

Children victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders in Albania

*Profile and experience within the immediate
response in Police Stations and protection system*



State Police
Nisma për Ndryshim Shoqëror ARSIS

Authored by:

This document stands as a testament to the commitment and efforts of a collective group of professionals. United by a shared vision, they've played a significant role in advancing protection response and championing the rights of children who find themselves at odds with the law in Albania. We refer to the people who work with children, victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders, have everyday professional contact with them, and have particular sensitivity and empathy for their needs.

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Remarks

State police

Dear colleagues and partners,
On behalf of the State Police, I am pleased to welcome this important study, which aims to shed light on the experiences and challenges of children who are victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders in contact with the police and protection system. As an institution dedicated to the safety and protection of children, we believe this report is a valuable resource for improving our intervention approaches and sensitivity toward children in difficult situations.

Thanks to our successful collaboration with the Initiative for Social Change ARSIS, this study has gathered valuable data that will contribute to enhancing service delivery strategies for children in need. The State Police remains committed to creating a stronger and safer system for the protection of children's rights.

I would like to extend my gratitude to all those who contributed to this study, and we hope these findings will assist in the improvement of policies and practices for child protection.

Sincerely,
Senior Director Ilir Proda
State Police

Initiative for Social Change ARSIS

Dear readers,
On behalf of the Initiative for Social Change ARSIS, it is a pleasure to present to you this important study on the experiences of children who are victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders in police stations and the child protection system in Albania. This research is the result of our professionals' dedication, who, for many years, have worked in the field with children who have endured challenging and difficult situations. This project represents an important step toward better understanding the needs and challenges these children and their families face. The prepared analysis aims to contribute to improving support mechanisms and services for these children, informing key institutional and international actors to develop new and tailored strategies and interventions.

We extend our gratitude to all partners and supporters, including the State Police, for their cooperation and commitment in this important process. This study is a further step toward a fairer, more sensitive, and effective protection system for children.

Respectfully,
Ana Majko
Initiative for Social Change ARSIS

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

BIC	Best Interest of the Child
CCJJ	Criminal Code of Juvenile Justice
CCSS	Center for Children in Street Situation
CPCJY	Center for the Prevention of the Crimes for the Juveniles and Youth
CPU	Child Protection Unit
CPW	Child Protection Worker
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DCM	Decision of the Council of Ministers
EU	European Union
ITG	Intersectoral Technical Group
MHSP	Ministry of Health and Social Protection
Nisma ARSIS	Nisma për Ndryshim Shoqëror ARSIS
PO	Police Officer
RDP	Regional Directory of Police
SARPC	State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child
SP	State Police
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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List of terms and definitions

Child

“Child” is any person under 18 years of age. If the age of the person may not be determined accurately, but there are reasons to believe that the person is a child, they shall be considered a child in the sense of this law, until the age is determined according to the law in force.¹

Children in conflict with the law

The term ‘children in conflict with the law’ refers to anyone under 18 who comes into contact with the justice system as a result of being suspected or accused of committing an offense.

Child in contact with the law

A person below the age of 18 who comes into contact with the justice system as a result of being suspected or accused of committing an offense, or as a victim or witness of a criminal offense.²

Child Victim (child in contact with the law)

A child victim typically refers to a child who has been directly harmed by a crime, witnessed a crime, or been involved in legal proceedings due to their actions or circumstances. These children may require specialized support and services to address their unique needs and ensure their well-being and rehabilitation.

Child Witness (child in contact with the law)

A child witness refers to a child who has been involved in legal proceedings as a witness to a crime or as a participant in the judicial process. This could include children who have witnessed a crime and are called upon to provide testimony

¹ Law 18/2017 “On the Rights and Protection of the CHild” (Retrieved from: <https://femijet.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Law-No-18-2017-On-the-rights-and-protection-of-the-child.pdf>)

² Diallo.M, Foussard.C, Perez.A.S, & Carrington.D (2021) Children in contact with the law in Europe: Trends & Opportunities, Terre des hommes – Europe Region, p. 4. (Retrieved from: https://childhub.org/sites/default/files/library/attachments/Synthesis%20Report_Children%20in%20Contact%20with%20the%20Law%20in%20Europe%20AND%20Country%20factsheets_0.pdf)

or evidence in court, or children who are involved in legal proceedings due to their own experiences or involvement in a case.

Children in need of protection

“Child in need of protection” is a person under 18 years of age, irrespective of having the capacity to act, according to the legislation in force, who may be a victim of abuse, neglect, exploitation, discrimination, violence, or any criminal activity, and also the individual under the age of criminal responsibility, who is alleged to have committed or accused of the commission of a criminal offense, and the children in conflict with the law.³

Juvenile

In the contemporary context of juvenile justice, juveniles are defined as “naïve risk-takers” who, due to their underdeveloped brain, particularly in areas responsible for impulse control and reflection, lack the mature capacity to fully understand the consequences of their actions, both for themselves and their victims.

Case management

“Case management”, is the methodology that ensures, step by step, continuous delivery and effective assistance for the child in need of protection and which aims to promote and encourage further protection of his rights and well-being.⁴

Intersectoral Technical Group

Intersectoral Technical Group (ITG) functions as an ad-hoc group in each municipality and administrative unit with over 3,000 children, aiming to address cases of children in need of protection. ITG convenes at the request of the director of the responsible social services structure at the municipal level or the child protection worker at the administrative unit level. The intersectoral technical group comprises: a) Representatives from police structures; b) Representatives from social services structures; c) Representatives from the local education institution responsible for pre-university education; d) Representatives from healthcare structures; e) Representatives from justice structures; f) Representatives from non-profit organizations; g) Any other specialist with knowledge of the child’s situation or who can contribute to the adoption or implementation of measures for child protection.⁵

³ Ibid 1.

