidence from the fieldwork shows a mixed picture. From the interview responses, the issue of awareness can be unpacked in relation to three different constituencies: **children, adults/ community, and professionals** (who have direct or indirect responsibility in the prevention of TIP).

## Children

In terms of an awareness of the dangers relating to trafficking, respondents observed that there is a broad level of understanding. Campaigns such as the ones mentioned earlier, as well as various information sessions and workshops organised in schools have generated a sense of knowledge among children. This, however, appears to be very superficial and may lead to a false sense of security. In many cases, respondents pointed out that

there is a difference between being informed and consciously internalising the dangers. This issue was reinforced by respondents across all categories interviewed. As such there are misconceptions about the phenomenon, and children's perception is that trafficking is a distant danger that cannot happen to them.

**'I think that for most children trafficking is what they see on TV, when I am abducted, dumped in a car, taken to a different country, and maybe sold to a different person. Anti-trafficking campaigns organised here in school at least, have focused on this. They also know about the 'lover boy' method, but nobody thinks that this could happen to them. So, they have a vague idea, because there have been campaigns on the prevention of trafficking in school and in Romania, not just in the county. It's just that they can't personalise this; they don't realise that they can be at risk, themselves. Their view is: "You have to be stupid to fall into such a trap; it can never happen to me". And often, it is the very children that are at risk that say these things. Or they are not willing to recognise to themselves that they are vulnerable.'** (School Counsellor 6)<sup>31</sup>

As the same respondent noted, there is a need for a broader approach to this issue: 'Children need to be educated about what constitutes abuse, what kind of forms of abuse there are, in order to realise other dangers'.

In terms of trafficking of children, the rural-urban division is relevant. Campaigns on social media or television are open geographically, but their effectiveness is limited because they do not respond to the particularities of rural conditions and vulnerabilities. For instance, data shows that many of the child victims of trafficking in rural areas have been recruited by parents or family members. Given the young age of the victims and the family connections that lead to recruiters, it is unlikely that information campaigns about online grooming are effective in addressing this type of vulnerability. More nuanced and focused action is required.

Respondents also noted the need for sexual and legal education. As explained earlier, sexual education remains a contested subject in Romania, due to pressures from conservative and religious segments of the public. However, there is scope to incorporate more strongly in the health education curriculum education relating to consent, autonomy of the body, and ways to recognise abuse and exploitation. Additionally, some issues relating to abuse should be discussed in terms of criminal acts and legal responsibilities. This type of education also requires a focus on gender differences. For instance, anti-trafficking education should include a focus (in particular for boys) on the risks of becoming unwitting accomplices in the process of recruiting and trafficking (a scenario might include someone receiving payment for introducing a potential victim to a recruiter under the pretext of a coffee meeting, etc.) (Anti-trafficking Specialist 1).

Respondents from the education sector noted an increase in instances among children that could amount to criminal offences relating to the production and distribution of online explicit materials (with one respondent mentioning four recent cases known to them, of children in the community being under criminal investigation for such acts).

**'It became clear that starting from secondary school all the way to high school level, there is no programme of awareness raising about the consequences of prohibited behaviours, and we do not have a legal culture built in schools. And it is very important[...] You need to tell children about the kind of risks to which they expose themselves.'** (Legal Specialist 3)

**Issues to consider:**

- There is a need to shift the focus from information to awareness raising and internalisation of risks.
- There is a need to broaden up anti-trafficking education, starting from the recognition of abuse, exploitation, and victimhood (especially in the context in which evidence shows that victims often do not realise their condition).
- There is a need for legal education in schools, to draw attention to different risks (crimes relating to online sexual materials, abuse, exploitation, complicity in trafficking, etc.).
- Anti-trafficking and other education campaigns tend to focus – for logistical reasons – on urban areas, so more focus is needed on rural areas that are typically neglected.

**Potential for good practice:**

- School Counsellor 6 suggested that anti-trafficking sessions could be based on the exercises/questionnaires that do not disclose intentionality. Instead, it engages children in exercises, and through their answers, they can realise whether they might be in a situation of victimhood.
- Legal Specialist 3 noted that the Romanian National Union of the Bar ran a successful legal education and social responsibility programme in schools, entitled: **"Be a lawyer in your school!"**<sup>32</sup>

In terms of awareness and use of reporting mechanisms among children, respondents identified three major hindering factors: trust in institutions, a sense of peer loyalty, and lack of clarity about what to do.

**Lack of trust covers institutions across the spectrum: from school to child protection agencies and police.** It manifests through a lack of faith that reporting something is going to be taken seriously and solved. There is also a sense of fear that reporting might have repressive consequences. Linked to the lack of trust in authorities, peer-loyalty means that informing on colleagues and friends constitutes an act of betrayal. Several respondents from both educational and NGO areas noticed this phenomenon. Breaking this barrier requires individuals working with children to build trust and honest communication relationships that can fill the gap of family trust:

**'[Children in school] feel close to me. They tell me anything, before things get out of hand, because they know I haven't lied to them, I haven't disappointed them, and I have always tried, as much as possible, through whatever means, to make them understand things, to prevent them from getting into trouble[...] This is a very good thing, because building these relationships helps.'** (School Counsellor 3).

