Policy Investigation in Europe on Child Endangerment and Support: Executive Summary of the findings of the PIECES Project
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Introduction

Violence against children (VAC) is recognised throughout Europe and internationally as a serious public health, human rights, legal and social justice issue. The consequences of child violence can be significant and severe; child abuse and neglect for example can result in death or affect a child’s physical and mental health in the acute stages, potentially impacting their ability to participate and function in society in the long term. Although not all child victims will have problems, children who are maltreated are at increased risk of either perpetrating or becoming victims of multiple types of violence, such as bullying, community youth violence, intimate partner violence and suicide.

Welfare and child protection approaches vary considerably across different countries, but European Union (EU) Member States are nonetheless obliged by international and European standards to protect children from violence and to set up child protection systems and the policy frameworks that support them. While evidence-based strategies exist to prevent violence and protect child victims in specific services, research on the policy frameworks that enable efficient delivery of responses in a child protection system remains limited. The degree to which policies supporting these prevention strategies have been adopted and implemented in the EU varies. These differences between countries create the potential for inequalities for children and families but also opportunities to explore differences and look for ways to address inequalities through exchange of good practices. However, before good practices can be exchanged more detailed information regarding existing policies is needed to understand country issues and identify gaps and solutions.
PIECES

PIECES – Policy Investigation in Europe on Child Endangerment and Support was a two year initiative led and coordinated by the European Child Safety Alliance in partnership with experts in Austria, England, France, Lithuania, Romania and Spain. The project aimed to conduct in-depth investigations of select policy issues in violence against children in the EU28 plus Norway, in order to provide a better understanding of how those policies are being implemented, monitored and evaluated.

The in-depth investigations explored:

1. **National plans/strategies addressing violence against children** through a content analysis of existing national plans/strategies addressing violence against children to assess what was and was not covered using a children’s rights framework.

2. **National data sources on violence against children** through an exploration of existing routinely collected administrative data and periodic surveys in the area of violence against children, including suicide as a potential outcome of abuse.

3. **Reporting and follow-up of violence against children** through an exploration of reporting mechanisms for violence against children, processes for follow-up and specialization and training of staff working in child protection services.

4. **National Home Visiting and Parenting Programmes** through an exploration of national policies on home visitation and parenting programmes as examples of evidence-based prevention efforts aimed at building resilience in children and positive parenting.

5. **National Multidisciplinary Child Death Review** through a look at national multi-disciplinary child death review committees as a tool to improve policy and practice for preventing and responding to violence against children.

6. **Awareness activities on violence against children** through an exploration of national awareness campaigns aimed at some aspect of violence against children.

For each of the six policy areas explored information was also collected on whether children were consulted on policy/programme development and implementation (**child participation**) and whether child poverty and other inequalities were considered during policy/programme development, implementation or monitoring (**child inequalities**).
Overview of project results

The PIECES project set out to explore in greater depth some of the important policy areas to address VAC across EU Member States in order to better understand how they are being implemented, monitored and evaluated, and to further inform good practice. Although the response to the six surveys developed was lower than anticipated, the findings are consistent with previous research and provide additional support for further attention and investment by EU Member States and the EU to address this important issue.

In addition to six working papers describing the individual survey results and a report describing five case studies, a synthesis report across the six policy areas focussed on cross cutting issues and their implications for enhancing child protection and VAC prevention efforts in the EU. While these are highlighted in this executive summary, the PIECES final report provides a full description of the issues and implications stemming from the synthesis. All documents are available online at: www.childsafetyeurope.org/PIECES.

The evolving nature of policy addressing VAC and the impact of changes in governance structures on the sectors involved in its prevention and management have resulted in fragmented and uncoordinated child protection systems. Our findings indicate that EU Member States are trying to address the current challenges in their systems, particularly in terms of responding to commitments made through the Convention on the Rights of the Child and their EU membership. These efforts have also been supported through the recommendations from the Council of Europe, WHO and other international organisations encouraging comprehensive coordinated action to address VAC, yet there is much more to be done by stakeholders at all levels.

Based on the survey results no participating country had implemented all seven of the specific policies/programmes examined across the six policy areas explored: national plan(s), national data on incidence or prevalence of physical violence1, mandatory reporting of suspected VAC for professionals, national home visitation programme, national parenting support programme, national multi-disciplinary child death review and national awareness campaigns. PIECES has identified several cross cutting challenges that are currently impacting EU Member States’ efforts: governance and coordination; resources and capacity; monitoring; child participation and inequalities.