⁴ DCM no. 579, date 03.10.2018 “for case management referral procedures, drafting and the content of the individual protection plan, the financing of costs for its implementation, as well as the implementation of its measures protection (Retrieved from:

https://childhub.org/sites/default/files/library/attachments/vkm_nr_578_date_3.10.2018.pdf)

⁵ DCM No. 353, dated 12.6.2018 “on the functioning rules of the intersectoral

Minimum age of criminal responsibility

The minimum age below which the law determines that children do not have the capacity to infringe the criminal law.⁶

Under Law 18/2017 “on the rights and protection of the child”, the terms “child, who has not reached the age of criminal responsibility”, “child under the age of criminal responsibility” and “child under the age of criminal responsibility in conflict with the law” has the same meaning as the terms defined by the criminal legislation and the Code of Criminal Justice for Minors.⁷

Vulnerability

Vulnerability refers to the degree to which individuals, communities, or systems are susceptible to experiencing harm, damage, or adverse effects due to their characteristics, circumstances, or exposure to risk factors. This concept encompasses various dimensions, including physical, social, economic, and environmental factors, and can result from factors such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, lack of access to resources or services, and exposure to hazards or emergencies.⁸

Criminality

The term “juvenile delinquency” refers to all criminal acts committed by individuals who have reached the age of criminal responsibility but are under 18 years old. This encompasses various types of offenses carried out by minors who are legally accountable for their actions but have not yet reached adulthood.⁹

technical group for the protection of children, near the municipalities and units administrative” (Retrieved from:

<https://femijet.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/VKM-nr.-353-date-12.6.2018.pdf>)

⁶General comment No. 24 (2019) on children’s rights in the child justice system (see Paragraph 8).

⁷ DCM no.635, dated 26 October 2018, “On the activity of the structures for the protection of the child below minimum age for criminal responsibility, suspected or that has committed a criminal offense”(Retrieved from:

<https://shendetesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/VKM-nr.-635-date-26.10.2018.pdf>)

⁸ McEntire, D. A. (Ed.). (2007). “Discrimination, Vulnerability, and Justice in Disaster Recovery: Conceptual Models and Applications.” Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

⁹ Hysi. V (2010) Criminology, P.238. (Retrieved from: <https://dokumen.tips/documents/v-hysi-kriminologjia.html?page=1>)



Executive Summary

This study, conducted at a national level, explores the experiences of children as victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders within the Albanian justice system, focusing on their interactions with police stations and child protection systems. The study examines the sensitivity of these mechanisms to children's needs and their alignment with international standards for child protection.

The methodology used in the study combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. From a quantitative perspective, data was collected from official sources and a broad range of institutions to provide an accurate picture of the number of child victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders. Data was obtained from reports by the State Police, the State Agency for the Rights and Protection of Children, and other service providers, focusing on the 12 districts of the country.

The qualitative part of the study included semi-structured interviews with key informants, including police officers and child protection workers, focus group discussions, as well as case studies to integrate the experiences and perspectives of children and professionals. This comprehensive approach highlighted existing challenges and proposed improvements in practices and procedures for handling minors in police stations, ensuring a uniform implementation of standards and protection of their rights.

The study's findings emphasize the need for significant reforms in the treatment of minors who come into contact with the justice system in Albania, whether as victims, witnesses, or suspected offenders. The study shows that the current justice system is often rigid and does not fully consider the specific needs of children, especially those who are vulnerable. The research underscores the necessity for specialized training, consistently applied across all districts, for police officers and child protection professionals, including tailored strategies for ethical communication and treatment of minors. Additionally, attention should be paid to improving physical infrastructure in police stations to create child-friendly spaces that positively impact the child's sense of safety during their time in custody. The role of the media in publicizing cases involving children also presents risks to their privacy and well-being, highlighting the need for stronger protective measures regarding the handling of personal data.

Another challenge is the limited availability of psychologists and social workers to support minors during interviews at police stations. This highlights the importance of having psychologists integrated into police teams to provide immediate psychological support when needed. In response to this challenge faced by police staff, ARSIS Initiative has provided ongoing psychosocial support in collaboration with the State Police, serving as a functional model for supporting children during interviews and reporting each child in contact with the law to the child protection system.

The study suggests establishing partnerships between police, social services, and mental health professionals for an integrated approach to child protection. Such collaboration would help not only in the legal management of cases but also in addressing the emotional and social needs of children. Implementing standardized protocols across all police stations and involving community-based services for ongoing support would aid in creating a more inclusive system that prioritizes the best interests of children, ensuring their reintegration into the community.

The recommendations aim to improve the treatment of minors in the justice system, ensuring that they, whether as victims, witnesses, or suspected offenders, face sensitive and fair procedures. Every police station should have dedicated juvenile officers trained not only in knowledge of children's cognitive, linguistic, and psycho-emotional development but also in legal frameworks to ensure a child-oriented approach. Special attention is also given to protecting minors' privacy during interviews by using child-friendly environments and limiting contact with the accused.

Continuous training for professionals who come into contact with minors in criminal proceedings is essential to ensure that everyone is prepared to treat them with high ethical and professional standards. To ensure transparency and justice, it is necessary to apply standardized protocols across all police stations and provide access to information for all children and their families. Cooperation between the justice system and child protection systems is essential for offering complete and comprehensive support, ensuring that children receive the necessary help and avoid re-traumatization during legal processes.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of the child justice system in Albania

The phenomenon of children victims, witnesses and offenders represents a critical and complex intersection of childhood, justice, and societal responsibility. Often defined by their age, vulnerability, and evolving sense of responsibility, these children find themselves entangled in the legal system due to their actions, circumstances, or need for protection.

Understanding the unique challenges and circumstances faced by children victims, witnesses and offenders is essential. It's not only a matter of legal procedures but also a reflection of our society's commitment to safeguarding the rights and well-being of its youngest members.

The minimum age of criminal responsibility is 14 years in Albania, which was established by article 6 of the 1995 Criminal Code and is in line with international standards including what the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) deemed in 2019 to be an absolute minimum. In most European Union (EU) countries the minimum age is 14 or 15 years old. Albania's Criminal Code distinguishes between felonies (criminal offenses) and misdemeanors (contraventions of the law) for which the ages of responsibility are 14 and 16 years respectively. Capital punishment is prohibited at any age.

An essential measure in enhancing the safeguarding of children in conflict and contact with the law involved the Albanian Parliament's endorsement of the new Criminal Code of Juvenile Justice (CCJJ) in 2017. This move was a significant component of the comprehensive Justice Reform undertaken in Albania. The CCJJ supplements the regulations outlined in the Law on Rights of the Child and Protection (Law no.18/2017), specifically designed to provide special legal protections for children who have reached the age of criminal responsibility and are involved in legal matters. For the first time in Albania's legislative system, children who encounter come into contact or conflict with the law are not treated as adults, adhering to international standards on juvenile justice. Equally important is the provision for law enforcement and justice authorities to collect and report on children's data using an integrated electronic tracking system.