Finally, despite various campaigns, there is still a sense that **children are not truly clear on the steps needed to report a situation of risk.** One respondent

observed that findings from interacting with children from different boards and organisations on a strategy for the protection and promotion of the rights of children show that they are not clear what to do and who to contact in cases relating to violence in schools and other related issues (NGO Specialist 9).

**Potential for good practice:**

- **Workshop relating to bullying organised by School Counsellor 5 in school, focusing on the position of witness and bystander that could be expanded to anti-trafficking activities.**

## Adults/communities

A pattern identified in the adult/community category, which constitutes a **barrier to awareness and understanding** of risks and mechanisms to report them is the **lack of trust in state institutions.** This is a wider problem that extends to political institutions: in the last decades, Romania has had a growing level of both mistrust in key political institutions (political parties, parliament, government), and perception of corruption<sup>33</sup>. The link to the broader political landscape is relevant, because in several cases respondents complained about the fact that mistrust is often justified by the politically charged appointments (which fly in the face of professionalism and expertise) in some key public institutions (NGO Specialist 6).

One respondent also pointed to a potential case of **'transgenerational trauma'** linked to the legacy of communism, when engagement with state authorities was predicated on persecution and repression (School Counsellor 5). Mistrust often derives from a lack of understanding of the role played by some state institutions, which hinders communication between such institutions and communities:

**'The state and public child protection institutions are seen as some sort of bogeyman, as a punitive institution. And this means that when these institutions actually have to intervene to save children, children see our intervention as a form of punishment. And we are perceived like that by schools, by hospitals – as those who need to intervene.'** (Child Protection Specialist 3)

This perspective is supported by significant anecdotal evidence of a tendency of adults to threaten misbehaving children with handing them over to the police or child protection services, as a way to discipline them<sup>34</sup>.

Lack of trust is often motivated by a **misunderstanding of the remit of some of these institutions and the limits of responsibility for the public.** As one respondent noted, the public reluctance to notify state institutions about suspected cases of abuse or risks is linked to a misperception about the burden of evidence: the responsibility is to notify, not to prove; it is for the relevant institutions to investigate these potential cases to find evidence.

Most importantly, **problems with awareness and notification mechanisms at adult/community levels stem from what most respondents described as passiveness and indifference, lack of empathy, solidarity, civic sense or community spirit.** One of the most commonly stated explanations links to



the persistence of a focus on secrecy and privacy within communities, which is summarised by many of the respondents with the Romanian saying that 'dirty laundry should be washed in the family'. This attitude is linked to the stigmatisation of the victim and leads to situations where the suffering is not recognised and empathised with; instead, the victim is blamed for shaming the family or community, and the response is one of secrecy and taboo. This is particularly the case for rural communities where these social norms are much stronger.

Often, practitioners must consider the risks of information spreading within the community, which can lead to further stigmatisation and marginalisation of the victim. This makes intervention very difficult, and it is not conducive to inter-institutional engagement.

**'Even if the family find out about a situation, they prefer that it stays in the family and not tell anyone. In these communities, when we are out on fieldwork, we often do not contact local authorities: we do not go to the mayor's office, to find out more about the family or the child, we do not go to the school, we go directly to the family, in a very discreet way. News spread very quickly in rural communities. Everybody knows everybody, people live close together, and rumours and discussions spread quickly among classmates, among teachers. Many people are not familiar with principles of confidentiality, etc. And then many people think that, for example, the girl was to blame, and they promote this idea in the community[...] And if the community finds out, this makes identification more difficult. Victims do not want to talk...'** (Child Protection Specialist 2)

**Issues to consider:**

- **Communication and bridge-building between state institutions and communities are necessary.**
- **Bottom-up community and solidarity-building activities could mitigate some of these challenges.**

## Professionals

Lack of trust in state institutions is visible among professionals, as well. Often, they do not see the benefits of reporting because of a lack of confidence that measures would be taken. In one case, the respondent noted a repeatedly occurring situation where children in care leave the care home without authorisation and return with goods that cannot be justified.

**'We have cars stopping at the gate of the residential centre, and the girls run away with them. We notify the police and BCCO and highlight suspicions of risk[...] Police identifies them and tells us that they found them with a certain family. The girls declare that they are not victims of any infraction and do not want to accompany the police. It is your problem to recover them now. I think there is a legislative gap here, as well. Because if a person holds someone else's child, it is constraint event if the victim does not recognise it as such.'** (Child Protection Specialist 3)

One respondent noted cases where teachers were actively opposed to reporting suspicious cases, due to a lack of understanding of the benefits of doing so, and of the legal framework. This is linked also to a lack of understanding of the remit of the school counsellor position.