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1 Although the survey investigating national data explored more than physical violence, the result reported here focuses on physical violence only here as this was the most common area of data across countries.
**Governance and coordination**

For effective prevention of and responses to VAC, comprehensive integrated system approaches are needed across a range of different sectors and services. While the majority of countries surveyed had a national plan that addressed some aspect of VAC, definitions of violence, the breadth, scope and coordination of responsibilities defined at the national level varied.

- Most EU Member States have policies on child maltreatment but few had comprehensive approaches to VAC. Significant gaps were found in the areas of prevention of school and community based violence and in child suicide and self-harm.

- While international and European standards have been developed and provide a framework for defining violence against children, they have not been used consistently across sectors and levels of governance within or across EU Member States. Work at the European level would be served by definitions harmonised at the EU level.

- Decentralisation, regionalism and localism have had an impact on coordination of VAC at the national level. Preference has grown for more decentralised priority setting and governance structures in many countries surveyed and the priority status required for effective prevention of and protection from VAC has not necessarily been sustained across all sectors. Countries varied in the extent to which decentralised responsibilities were guided by national standards, oversight and mechanisms to implement coordinated responses. Policies and plans need to set out clear roles and responsibilities of different sectors and how these can be coordinated across and within levels of governance.

**Resources and capacity**

Lack of resources was an issue in many (but not all) of the areas of policy implementation studied. In addition, economic restraint measures in recent years have resulted in cuts to existing funding which have had a negative impact on both government and civil society action to address VAC. Notably, dedicated funding within existing national plans and policies was lacking with only 60% of child maltreatment plans and 55% of school and community violence plans referring to resources for implementation.

National provisions for supporting the capacity of different professions to respond to cases of VAC were also variable and training provisions varied substantially across countries depending on the category of service/institutions. This included case identification, management and prevention.

National commitments to prevent and respond to VAC cannot be effectively implemented if resources and capacity to respond are inadequate. Further, without adequate resources and capacity, the quality of implementation and monitoring of policies in place to prevent and respond to VAC suffers and this will have a direct impact on children’s well being.

Moreover in conditions of economic adversity, as seen in recent years, financial constraints bring a greater emphasis on cost effectiveness and there is scope to share with EU Member States the growing evidence on the cost effectiveness of preventing VAC. The results of this project and others indicate there is considerable scope for such activities. This could be supported by further cross-European research on effective responses to prevent and respond to VAC in addition to ensuring research priorities are regularly reviewed to aid knowledge sharing across EU members.
Monitoring

It is difficult to design, implement and monitor an effective policy response to VAC with insufficient knowledge on the prevalence, trends and progress in implementation. Considerable gaps were found in national data on violence against children in our survey, a finding confirming other research. The lack of data for monitoring and tracking trends at the national level was a key finding across all policy areas studied. A large number of Member States have national action plans to combat various forms of VAC, and data collection is part of these action plans. Yet comprehensive data collection on the prevalence and incidence of VAC was only available in the Nordic countries, Denmark in particular. Furthermore, the data are highly fragmented at the national level, as three to five different registers contain different data related to child violence and the administrative data sources on child violence reported upon by the national respondents from the 20 EU countries responding was highly uneven.

The EU and international organisations such as WHO and UNICEF have encouraged development of such efforts, but more action is needed to encourage standardisation of indicators and harmonisation of available data to support benchmarking and international monitoring. For example, pan European violence prevention activities would be enhanced if trends in VAC could be monitored more effectively across EU Member States. However this would require the development of pan European indicators to measure progress and change in levels of VAC. And although specific indicators are needed to measure VAC, it is vitally important that the development of indicators take a holistic approach in measuring outcomes for children and child wellbeing overall as experiences of violence clearly have a significant impact on children’s health, development and overall life chances.