The CCJJ ushers in a transformative shift, moving away from a punitive approach and embracing one that emphasizes rehabilitation and restoration when addressing juvenile offenses. This Code endeavors to create a more child-

centric justice system, whether a child is a victim or a witness of a crime. Its regulations aim to tailor the criminal justice system to accommodate the unique requirements of children, ensuring their access to justice, legal remedies, protection, education, and rehabilitation for those involved in legal matters, be they offenders, victims, or witnesses.

The 2022-2026 justice for children strategy enlarges from criminal justice to equitable access to justice for all children and in all areas of law, seeking to consolidate child-friendly justice. Its full implementation would require more resources, investment, coordination, and accountability, including establishing special child sections in each district court, use of new technology tools during trial testimony, and having child-friendly environments in place during interviews on the premises of the police or prosecution¹⁰. The coordination and implementation of the strategy require a dedicated service within the Ministry of Justice.

CPR 2019 notes that there are still structural gaps in juvenile justice in Albania and fulfilling the regulatory framework would require a shift in the administrative culture, considerable capacity building, specific adapted infrastructure, the establishment of community services, and inter-disciplinary and interinstitutional coordination at the central and local level. The criminal justice system for children operates in a context of social inequality and lack of assessment of social factors and circumstances¹¹.

The Albanian state police have taken significant steps to enhance their approach to handling cases involving children, particularly those who are either suspected perpetrators or victims of criminal offenses. To properly handle these sensitive situations, child-friendly interview units have been established in 16 police departments or stations across the country. These units are staffed with trained police personnel who specialize in conducting interviews in a manner that is supportive and appropriate for children. The proper maintenance and uninterrupted functioning of these facilities require an adequate budget from the state police.¹²

The State Police, in fulfillment of its mission and legal responsibilities, is committed to ensuring public order and safety by safeguarding the lives of individuals, promoting economic freedom, and upholding the rule of law in its entirety. The number of individuals **affected by criminal acts** in 2022 was

¹⁰ ARCTT, Uncertain pathways 2019, p. 53; Personal Communication, Ministry of Justice, Head of Juvenile Justice Section

¹¹ Byrne K., Kulluri E., Gedeshi I., 2021. Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents in Albania. UNICEF Albania, Tirana, page 51 (Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/4071/file/SituationAnalysisofChildrenandAdolescentsinAlbania.pdf>)

¹² EU progress report 2023 for Albania, p.38 (Retrieved from: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf)

13,651, compared to 16,910 in 2021. Of this number, **1,057 or 7.7% were in the age group up to 18 years old**, while 4,200 of them were female, representing 37.1% of the total affected¹³.

A total of 34,420 perpetrators were involved in criminal activities in 2022. Among them, 1.5% were aged up to 14 years, and 3.2% were aged 15-17. Tirana County is the county where the majority of criminal acts have occurred, even for the year 2022, while Kukës County is the county with the smallest number of reported criminal acts during 2022, leaving behind Gjirokastrë County compared to the previous year.

The criminal justice system for children operates in a context of social inequality and a lack of assessment of social factors and circumstances. Involvement of social services and effective provision of social services to children, especially children in conflict with the law before their release from incarceration and prior to reintegration back into their communities, is crucial to preventing discrimination and differential treatment.

Acknowledging recent reforms in the child justice system and referencing its general comment No. 24 (2019) on children's rights within this system, the Committee emphasizes the imperative for the State party to fully align its child justice system with the Convention and other pertinent standards. Specifically, the Committee urges the State to:

- (a) Allocate sufficient financial and human resources to effectively implement child justice reforms, including those about primary and secondary free legal aid.
- (b) Advocate for the utilization of non-judicial measures, such as diversion, mediation, and counseling, for children accused of criminal offenses. Wherever feasible, prioritize the use of non-custodial sentences, such as probation or community service.
- (c) Ensure that detention is employed only as a measure of last resort, for the shortest duration possible, and subject to regular review with the aim of its eventual cessation.
- (d) Guarantee that in exceptional circumstances where deprivation of liberty is deemed necessary as a last resort, detention conditions adhere to international standards, including provisions for access to education and healthcare services.
- (e) Implement comprehensive training initiatives on children's rights and child-friendly proceedings for the judiciary, legal practitioners, law enforcement personnel, and other relevant officials involved in the justice system's interactions with children.

¹³ Annual Report State Police 2022, page. 5
(Retrieved from <https://mb.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Raporti-Vjetor-Policia-e-Shtetit-2022.pdf>, accessed 20 April 2024)

1.2 Legal framework

In Albania, the existing legal framework concerning child victims, witnesses and offenders is largely similar to that governing adults, albeit with certain exceptions, provisions, and specifications. International standards set by the United Nations (UN) and the Council of Europe encompass regulations tailored to both adults and children, addressing various aspects of their rights and legal treatment.

Key international and European policies are summarized as follows:

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
- Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (2000)
- Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000)
- United Nations Guidelines on justice in matters involving child victims and witnesses of crime adopted by ECOSOC (2005)
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)
- Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2007)
- Council of Europe Guidelines on child friendly justice (2011)
- EU Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims (2011)
- EU Directive 2011/92/EU on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography (2011)
- Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (2011)
- EU Directive 2012/29/EU establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime (2012)

Key national policies and legislative framework

** Penal Code*

According to the Penal Code of the Republic of Albania, the minimum age for criminal responsibility is 14 years old. For individuals aged 14 to 18 years old, the penal law uses the term “minor.”

In the Penal Code of the Republic of Albania, criminal offenses involving the trafficking of minors, mistreatment/exploitation, exploitation for prostitution, and pornography with minors are provided for. Specifically:

- i. Article 128/b “Trafficking of Minors” stipulates that: “Recruitment, sale, transportation, transfer, concealment, or harboring of minors for the purpose of prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or similar practices to slavery, organ trafficking or other forms of exploitation, are punishable by

imprisonment from ten to twenty years. Organizing, directing, and financing the trafficking of minors is punishable by imprisonment from ten to twenty years. When this offense is committed in cooperation or more than once, or is accompanied by mistreatment and physical or psychological violence against the victim, for performing various acts, or results in serious consequences for health, it is punishable by imprisonment of not less than fifteen years. When the offense results in the death of the victim, it is punishable by imprisonment of not less than twenty years or life imprisonment. When the criminal offense is committed through the exploitation of a state or public service function, the imprisonment is increased by $\frac{1}{4}$ of the imposed sentence.”