**'I had a school counsellor tell me that in her capacity she is bound by professional confidentiality regulations. This is not supported by legislation. Legislation talks about a duty to report serious cases, especially if the cases involve minors[...] Others also told us that you cannot report suspicions of violence against children without parental consent. This is in the context in which children are victims of violence at the hand of their parents.'** (NGO Specialist 9)

The same respondent noted that **often teachers and school counsellors take a problem-focused, not solution-focused approach**. The emphasis is on finding reasons why there are difficulties in responding to legal requirements or simply believing that requirements are wrong. This attitude often **uncovered prejudices against some of the communities these professionals were engaging with**. In other cases, respondents noted that often school professionals – as was the case with adults/communities – display a similar sense of indifference and lack of solidarity and civic sense, which hampers reporting.

A different perspective which relates to a poor understanding of the role of the school counsellor came from those working in those capacities. In several cases, it was reported that other **teachers view school counsellors as persons that can be called upon to solve ad-hoc behaviour problems in class**. This leads to a negative perception of school counsellors by children and undermines trust and relationship-building efforts. Additionally, as one respondent pointed out, there is a lack of openness and empathy among teachers towards children. Often, children are not treated as children:

**'At one point, I was in the teachers' room, and I had a realisation: they were talking about a 12-year-old girl as if she were 30. I witnessed that, and I intentionally asked, "Are we talking about a 12-year-old child?" And it clicked a little bit.'** (School Counsellor 5)

Finally, while legal frameworks are relatively clear, respondents pointed to school professionals' lack of up-to-date training in detecting risks (NGO Specialist 10). In addition, a more general lack of legal education is present among professionals, as well as among children.

**Issues to consider:**

- **Lack of clarity about the role of distinct categories of professionals (e.g. school counsellors, child protection specialists) are barriers to prevention.**
- **As in the case of children and adults/communities, there is a need for a bottom-up process of fostering solidarity and civic sense. As a respondent put it: 'Bearing witness works as a system of social "anti-bodies" from a civic point of view'. (Legal Specialist 3).**

While the field research focused mainly on the prevention of trafficking and issues concerning vulnerabilities, some valuable information about prosecution efforts were highlighted, and these can be corroborated with findings from the desk research.



# Prevention mechanisms and gaps

## Prosecution mechanisms and gaps

Over the last decade, Romania has made considerable progress in aligning its legal frameworks aimed at combatting the trafficking of human beings to European and international standards. The adoption of the new Criminal Code in 2014 and subsequent amendments in 2020-2021 addressed provisions on human trafficking especially, relating to the trafficking of minors, by:

- Increasing minimum punishments for trafficking of minors.
- Expanding on the aggravating factors linked to the crime of trafficking of minors.
- Eliminating the statute of limitations for human trafficking and the trafficking of minors.
- Aggravating criminal liability for acts of pimping committed against a minor in several circumstances.<sup>35</sup>

It is worth noting that the introduction on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 2020 of changes increasing punishments for child trafficking crimes inadvertently resulted in shortening the statute of limitations for all child trafficking cases committed before the introduction of the amendment. While this error was corrected through a new law passed on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2020, all cases before the 29<sup>th</sup> of November remained subject to the reduced statute of limitations, negatively affecting prosecution efforts.<sup>36</sup>

Further changes were introduced through Law 217/2023 and subsequently through Law 424/2023, such as raising the age of consent for minors engaging in sexual acts with adults from 14 to 16, as well as wider provisions concerning the incitement of minors to commit acts of a sexual nature (including remotely, through electronic means and social networks).<sup>37</sup>

The role of NGOs in influencing some of these changes to the legislative framework has been significant, suggesting a positive and deepening collaborative partnership between state institutions and civil society organisations. NGOs were instrumental in securing the correction of the error regarding the statute of limitation in 2020<sup>38</sup>, and contributed to the 2023 legal provisions highlighted earlier.<sup>39</sup>

Despite these improvements, the United States' State Department Trafficking in Persons (TIP) annual reports continue to place Romania in the Tier 2 category, with a concerning drop to the Tier 2 Watchlist category in 2020 and 2021. The most recent US TIP report (2023) recognises increasing efforts in meeting minimum standards. With regards to prosecution, though, it suggests that 'the government decreased law enforcement efforts', pointing to rulings by the Constitutional Court and by the High Court of Cassation and Justice that changed the calculation of limitations. As a result, courts changed their methods of calculating the statute of limitations, resulting in dismissals in several serious trafficking cases.<sup>40</sup>

Data from the fieldwork suggests that professionals in the field received the legislative changes positively. Legal specialists referred to these changes as a timely achievements addressing an important legislative vacuum.

**'When such a reconfiguration of criminal law [regarding minors, consent, removal of statute of limitation, and enhancing punishments] took place,**

**while I don't believe in punishment as the only means to address issues, I thought that Romania took a significant step forward[...] Other measures including the rapid extraction of vulnerable minors from harmful context, strengthen [agencies responsible for child protection...] Things are in a motion that give me hope. We are heading in the right direction.'** (Legal Specialist 1)

Respondents from the NGO organisations, lobbying for changes in legislation, also highlighted the positive impact of these changes.