But development of measures is not enough. There is a need to ensure that associated resources and capacity are made available to ensure adequate monitoring of implementation, impact and resulting outcomes of all policies to prevent and respond to VAC. Evaluation methods exist and considerable progress has been made in developing them. This knowledge should be widely shared and built into plans and budgets for this important step in the policy cycle.
Child participation

Little evidence of child participation was found across any of the six policy areas and seven specific policies explored. While children were able to report their own experiences of violence in most countries, consultative approaches to child participation were limited for policies on data collection, identification and reporting of VAC and awareness and prevention campaigns. While these findings pertain only to the six policy areas explored under PIECES and do not necessarily take into account the broader policy work of children’s rights units and ombudspersons, they do suggest that further work is required to ensure that children’s participation forms an integral part of policy development and implementation. Mechanisms to share and build further knowledge regarding violence prevention and child protection should include good practice in the area of child participation.

Child inequalities

A rights based approach to VAC promotes equity, ensuring that all children are safe without discrimination and can access services and help when needed. Equity issues need careful monitoring so that unforeseen and adverse consequences of policies on the most disadvantaged children can be identified and addressed. Yet the survey addressing data sources found that not all countries collect data on ethnicity, family income level and diversity issues. There are also significant gaps in knowledge about violence and specific groups of disadvantaged children. Equity issues were also unevenly addressed at the level of the national policy framework. For example, only three of the responding countries, Greece, Romania and Spain, had national plans specifically addressing the needs of Roma and traveller children. Only six countries had child protection strategies specifically mentioning migrant children.

Child inequalities may be best addressed at the local level where data on local circumstances can be more readily obtained and strategies to engage/access specific groups at risk are more easily implemented. Decentralisation of responsibilities may be a benefit for responding to child inequalities, however limited resources, lack of capacity and economic restraint may result in decisions that do not address the most disadvantaged children, particularly in rural areas where access to services is often more difficult. It is important that children have equal access to services, including prevention focused services, regardless of location (rural or urban) and there needs to be an appropriate balance between universal and targeted provisions to prevent violence to ensure that the most vulnerable children can be safe. There is the likelihood of co-wins for areas such as early childhood development and reduction of inequities through greater investment in parenting and home visiting programmes.

Summary and Recommendations

The six PIECES surveys identified a number of challenges for the field. Some of these relate to measurement, some to gaps in capacity and shortfalls in resourcing, some to the need for further research, but all start with the need for strong national leadership. Maintaining a national framework and national oversight in the context of devolution and decentralisation of responsibilities for services is essential to keep the priority status of action to combat all forms of violence against Europe’s children.
Analysis across the six policy areas has resulted in the following key recommendations to advance the field:

- EU Member States should review the breadth and scope of policies on VAC to ensure they address all aspects of violence comprehensively.
- Standardised definitions of VAC need to be harmonised across Europe and within each EU Member State so that there is a common language used to describe the problem.
- EU Member States should ensure, regardless of governance structure, that coordination of activities against VAC occurs at three levels - national (standard setting to provide a framework and guidelines for effective action for both prevention and protection), regional (to meet specific regional needs drawing together available services) and local (providing coordinated services to meet the needs of individual children and their families through effective case management across the continuum of care), with effective monitoring at each level.
- National plans on VAC need to be supported by adequate resources to ensure that plans can be implemented and capacity exists to respond effectively.
- EU Member States need to invest adequate resources in training and resources to support professionals in the identification of potential cases of VAC, in assessment processes, in supporting victims, in ensuring more effective interagency cooperation and collaboration and in implementing prevention programmes (e.g., home visiting and parenting programmes).
- The EU in conjunction with EU Member States should invest in mechanisms to share and build further knowledge on evidence-based multi sector methods of working, especially identification, assessment and response to VAC between child protection systems in EU Member States.
- EU Member States should invest in enhancements to existing data systems and ensure collection of data to support prevention and protection activities, including exploring possible linkage mechanisms.
- EU Member States should establish indicators and statistical systems for monitoring and evaluation as part of a national coordinating framework that is effectively regulated and independently monitored, ensuring accessible, quality data on VAC.
- On-going work on European indicators by organisations such as the FRA could contribute to the development of pan European indicators to measure progress and change in levels of VAC.
- EU Member States should ensure that resources and capacity are made available to ensure adequate monitoring of all policies to prevent and respond to VAC.
- EU Member States need to continue to work to apply effective and authentic methods to achieve meaningful child participation in the planning and monitoring of policies on violence.
- EU Member States should ensure that prevention is a key focus of national plans and that there is an appropriate balance between universal and targeted provisions to prevent violence to ensure that the most vulnerable children can be safe.