- ii. Article 124/b “Mistreatment of Minors” provides that: “Physical or psychological mistreatment of minors by parents, siblings, grandparents, legal guardians, or any person obligated to care for them, is punishable by imprisonment from three months to two years. Forcing, exploiting, coercing, or using minors to work, to earn income, to beg, or to perform actions that harm their mental and/or physical development, or their education, is punishable by imprisonment from two to five years. When serious injury or death of the minor is caused by the offense, it is punishable by imprisonment from ten to twenty years.”
- iii. Article 114 “Exploitation of Prostitution” stipulates that: “Inducing, mediating, or receiving compensation for engaging in prostitution is punishable by imprisonment from two to five years. When this offense is committed with minors, against certain individuals, with persons with whom there are close kinship ties, guardianship, or by exploiting official relationships, or is committed in cooperation or more than once, or by persons entrusted with state and public functions, it is punishable by imprisonment from seven to fifteen years.”
- iv. Article 117 “Pornography,” in its second paragraph, stipulates that: “Production, distribution, advertisement, importation, sale, or publication of pornographic materials in environments where there are children, by any means or form, constitute criminal offenses and are punishable by imprisonment up to two years. Production, importation, offering, provision, distribution, transmission, use, or possession of child pornography, as well as intentionally accessing it, by any means or form, are punishable by imprisonment from three to ten years. Recruiting, using, coercing, or persuading a child to participate in pornographic performances, or participating in pornographic performances involving children, is punishable by imprisonment from five to ten years.”

* *Strategy on Juvenile Justice 2022- 2026*

The Strategy for Juvenile Justice 2022–2026 (SJJ 2022–2026) was approved by DCM no. 892, dated 27.12.2022, “For the approval of the Cross-sectoral Juvenile Justice Strategy 2022-2026, Action Plan and the Passport of the Indicators”. This cross-sectoral approach of the strategy provides protection and guarantee of children’s rights, aiming for justice as much as possible friendly to each child based on the best interest of the child. This strategy addresses consolidation of access to friendly justice for every child, prevention priority of children’s involvement in crime and their victimization, access to help free legal services, strengthening the capacities of legal professionals, guaranteeing a process of legally for every child at any time and without delay, the exercise of rights in the field family, civil, administrative and criminal, the consolidation of alternative measures of avoidance from criminal prosecution or judicial proceedings, through the implementation of restorative programs and mediation, keeping children out of criminal processes and court proceedings counseling, supervision of the child in cases where the family or his legal representative cannot exercise, the rehabilitation and reintegration of the child in society.

* *Agenda on the Rights of the Child 2021-2026*

The National Agenda for Children’s Rights 2021-2026¹⁴ Albania sets out several political goals and specific objectives aimed at protecting and promoting the rights of children, including those who encounter or are in conflict with the law. Political Goal 2 focuses on the elimination of all forms of violence, exploitation, abuse, and harmful practices. Specific Objective 2.2 emphasizes the operation of a comprehensive and useful system for the protection of children. This objective directly relates to the challenges faced by children in contact with the law, as it highlights the importance of having effective mechanisms in place to safeguard children from abuse, exploitation, and violence within the justice system. By ensuring the operation of a comprehensive protection system, including legal assistance, counseling, and support services, children involved in legal proceedings can receive the necessary protection and support to prevent further harm and trauma.

Political Goal 3 focuses on establishing systems and services that are friendly to children and teenagers. Specific Objective 3.2 aims to create an integrated system of social protection sensitive to the needs of children and families. This objective is crucial for children in contact with the law, as it underscores the importance of providing holistic support that addresses not only their legal needs but also their broader social and welfare needs. By integrating social protection services, such as housing assistance, educational support, and mental health services, children in conflict with the law can receive comprehensive support to address the underlying factors contributing to their involvement in legal proceedings.

¹⁴ The National Agenda for Children’s Rights 2021-2026 (Retrieved from: https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/4396/file/NARC%202021-2026_ENG.pdf)

Specific Objective 3.4 emphasizes the importance of establishing a friendly justice system for children. This objective directly addresses the challenges highlighted in the study regarding the vulnerability of children/youth offenders and victims within the justice system. By prioritizing the creation of a justice system that is sensitive to the needs and rights of children, including providing child-friendly courtrooms, trained personnel, and age-appropriate legal proceedings, children in contact with the law can experience a more supportive and empowering legal process.

** Intersectoral Strategy for the Protection of Victims of Crime 2024-2030*

Albania in the end of 2023 approved the Intersectoral Strategy for the Protection of Victims of Crime 2024-2030 (ISPVC) and its action plan for the first time. ISPVC 2024-2030 includes measures and actions aimed at strengthening the position of victims of crime in the criminal justice system, through institutional commitment in order for victims to be informed about their rights, to be able to report the crime, to participate and to be heard in criminal proceedings, to have access without discrimination to the criminal justice system, access to services for victims is guaranteed, they are guaranteed the right to compensation for damage from the author and/or the state in the criminal process and during the civil process, based on the needs for protection specific, to receive the necessary services in order to rehabilitate them. Prevention of re-victimization and secondary victimization of victims is one of the goals of this strategy.

** Law no.18/2017 “on the rights and protection of the child”*

The Law on the rights and protection of the child creates legal lays the groundwork for the establishment of institutional mechanisms that will guarantee and ensure respect for the rights of children by the individual, the family, the State and other third-party entities. The Law provides for a coordinated approach by various child rights and child protection stakeholders. In the definition of the law, the concept of “children in need of protection”, including children up to 18 years old as victims of abuse, neglect, exploitation, discrimination, violence, or a criminal activity, but also children under the age of criminal responsibility, who is suspected of having committed or is accused of having committed criminal offense, as well as children in conflict with the law.