**The duration of criminal proceedings in both pre-trial and trial phases continues to be a serious impediment to the effective prosecution of people involved in TIP.** The Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) third evaluation report on Romania emphasised the need to address these challenges. The report notes that – according to Romanian authorities – the average length of court proceedings was 689 days in 2018 and 585 days in 2019, with instances of individual cases lasting for several years, with dire consequences in terms of cases reaching the statute of limitations.<sup>41</sup> While legislative changes removing the statute of limitations in cases of TIP address some of these issues, the lengthy trials continue to remain a problem.

**The legal and institutional barriers that pertain to the length of the trials and the specialisation of the judges have been highlighted.** Respondents pointed out that, while the statute of limitations for TIP offences has been removed, the length of trials still remains a significant barrier to prosecution, because it discourages victims from engaging in the process, prolong victimisation and suffering, increases the risk for victim intimidation, and leaves victims without adequate support during the proceeding.

The lack of specialisation of judges involved in trafficking cases is an added cause for frustration among respondents from both the legal profession and NGOs. In both cases, the activity of investigation and prosecution agencies (e.g. DIICOT) was praised, with a legal specialist suggesting that their efficiency is also reflected by the increased level of fear coming from criminal organisations (Legal Specialist 1). Judges' decisions can frustrate anti-trafficking efforts.

**'It is frustrating for them [DIICOT] to work so hard to obtain results[...] and after an effort of two-three years preparing a case, you have a judge issuing a different decision and cancels all that effort. It is very difficult, and you start from scratch...'** (NGO Specialist 1)

### Issues to consider:

#### Proposals from legal experts and NGO respondents included:

- **Shortening the investigation stage.**
- **The reduction of the number of times victims need to testify in court.**
- **Establishing (shorter) time limits for trials.**
- **Establishing specialist judge panels for specific crimes (including trafficking)**

Data coming from the Directorate for Investigating Organised Crime and Terrorism (DIICOT) shows that over the last three years, despite the growing number of overall cases pursued by the directorate, the number of cases

involving TIP has seen a small decrease both in terms of net figures and as a proportion of the overall cases passively registered as still to be solved. The number of solved cases followed a similar decreasing pattern, the percentage of the solved trafficking cases of the overall solved cases remains slightly smaller than the proportion of the trafficked cases of the overall ones still to be solved (see Table 3).

	2023	2022	2021
Solved Trafficking Cases (net figures)	447	507	525
Solved Trafficking Cases (% of overall cases solved)	3.81%	4.53%	5.5%
Still to be Solved Trafficking Cases (net figures)	1429	1431	1513
Still to be Solved Trafficking Cases (% of overall cases still to be solved)	3.96%	4.66%	5.51%

Table 3: Data compiled from DIICOT Annual Report for 2023, 2022, 2021<sup>42</sup>

Overall, the difficulties encountered in the successful prosecution of criminal cases involving TIP are broadly caused by three types of deficiencies:

- Law enforcement deficiencies: manifested through staff shortages, unmanageable workloads, limited resources and considerable risk of burnout and trauma, etc.
- Training deficiencies: limitations in terms of officers specialising in investigating trafficking crimes, appropriate training for investigators and prosecutors and judges focusing on sensitivity to trauma and on employing a victim-centred approach.<sup>43</sup>

These challenges (in particular in relation to law enforcement and training) have also been highlighted by specialised NGOs. Furthermore, the ANITP evaluation of the National Strategy against the Trafficking of Persons (SNITP) 2018-2022 draws attention to similar obstacles. Importantly, the report also identifies difficulties emerging from the increasing role of technology in the recruitment and exploitation of victims. Thus, shortages in terms of access to anti-trafficking technologies and expertise adds another significant burden in the fight against TIP.

### Prevention mechanisms and gaps

Over the past years, Romania has improved its preventive activities with respect to the TIP. As the latest US TIP Report (2023) highlights, the institutionalisation of the anti-trafficking committee bringing together state institutions and NGOs under the Prime Minister's Office, as well as the sustained work towards

the implementation of the National Action Plan 2021-2022 (part of the SNITP 2018-2022) accounts for achievements in various areas. These include a consistent framework for the allocation of budgets to activities, maintaining effective reporting mechanisms through ANITP, and – significantly – the implementation of ‘the emergency ordinance and action plan for improving investigations of crimes against children, including trafficking, and assistance to vulnerable children and other at-risk populations’.<sup>44</sup>

Importantly, prevention work in Romania is increasingly taking a collaborative approach. At one level, this takes the form of partnerships established between NGOs working in the field. Instrumentally, collaborative work like this is essential, as NGOs in Romania tend to work under significant financial and operational limitations. The pulling together of some resources enhances both coverage and influence.