The law gives dedicated attention to parents/legal guardians as the persons primarily responsible for the growth, care, or education of the child, sharing their responsibility with the state authorities and society. The main principle of the law is the principle of the best interests of the public (Article 6) and public and non-public authorities, as well as the courts, have as a primary consideration the best interest of the child in all actions and decisions taken regarding children. In this law, it is explained in a more detailed manner than in any other legal document what it is considered in the actions that are directly related to the children to respect the best interests of the children.

The best interest of the child means the right of the child to have a healthy

physical, mental, moral, spiritual, and social development, as well as to enjoy a family and social life suitable for the child. In the implementation of this principle, the following are considered:

- the child's needs for physical and psychological development, education and health, safety and stability as well as growth/belonging to a family.
- the opinion of the child, depending on his age and ability to understand.
- the history of the child, considering the special situations of abuse, neglect, exploitation, or other forms of violence against the child, as well as the possible risk that similar situations will occur in the future.
- the ability of parents or persons who care for the child's well-being to respond to the child's needs
- continuity of personal relationships between the child and people with whom he has gender, social and/or spiritual ties.

The law provides in specific articles, the actions that must be followed by child protection structures during the application of protection measures for children in conflict with the law under the age of criminal responsibility (articles 55, 65, 66) which includes interventions and services necessary for treatment and reintegration, taking into consideration the conditions that facilitated the child's involvement in crime, the level of social risk and the offense committed, the environment in which the child grew up and lived, the risk or possibility that the child commits another criminal offense such as and any other factor that may help to understand the child's situation. Child protection structures can also include in the Individual Protection Plan counseling sessions for the parents of the child who is suspected or has committed a criminal offense, who are not subject to criminal proceedings or have not been criminally convicted for this. The law also provides for the responsibilities of the local government in the establishment of rehabilitation and reintegration programs and services for children in need of protection, with a special focus on children who are victims of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation and children who are suspected or have committed criminal offences. who are under the age of criminal responsibility.

** Law no. 9669, dated 18.12.2006 "On measures against violence in family relationships (amended).*

The law establishes a system of judicially imposed protection measures for



victims of domestic violence, enhances services for victims and creates coordinated referral mechanisms. designs policies and supervises taking measures to eliminate the consequences of child abuse by parents or legal guardians or, in the case when children live in families where parents or guardians abuse each other, through placement in alternative care or emergency protective measures, according to the provisions of the legislation in force on the rights and protection of the child. The court, mainly, in the immediate order of protection and/or in the order of protection, can provide protective measures for children who have suffered violence or were present when domestic violence was carried out. The court, according to its assessment, can also implement protective measures and procedures provided by the legislation in force for the rights and protection of the child, as long as the deadlines for the judicial process provided by this law are not violated.

The law provides actions that must be carried out by local structures, including the court, for the child, as a victim or as a witness. The law provides the application of the immediate protection order. In the same line, the Law on the Rights and Protection of the Child provides in Article 62, point 6, that when the child is subject to domestic violence, the authorities must apply the protection measures provided by both laws.

** Family law The Family Code (Law no. 9062,
date 8.5.2003 (amended in 2015)*

The Family Code defines the primary role of parents in the obligations and rights to care for the well-being, development, upbringing and education of children born out of wedlock, as well as the necessary support that the state and society must provide to families for caring for their children, to prevent their abuse and abandonment, as well as to maintain the stability of the family.

In Article 6, the Family Code provides the right of the minor to be heard in every procedure, in accordance with his age and ability to understand, while preserving the right given by the special provisions that guarantee the intervention and the granting of his consent. In cases where the minor requests to be heard, his request cannot be dismissed, except for serious reasons and with a highly motivated decision. The minor can be heard himself, through a lawyer or a person chosen by him. In any procedure concerning a minor, the presence of a psychologist is mandatory to evaluate the statements of the minor, in accordance with his mental development and social situation.

The law does not provide for specific actions for minors in conflict with the law, but gives meaning to parental responsibility (Article 251) as the set of rights and duties aimed at ensuring the emotional, social and material well-being of the child, taking care of him, maintaining personal relations with him, ensuring his well-being, upbringing, education, legal representation and administration of his assets. Article 232 Parents represent their minor child who has not reached the age of fourteen in all legal actions, with the exception of those that, according to the law, the minor can perform on his own.

1.3 Experience of children at the police stations

Children come into contact with police authorities or police stations, facing roles **as suspects, victims, or witnesses** for various reasons such as exposure to violent actions and different forms of abuse in family or social environments, involvement in criminal offenses, and in any other situation where the presence of potential risk is assessed due to cultural, social, familial, health, or other factors.

Police Structure

In accordance with the obligations set out in the Juvenile Justice Code, Article 25, the State Police undertook a reorganization of its structures and functions in 2018. The objective was to expand the roles related to “juveniles and domestic violence” across all levels, from central to local units. These changes aimed to establish the organization of structures for juveniles and domestic violence as a successful model, as follows:

- Within the General Directorate of the State Police, under the Criminal Police Department, and reporting to the Directorate Against Crimes Against Persons and Property, the Sector for Juveniles and Domestic Violence operates.
- In the 12 Regional Police Directorates, within the Crime Sector, there is an organic position titled “Specialist for the Protection of Juveniles and Domestic Violence.”
- In Police Stations, depending on the area they cover and the number of recorded incidents, 1 to 3 organic positions titled “Specialist for Crime Investigation and for Juveniles and Domestic Violence” have been added.

However, currently, this structure is no longer functional in police stations. With the structural changes to the State Police in 2023, the configuration of local structures has shifted, and they are now organized into police zones.

The presence of a minor as a victim, witness, or suspect within the police station environment is governed by procedural processes set out in the Juvenile Justice Code. The questioning of a minor typically occurs in the presence of a legal representative, procedural representative, psychologist, social worker, and child protection worker, depending on the level of risk and the child’s status. This child-centered process, oriented toward the child’s best interests, faces challenges both from the system and procedural implementation.

A minor is questioned by a police officer (primarily judicial police officers) in every situation they find themselves in, whether as a victim, suspected offender,

or witness. The presence of a minor in the police station is managed by police structures, especially in cases of in flagrante incidents, and the child is always accompanied by family members.

When the minor begins the interview process, they are accompanied by a legal representative (except in cases where family members are the abusers), procedural representative, and the psycho-social team (psychologist and social worker). If the minor is under 14, the questioning process only proceeds with the consent and presence of parents or legal representative, the procedural representative, and an assisting psychologist.

Based on the child's right to be informed, the judicial police officer presents the letter of rights that legally applies to the child. The officer also explains the steps of the process to ensure that the information is understandable according to the child's age group. With the support of the assisting psychologist, the officer continues the questioning while ensuring adherence to the principle of non-harm and appropriate communication, aligning with the child's development.

The interview with the minor takes place in child-friendly rooms, primarily in cases of sexual violence, family-related violence, and other similar situations. This entire process is supported by the child's defender, psychologist, and social worker, who help to ease the child's psycho-emotional state and conduct an initial assessment of the family and risk factors.

The experience of a minor in the interview rooms is unique, shaped by external and internal factors that have influenced each child's growth and education. The sense of security and trust built during the time spent in the police station are crucial elements, which the minor uses to develop resilience, enabling them to emotionally cope with the responsibility of facing the criminal process.

For this reason, the preparatory phase before the questioning process by the judicial police officer is crucial in managing the child's experience with investigative or other ongoing procedures. The psychologist's contact with the minor in a neutral environment, unaffected by third parties, and the social worker's contact with the family members help to inform them about the situation, clarify the role of each professional and the procedures to follow, and most importantly, improve the child's emotional state and prepare them for the interview process.

The initial assessment and emergency intervention by the psychologist-social worker team also help to create a clearer understanding of the circumstances and risk indicators, guiding the officer in addressing the case and the further processing by prosecution, court, or social protection services.

Providing such a service in a timely manner and according to the needs of the minor and family serves as a guarantee for activating the justice and social protection system mechanisms to empower the case and family with the final goal of referral and fulfillment of needs.

In situations where the minor is a victim of domestic violence, sexual abuse, neglect, trafficking, or exploitation, the initiation of immediate protection procedures takes precedence over the entire process by both police authorities and local social services. Providing emergency secure service and accommodating the protected minor are steps implemented under current legislation, ensuring full support, safety, and protection for the child against abusers.

Protection procedures for the minor are initiated by police authorities, who, in close collaboration with the psycho-social team and child protection workers, identify the best option for temporary custody of the minor until further procedures are completed by judicial authorities. In such cases, the minor is given priority, particularly in the interview process, to avoid retraumatization and create optimal conditions for audio-visual interviewing. The role played by the psycho-social team also influences the minor's experience even after they leave the police environment.

In cases where the minor is the suspect and all conditions for detention are met, the entire process is guided by the prosecutor's decisions and other competent authorities within the time limits set by law. In this situation, every minor facing such circumstances experiences significant emotional distress, often accompanied by emotional shock, which requires psychological assistance and support, along with emotional support from family members when faced with an unexpected decision.

The long-standing contribution of ARSIS Initiative's psycho-social teams, who have assisted minors during the questioning process at police stations in Tirana, Kamëz, Vorë, Farkë, Krujë, Kavajë, etc., has proven to be an essential service, providing an emergency response and fulfilling minors' rights and needs.

Through this support, concrete practices have been established to handle cases in accordance with current legislation, offering timely access to quality services. The presence of ARSIS Initiative's psycho-social services contributes to identifying and reporting cases of recidivism, activating support systems to help reduce repeat offenses among minors.

The experience of providing this service over the years in a considerable territorial scope has created an impact not only in offering child-friendly approaches within the police environment but also as a guiding compass for every police officer, treating minors with full respect for their needs, development, and integrity, regardless of their status in criminal proceedings.

1.4 Psychologist's role at the police stations

The psychologist's role in police stations involves providing comprehensive support to minors, including suspected offenders, victims, and witnesses, during their interactions with the criminal justice system. This role encompasses several key responsibilities:

- Ensuring a calm environment free of distracting objects/materials to help children feel relaxed, safe, and ready to share information.
- Conducting a preparatory phase to stabilize the emotional state of the minor before questioning, to ensure a fair and transparent process in narrating events.
- Establishing a trust-based relationship with the child, offering security and protection throughout their stay in the interview environment.
- Providing emotional support and reducing the traumatic impact on the child. Emphasizing the importance of truthfulness while guiding the child as the primary source of information.
- Collaborating with the team to convey legal information, such as the rights described in the letter of rights or any process impacting the child's decision-making, in a friendly and understandable language for the child.
- Consulting and assisting judicial police officers in formulating questions to ensure they are appropriate for the child's age, cognitive and linguistic development, and are clear, open-ended, and non-suggestive.
- Being present and assisting in all legal procedures involving minors—whether victims, witnesses, or suspects—in the police station environment.
- Safeguarding the child's rights and psychological well-being, respecting, in special cases, the child's will to pause or stop the interview process.
- The psychologist provides input in reports and assessments that influence the direction of investigations and the judicial process, ensuring the child's best interests are maintained throughout.¹⁵

¹⁵ Order of the Psychologist in cooperation with the Security Academy, PAMECA V, and the State Police. (2021). Psychologist at the Police Station: Manual.

1.5 Nisma ARSIS immediate support at the police stations

The Juvenile Justice System in Albania is anchored in earlier agreements of the government with international agencies and other stakeholders within the child protection system and is designed to expand the circle of authorities taking the commitment to offer child-friendly justice, comprising both justice and care sectors.

Nisma ARSIS, as a reputable child protection specializing organization, which aims to achieve sustainable and long-lasting results, has designed its emergency response service ensuring the best possible outcomes for children, youth, and their families who are in vulnerable situations, including child victims, witnesses and offenders in police stations.

The establishment of services for children under 14 in conflict with the law was formalized through a Cooperation Agreement signed on August 24, 2011, between the State Police and Save the Children Albania, along with partner organizations ARSIS, FBSH, and QFPJR¹⁶. This agreement addressed the shortcomings in the police's ability to handle such cases effectively. The policy defined the roles and responsibilities of police officers and staff from Save the Children, specifying procedures for the humane treatment, verification of identity, and immediate legal and psychological assistance for minors.

To implement this agreement, a local referral system was created to provide comprehensive psychosocial assistance, including educational reintegration, recreational activities, and ongoing counseling. Training programs were conducted to equip police officers and ARSIS staff with the necessary skills to support and reintegrate children effectively. Continuous monitoring and evaluation ensured that these services met their goals of minimizing recidivism and supporting the well-being of minors in conflict with the law. In 2016 Nisma ARSIS continued this cooperation with State Police within the same methodology as the teams has been used to. Every two years the cooperation agreement between Nisma ARSIS and State police is renovated.