Education and school abandonment more specifically correlate significantly with trafficking victimhood. The issue of school abandonment is recognised as a very concerning problem by Romanian authorities. There is sustained action in this respect, through the Ministry of Education nationally and locally through its inspectorates, and through county prefectures and local authorities, with support and collaborative work from non-governmental organisations. **The focus of these actions is on the link between economic deprivation and school abandonment. There is a need for a more direct linking of the trafficking vulnerability with these issues and for a more nuanced approach that does not rely on assumptions (while poverty is usually an overarching cause for both trafficking and school abandonment, there are other dynamics between these three elements, as well).** In addition, various practitioners (from education and child protection services, in particular) have highlighted the need for specific quality standards regarding detection and prevention that would ‘translate’ the National Identification and Referral Mechanisms into more concrete frameworks for action adapted to particular institutions.

Finally, information and awareness are important preventative factors. They need to be supported further by more systematic and targeted outreach mechanisms to find the root causes for the various features of trafficking of children. Working within communities to unpick some of these patterns could provide effective prevention mechanisms. Given the resource-intensive aspect of such work, NGOs seldom engage with such activities and only in a very localised way. A more coordinated, systematic, and unified approach, with consistent parameters and task-sharing between organisations, could provide insights into directions for action.

Responses from the field research reinforce these findings and provide a nuanced insight into some of the successes and challenges in prevention efforts, highlighting different areas of focus and concern.

### Resource pressures

Financial and logistical pressures and shortages as barriers to TIC prevention have been highlighted by respondents in all areas of specialism.

On the one hand, respondents stated that inter-institutional collaboration has increased significantly in recent years, but resources are a significant

limitation. Regional ANITP centres engage in awareness-raising and prevention activities in schools, and in most cases, respondents from the education sector have praised these collaborative actions. These regional offices have large geographical jurisdictions, covering large populations (and number of schools)<sup>45</sup>. This, coupled with the fact that some of these regions are also among the most underdeveloped and vulnerable, and that the regional ANITP teams are often formed of 4-5 members, limits considerably their ability to conduct meaningful prevention work in the communities.

In the case of Craiova, for example, anti-trafficking specialists pointed out that the office has in its jurisdiction around 2000 school units. As a result, community action is targeted.

- Priority is given to vulnerable communities that are identified based on needs.
- Visits are also based on requests from schools, and where possible, different forms in school are mixed for wider coverage.

As far as respondents from the educational sector suggest, collaboration with ANITP in other areas is not as developed, though there is involvement in awareness and prevention action.

#### Issues of concern:

- **Successful collaboration relies on individuals instead of on institutions and systematic, strategic structures, which is why effectiveness varies substantially across regions. In other words, it is down to the efforts of specific individuals to develop collaborative activities.**
- **Linked to the point above, there is no clear training for transition and continuity processes and mechanisms. There is continuity of action only as long as committed individuals stay in their roles.**

Similar pressures are replicated in schools, in terms of the school counsellor roles. While it is deemed that school counsellors play a vital role in early identification of risks, due to their direct contact with communities, their work is limited by personnel shortages. The legal framework requires a minimum of one school counsellor for 600 students (with a current government proposal to reduce that to 500). This limits the possibility of systematic prolonged work with cases at risk.

Two other factors add further pressure:

- The fact that – according to respondents - at national level, the average number of students per school counsellor does not meet the minimum requirements (claims suggest that the real number is closer to 900). Respondents working in this capacity noted that they are often forced into reactive, 'firefighting' and damage limitation activities, rather than proactive prevention work.
- The fact that in remote, rural areas with small numbers of children in schools, a school counsellor often covers more than one school, adding a geographical difficulty to the process.

Finally, NGOs operate under similar pressures. Their ability to plug some of these shortages is limited. There is also the issue of the vicious circle of poverty and exclusion: poorer areas in the country, where needs and risks are

higher, also have a lower capacity to sustain non-governmental organisations and community groups that can support anti-trafficking efforts. There is a risk that these challenges create a sense of disappointment and resignation among actors in the field.

#### Potential for good practice:

- **Several respondents from NGOs spoke of attempts to engage with the communities and involve them directly in activities (e.g. educational activities, extra-curricular activities), to foster solidarity and reduce vulnerabilities.**

**'For about 10-15 years, we are increasingly starting from the children, work towards the family and the community, because you simply cannot stay in your bubble. This eco-systemic, ecological approach, where you cannot generate changes at the individual level unless you go towards the community... is something we have been doing through our more recent strategy[...] The simple provision of services in a community creates dependency[...] We are working directly through dialogue with the community, both sides pulling resources together[...] These initiatives have been good, because we are trying to empower beneficiaries, who are participants in the project' (NGO Specialist 10)**

#### The nature of prevention activities

Some of the limitations of the prevention and awareness-raising activities have already been highlighted. They include the lack of adaptation of campaigns to the specific vulnerabilities of different communities (the rural-urban categories are particularly important here). In addition, due to logistical restrictions, the vast majority of prevention activities and direct interventions favour urban areas, not least because of ease of access. This leaves more remote rural areas particularly vulnerable.

One important aspect that was identified by a significant number of respondents, and which points to a potential area of good practice, was the response to one of the principal areas of vulnerability exposing young people to the risk of trafficking: the lack of options to escape poverty.