Providing psycho-social support in police stations during the interview process for children fulfills broader legal and ethical obligations to treat all child victims, witnesses, and offenders with dignity and respect, while also offering the necessary care and support for those in vulnerable situations. The psycho-social service provided by ARSIS Initiative in police stations during the interviewing of minors reflects a holistic approach to legal matters, which often intersect with social, psychological, and economic factors. By integrating these dimensions, ARSIS's psycho-social service in police stations has played an active role in emergency response and preventive measures for both child victims and those who are offenders or witnesses.

¹⁶ Center for Children in Street Situation in Tirana (Established by Save the Children in cooperation with the Municipality of Tirana)

Impact of the psychosocial intervention at police stations:

Creating a child-friendly setting in the police stations for the minor's development needs to ensure that the process is conducted in a manner that is both supportive and conducive to obtaining accurate and reliable information during the process.

Crisis management is an issue that the police stations often deal with individuals in crisis, whether they are victims, offenders or family members. The psycho-social team provides intermediate crisis intervention to stabilize these individuals and guide them to appropriate long-term services.

Addressing the immediate needs of victims and offenders, psycho-social services have reduced the workload and emotional burden on police officers, allowing them to focus more effectively on their primary law enforcement duties considering the best interest of the child.

Nisma ARSIS has dedicated a psycho-social support team consisting of 12 professionals (6 social workers and 6 psychologists) across 8 police stations in Tirana and in 4 other cities to enhance the well-being of all child victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders during interviews in collaboration with the State Police. Comprehensive support is provided to children and their families as they face the justice system by the organization's specialized professionals, who are committed to a 24/7 response. ARSIS's multidisciplinary approach consists of three steps: initial psycho-social assessment, assistance during the interview, and referral of the case to social and protective services, aiming to address children's needs for support.

The Nisma ARSIS psycho-social team operates beyond official hours, from 16:30 to 22:00, covering 7 police stations in Tirana and 1 in the Kamëz Municipality, Fushë-Krujë, Krujë, Kurbin, Vorë, Farkë, and Kavajë, in line with the criteria set by the Juvenile Justice Code (hereinafter referred to as the Code).¹⁷

The primary objective of the team is to support the minor throughout the interview conducted by police officers, ensuring a child-friendly environment where questions are appropriate to the child's age and comprehension level.

The presence of the psychologist in police stations where the Nisma ARSIS

¹⁷ Article 18 of the Juvenile Criminal Justice Code stipulates that the presence of a psychologist is mandatory at every stage of criminal proceedings involving a child in conflict with the law, as well as during the interview process for child victims or witnesses, regardless of whether they are above or below the age of 14. This Code contains specific regulations concerning the criminal responsibility of minors, procedural rules regarding investigation, prosecution, trial proceedings, execution of criminal sentences, rehabilitation, or any other measures involving a minor in conflict with the law, as well as minors who are victims and/or witnesses of criminal offenses.

team has assisted highlights several elements that directly impact the significant alleviation of the child's emotional response, encourage interactive communication, and provide support during moments of reliving the event. The presence of the psychologist and social worker, reinforced by the testimonials and impressions of the minors and their families, has increased trust in conducting a fair process based on the principles of respecting the child's full rights, eliminating hesitancy to report incidents, and encouraging cooperation with the relevant authorities. The handling of each case with the presence of the minor by officers is guided by the team, adopting a more social approach focused on eliminating the child's retraumatization and identifying appropriate resources to avoid causing any harm.

Furthermore, through intervention and assistance in the police station, the ARSIS team strengthens the referral mechanism within the child protection system in Albania, ensuring that every case assisted at the police station is referred in accordance with legal provisions, including Law 18/2017, Article 67 (reporting obligation), and Law 37/2017, Article 35, which outlines child protection workers' responsibilities in supporting minors during judicial processes.

Beyond cases assisted in the police station, the Nisma ARSIS team, depending on the case assessment, provides safe transportation to the child's residence or to an emergency protection service or residential care service. In all cases, this process is well-coordinated with the relevant structures, initiated by police representatives, child protection workers, or any other referring structure. The psycho-social team ensures the child's well-being, offers psychological support, and prepares the child for the new experience of being placed in emergency protection or residential care, mediating all decision-making by the aforementioned structures. Each procedure is conducted in compliance with legal provisions and in coordination with protection structures and social services to guarantee the most suitable alternative for the child's safety and well-being after leaving the police station.

The team's presence during the interview of the minor by the officer is also considered essential in other settings outside the police station, such as at home or in hospital environments, respecting the legal framework that allows for the interviewing of minors. In such cases, the role of the psychologist is crucial, as it eases the impact of the incident on the minor's current state and their family. This process is handled with great care by the officer, prioritizing the child's health and closely cooperating with the team and following the given guidelines.

2. Methodology for research

2.1 Purpose and objectives of the study

In collaboration with the support of the State Police, the ARSIS Organization is analyzing the experiences of child victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders nationwide as they relate directly to their interactions with police stations. This initiative was developed by professionals at ARSIS, drawing from extensive field experience working with child victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders throughout the country, in police stations, and within Albania's child protection system.

The findings from this analysis will be shared with relevant local and central structures to aid in developing new strategies, improving service delivery, and building other necessary support mechanisms for children and their families. Furthermore, it will inform all stakeholders, including donors and civil society, to develop a comprehensive perspective on future interventions.

The study aims to understand the prevalence of child victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders in Albania, their profiles, and the identification of key elements from the perspectives of the police, the child protection system, and the children themselves. Additionally, it highlights the sensitivity shown towards children by police station staff and the child protection system.

Key issues for consideration are as follows:

1. Qualitative and quantitative data have been collected to understand the prevalence and profiles of children as victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders in Albania.
2. The analysis and data collection should inform legislative and law enforcement mechanisms on how this analytical process reflects strategic objectives; what types of services and other support mechanisms are needed for children and their families; and what measures are necessary to strengthen and enhance existing resources at local and central levels, considering the profiles of children as victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders.
3. Emphasizing the role of statutory services by highlighting the importance of inter-institutional coordination within the child protection system (e.g., Police, Child Protection Units, among others).