Different types of activities have been identified, which should be incorporated into a systematic prevention strategy:

- The shift from the emphasis on a deficit approach to one that removes barriers and differences. In many cases, the focus is (in some instances necessarily) on activities directed at particularly vulnerable groups. This, however, has the potential risk of highlighting those groups as vulnerable, and of marginalising them further.

**'In our summer schools, we started to test this 3-4 years ago, to focus on this aspect. I don't want to hear about children with protection measures, poor children; all I want to see is just children. All we did is let them play together, we created contexts for interaction[...] It is normal that in Romania, we have – for all kinds of services – a standard that needs to define the target group. And there you have vulnerable children. But we need some imagination to try to break these barriers every now and then. And to teach those children – and it is very difficult – not to see themselves only as victims.' (NGO Specialist 8)**



- The focus is on providing children alternatives to the attraction of quick financial gains promised by traffickers. Several respondents pointed to collaborative initiatives that link awareness and prevention to personal development and career advice. This varies from discussions about career options to visits to and from employers, career counselling, etc.

**‘It is often about education and perspectives for the future. Girls often do not see a problem in activities [such as internet pornography]. They see an opportunity to make money and do not necessarily see the risks associated with it. We are running activities in a technical high school that focus on career advice, but it is also more than that. We discuss about life and about options and choices. Once we interact with them, even girls that would tell us that their goal is to find a rich partner as their success plan – faced with exercises that invite them to make different choices – they realise that such plans are not necessarily viable. We talk in terms of sustainable plans for the future.’ (NGO Specialist 9)**

- The development of settings in which children can exercise agency in co-creating prevention tools and mechanisms.

**‘When we met with young people in our focus group, they started telling us [about digital tools and prevention] you can use this thing and that thing... Technology moves very quickly. Some applications go out of fashion, others appear[...] We played with this in the high school I mentioned in an anti-trafficking campaign. We used stickers and QR codes around the school’. (NGO Specialist 9)**

## Curriculum needs

Education (or rather gaps in this area) was highlighted by respondents as an area for development, with a focus on sexual education and legal education, extending to areas specifically dealing with vulnerabilities and risks, and more broadly with civic responsibility. There is evidence that such activities already exist, and inter-institutional collaboration has often been identified as a positive aspect. Resource and logistical difficulties, however, means that these collaborative activities are reactive or at least ad-hoc and short-term. What is often missing is long-term collaborative networks or programmes. Respondents stressed the need for these collaborations to be facilitated through inclusion in the curriculum, to give these issues sufficient attention, focus and sustainability. As respondents pointed out, one or two prevention and awareness activities per year are not an effective way to reduce risks. The involvement of the Ministry of Education is necessary in shaping the curriculum.

**‘Maybe there is a need to lobby the Ministry of Education to reform the curriculum. Children study a lot of useless stuff. The curriculum could be balanced. For instance, I am currently teaching an optional course entitled “Ready for Life”. Within this course, there is information on these things [risks and vulnerabilities, trafficking, violence], as well. But how many schools have such an optional course? Because with optional courses, the decision belongs to the school. And they still focus on maths or Romanian language, which are considered core disciplines.’ (School Counsellor 6)**

# Conclusions

The findings from this report reveal the complex environment in which TIC prevention work takes place in Romania. While progress has been made in terms of access to data and regulatory and institutional frameworks, there remain important challenges that undermine efforts. Access to data is transparent, but it is estimated that official figures only capture a fragment of the phenomenon, with a substantial number of cases going unreported. This, in turn, has potential consequences on the efforts and resources allocated for prevention work. Cases of trafficking for sexual exploitation of girls are predominant, with an increase in cases related to online sexual exploitation. Rural areas are more at risk, and key areas of vulnerability include poverty and marginalisation, disorganised families, unmanaged access to social media, and the normalisation of sexual violence and exploitation. Awareness of the phenomenon is relatively limited or superficial, especially among children and adults, but also among some professionals. Prevention mechanisms have improved, with evidence of collaborative inter-institutional initiatives, but this is often hindered by lack of trust in public institutions.

# Recommendations

All in all, there are no simple solutions to this problem. Effective prevention requires a comprehensive approach that includes early identification of risks, long-term engagement with communities at risk, clearer frameworks of action for local stakeholders, and the integration of awareness and prevention tools into the curriculum. By addressing these areas, Romania can make significant strides in combating TIC and protecting its most vulnerable populations.

Further work should consider a multi-layered approach with a focus on different areas of priority.

## **Core strategic areas relate to the need for community-level intervention where action target:**

- Developing local-level safeguarding mechanisms and deploying adequate human resources in communities, able to assess the vulnerabilities and implement tailored intervention and protection measures for those at risk.
- Developing long-term local partnerships between stakeholders (schools, local government, police, NGOs, and community leaders) that can coordinate education and prevention activities, develop community support mechanisms, and foster solidarity and civic engagement.
- Diversifying the range of trafficking prevention and awareness-raising activities at community level, incorporating, for example:
  - Activities focused specifically on awareness and prevention.
  - Activities that combine anti-trafficking education with career advice.
  - Activities that combine anti-trafficking education with extracurricular activities to enhance participation and engagement.
  - Expanding from a strictly deficit-approach type of activities (focused only on children at risk), to include wider activities that showcase positive experiences and role models, and foster inclusivity.
  - Incorporating educational dimensions into activities that have a material gain, to ensure wider community participation.
- Engaging children in co-creative activities of information, awareness-raising, and prevention of trafficking, allowing them agency in shaping such activities in order to enhance effectiveness.
- Adopting specific policies and procedures regarding the application of the National Mechanism for the Identification and Referral of Victims of Trafficking in Persons (MNIR) by specific institutions (education, child protection, etc.).
- Incorporating further into the current health education curriculum aspects concerning sex and relationships, with a particular focus on consents and boundaries, and on the prevention of abuse and sexual violence, and introducing in the curriculum legal education with a specific emphasis on recognising crimes relating to online materials, to sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking (alongside other areas of priority such as drug consumption, trafficking, bullying and violence, etc.).

## **Other areas of work towards enhancing prevention include:**

- Initiating tailored and targeted awareness-raising campaigns that respond to key differences between rural and urban areas.
- Ensuring that all stakeholders (especially those at local levels) adopt a victim-focused approach to anti-trafficking education and prevention.
- Encouraging boarding schools to develop bespoke induction and support frameworks for boarding children.
- Providing information technology training to educators, school children and parents.

## **Finally, wider structural areas of work to be considered incorporate:**

- Introducing consistent criteria for registering cases of trafficking across all regional ANITP centres for a more accurate evaluation of cases.
- Increasing ANITP personnel and resources in regional centres to permit more meaningful awareness-raising and prevention work.
- Ensuring that the legal minimum required number of school counsellors are met.
- Providing CJRAE support, ensuring that schools use the school counselling role appropriately, in line with regulatory frameworks.
- Ensuring consistency in how schools (supported by CJRAE and the County School Inspectorates) manage cases of children with parents who work abroad.
- Advocating for the speeding up of judicial processes involving cases of trafficking and for specialised judges for such cases.

# Endnotes

- 1 US Department of State '2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Romania', [Romania - United States Department of State](#).
- 2 Al Jazeera 2024 [The Take: Is Romania's labour shortage fuelling exploitation? | Migration News | Al Jazeera](#)
- 3 [TIP.pdf](#).
- 4 [TIP.pdf](#).
- 5 ANITP Date deschise 2018-2022 [Date deschise – Agenția Națională Împotriva Traficului de Persoane \(gov.ro\)](#).
- 6 Chera, D. 2024 [ANALIZĂ SUCCINTĂ PRIVIND TRAFICUL DE PERSOANE ÎN ANUL 2023 – Agenția Națională Împotriva Traficului de Persoane \(gov.ro\)](#).
- 7 It is worth mentioning here that language alignment is necessary in Romania, with regards to how crimes involving children via online platforms are labelled. It is concerning that the Romanian Criminal Code still uses the questionable term 'pornografie infantilă' (child pornography). Art. 374 of the Criminal code, for instance, speaks about 'pornographic materials involving minors' and about 'recruiting a minor for the purpose of participating in a pornographic show' ([Pornografia infantilă Art.374 Codul Penal 2025](#)). Language alignment should involve a shift towards labelling such acts as sexual abuse and exploitation of children, especially considering the recent changes and clarifications in the criminal code that remove any notion of consent and increase penalties in relation to sexual acts involving children.
- 8 ANITP Date deschise 2018-2022.
- 9 Chera, D. 2024
- 10 ANITP Date deschise 2018-2022.
- 11 ANITP Date deschise 2018-2022.
- 12 HotNews.ro 2024 'România extremelor. Topul celor mai sărace și al celor mai bogate 10 județe' [România extremelor. Topul celor mai sărace și al celor mai bogate 10 județe - HotNews.ro](#).
- 13 Eurostat 2024 [Risk of poverty or social exclusion in regions - Eurostat](#).
- 14 Eurostat 2024 [Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2023 - Eurostat](#).
- 15 ANITP Date deschise 2018-2022.
- 16 Chera, D. 2024.
- 17 ANITP Date deschise 2018-2022.
- 18 ANITP Date deschise 2018-2022.
- 19 Aninoșanu et al. 2016 'Trafficking for sexual exploitation of Romanian women. A qualitative research in Romania, Italy and Spain' [Trafficking for sexual exploitation of Romanian women. A qualitative research in Romania, Italy and Spain Final-qualitative-research-report.pdf \(cpe.ro\)](#); Johnson 2015 'America's Sex Trafficked Children: A Study of the Victim-Trafficker Relationship from Victim's Responses', *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 1(3); Sirseloudi, M. (2018). 'Financing of Trafficking in Human Beings in Germany' Sofia: CSD.
- 20 Eurostat 2023 [Early leavers from education and training - Statistics Explained \(europa.eu\)](#)
- 21 ANITP Date Deschise 2022 <https://anitp.mai.gov.ro/ro/docs/Date%20deschise/Set%20date%20deschise%20VTP%202022.xlsx>.
- 22 See Pascoal R.H., & Schwartz A.N.E. 2018 'Are Romanian Children Left behind a Vulnerable Group to Human Trafficking?' In: Ducu V., Nedelcu M., Telegdi-Csetri A. (eds) *Childhood and Parenting in Transnational Settings. International Perspectives on Migration*, 15, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-90942-4\_4; Botezat, A., & Pfeiffer, F. 2020 'The impact of parental labour migration on left-behind children's educational and psychosocial outcomes: Evidence from Romania' *Population, Space and Place*; Tomșa, R., & Jenaro, C. 2015 'Children Left Behind in Romania: Anxiety and Predictor Variables' *Psychological Reports*, 116(2), 485-512.
- 23 Chera, D. 2024.
- 24 Concerningly, several respondents perceived the reliance on welfare support as complacency, and, in some cases, went further to suggest that the welfare support may represent an incentive for some people not to find work.
- 25 Statista [The EU Gender Equality Index by country 2023 | Statista](#).
- 26 It is not accidental that the Tate brothers (whose case relating to these issues is currently in progress in Romania) has a sizeable support base.
- 27 Romania still has the second highest rate of teenage pregnancies in the EU (after Bulgaria): [Teenage Pregnancy Rates by Country 2024](#).
- 28 ANITP data suggests that most victims are recruited by people they know. However, it is important to clarify this: given that the 'lover boy' method remains the most common recruiting tool, it is clear that at the point of recruitment, the victim would know the perpetrator. This means at the point of first contact with the victim, the perpetrator was potentially someone unknown (e.g. 'a friend of a friend').
- 29 ANITP [Parteneri – Agenția Națională Împotriva Traficului de Persoane \(gov.ro\)](#).
- 30 European Commission [Romania - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#); ANITP 2022 [Raportul anual privind evoluția traficului de persoane în 2022.pdf \(gov.ro\)](#).
- 31 It is worth noting that the researcher observed anti-trafficking campaign posters focusing on work exploitation in the school where the School Counsellor was based.
- 32 PROIECTUL UNBR „FII AVOCAT ÎN ȘCOALA TA!” Campanie de responsabilitate socială - UNBR
- 33 See Cinpoes (2024) 'The Challenges of Political Protest and Democratic Representation in Romania', in Stan, L. and Vancea, D. (eds) *Post-Communist Progress and Stagnation at 35: The Case of Romania*, Palgrave Macmillan, 159-180.
- 34 Anecdotally, while out in the field for data collection, the researcher witnessed an incident where parents were using this approach to discipline their young child: they threatened the child with handing them over to a police patrol that was passing by. The response from the police highlighted exactly the difficulty faced by state institutions. They advised the parents not to use the threat as a coercive tool, pointing to potential cases of lost children who might be reluctant to engage with the police sent to save them, because of fear and mistrust.
- 35 European Commission [Romania - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)
- 36 US Department of State '2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Romania' [Romania - United States Department of State](#).



- 37 [Avocatnet.ro 2024 Modificări oficiale pentru creșterea protecției juridice a minorilor în fața abuzurilor sexuale \(avocatnet.ro\).](https://www.avocatnet.ro/2024/04/modificari-oficiale-pentru-cresterea-protectiei-juridice-a-minorilor-in-fata-abuzurilor-sexuale/)
- 38 [ProTECT 2020 Victorie\\_ am reușit corectarea legii 217\\_2020.pdf \(dropbox.com\).](https://www.dropbox.com/s/1680a2b0f8/GRETA_2021_Evaluation_Report_Romania.pdf?dl=1)
- 39 [ProTECT 2023 Lege Consimțământ - Poziție ProTECT \(traficdepersoane.ro\).](https://www.traficdepersoane.ro/2023/04/lege-consimtamant-pozitie-proTECT/)
- 40 US Department of State '2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Romania'.
- 41 [GRETA 2021 'Evaluation Report: Romania'1680a2b0f8 \(coe.int\).](https://www.coe.int/t/e/treaties/gre/gre2021/1680a2b0f8.pdf)
- 42 [DIICOT Raport de activitate 2023, 2022, 2021 raport\\_2023.pdf \(diicot.ro\); raport2022.pdf \(diicot.ro\); raport2021.pdf \(diicot.ro\).](https://www.diicot.ro/raport-de-activitate-2023-2022-2021)
- 43 US Department of State '2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Romania'.
- 44 US Department of State '2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Romania'.
- 45 For reference, the picture in three regions studied looks as follows: ANITP Craiova covers Old, Dolj, Gorj and Mehedinți counties; Iași covers Iași and Vaslui counties; and Bacău covers Bacău and Neamț counties.

**Hidden Chains and  
Missing Links - Child  
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- A Comprehensive Study

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