4. Reflecting on and analyzing current practices for immediate response and the effectiveness of legal services in providing accessible mechanisms and services to appropriately address minors.
- 5.

Objectives:

- Generate a demographic profile of children victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders in Albania;
- Describe the existing law enforcement mechanisms and processes, the shortcomings and lessons learned, in administering children victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders at the police stations;

2.2 Study design

The study was conducted at national level and collected data from a wide range of credible sources to validate information.

Key research areas

Based on the definition of children as victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders in police stations, the key issues identified are informed by findings from programs implemented by Nisma ARSIS in cooperation with the State Police, the current context, and relevant literature. The suggested key research questions are:

- 1 Who are children victims, witnesses and offenders in Albania?
 - 1A. How many children are victims, witnesses, and offenders?
- 2 How child-sensitive are law enforcement mechanisms and processes?
 - 2A. How much do the mechanisms & processes at the Police stations take into account the needs and sensitivities of children in police stations?
 - 2B. Child view: immediate response in Police Stations and Protection System

The study design offers a general overview of the national context including legal framework concerning children victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders. This perspective is based on primary data collected from fieldwork in 12 counties, encompassing official data and findings from interviews and focus groups. Additionally, the report draws on data from Nisma ARSIS's extensive work in Tirana, the largest county in Albania, providing a more specific context and detailed findings based on years of experience in the region within the same framework of analysis.

Geographical considerations

The study has been carried out on a national scale. There has been a consistent

effort to gather data from diverse sources throughout Albania, including local, county, and national levels, in collaboration with relevant institutions.

Quantitative methodology

The quantitative methodology established a foundational understanding of the number of children victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders. It was essential to integrate and correlate data from diverse sources. The primary goal was to provide a range, from the lowest to the highest estimates, of children victims, witnesses, and offenders in Albania. This was complemented by a detailed quantitative breakdown of the various profiles or categories of these children, which was enriched by insights from the qualitative study.

Fieldwork:

- * desk review identified the most important sources used like the databases of Police, Nisma ARSIS, other service providers, etc;
- * from this analysis, 12 major cities/regions were involved in an extensive mapping and survey, while all other cities were mapped through contact with local partners and/or contact Police, Child Protection Units, etc.

Numerical data of children victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders from reliable sources:

- * Official data was intended for those statistics and reports that were produced or collated by institutions and were public and released upon request for the purposes of this study.
 - i. State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child data from all CPUs and other institutional sources;
 - ii. General Police Directorate - Children's Section – data from all police stations about children who are in conflict with the law, victims or witnesses of criminal or violent acts;
- * Number of children victims, witnesses and suspected offenders in police stations (including disaggregation of sex, ethnicity, typology, recidivism, number of cases sent to prosecutor, number of cases referred to child protection units)

Qualitative methodology

The primary objective of the qualitative analysis was to integrate the insights from the quantitative data with the information collected through an inclusive process involving all preselected informants and children. This fostered a mutual understanding, especially among relevant institutions, regarding the crucial issues that need addressing, and ideally, the suggested recommendations. The culmination of this process is a comprehensive report detailing the study's empirical results and actionable recommendations.

This process began with a systematic review of profiles of children victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders, key issues leading to their being in the police

station, and relevant intervention related to the immediate response, referral, and follow-up by the child protection system. To ensure wide participation, various activities feed into this systematic review:

- * in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants – local key informants and national key informants
- * focus group discussions with professionals including child protection workers, police officers, etc
- * case studies

Qualitative analysis provides, at a minimum:

- * main profiles of children victims, witnesses and suspected offenders including data for: age group, gender, location, activity/ies, categories (Key research question 1), including minimum and maximum estimates of children victims, witnesses and suspected offenders;
- * detailed analysis of how child-sensitive are law enforcement mechanisms and processes: 2A. Do law enforcement and protection mechanisms & processes take into account the needs and sensitivities of children in police stations.
- * summary of child perspectives and views from the case studies in relation to their involvement with law enforcement agencies as victims, witnesses or offenders, and the immediate response provided to them in police stations and protection systems (Key research question 2B).

2.3 Sampling

The sample for this study encompasses a broad spectrum of data sources and participants, aiming to capture a comprehensive understanding of children's involvement in the justice system in Albania. Here's a breakdown of the sample:

Participants

- * 22 interviews have been conducted with key local and national stakeholders, including professionals from the police, child protection units, law enforcement agencies, NGOs, and relevant government bodies.
- * 2 focus groups have been held with professionals such as child protection workers and judicial police officers.
- * 2 case studies of minors (one as a victim and one as a suspected offender) have been reviewed, where the children shared their experiences and perspectives from their time within the police station environment and beyond.

Sample Characteristics

The sample included:

1. Law enforcement professionals, child protection professionals, and representatives from international and national organizations in Albania involved in providing specialized services, advocacy efforts, and experience working with children in contact and in conflict with the law.
2. Children who have been victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders in police stations, assisted with services from Nisma ARSIS and the police at the stations. Data was disaggregated based on various demographic factors such as gender, age groups, ethnicity, and geographic location.
3. Analysis of case files for minors assisted by ARSIS Initiative to categorize different components relevant to the study's analysis, including family background, living situation, education, and opportunities for life skills, assessment of development areas, determination of risk levels, recidivism factors, and more.

2.4 Limitations of the study and challenges

- Some respondents were reluctant to share detailed information, influenced by concerns about stigma, fear of judgment, or breaking confidentiality, given the sensitivity of the issues being addressed.
- The absence of additional national resources on the topic limits opportunities for comparative and progressive analyses of the phenomenon of minors in contact and conflict with the law. This lack of information or research resources requires long-term interventions to monitor the effectiveness and impact of interventions over time.
- Limited funding and personnel restricted the ability to conduct more extensive territorial work and fieldwork, which could have increased participant numbers and provided additional resources for data analysis.
- The reliability of information and data source stability was influenced by the professional capacity and preparedness of respondents in handling juvenile cases during interviews and responding quickly to the protection needs of minors.
- Ensuring confidentiality and maintaining the emotional stability of minors posed ethical challenges. Balancing the need for detailed data with the requirement to protect vulnerable participants served as a potential limitation.

These limitations highlight the need for careful interpretation of the study's findings and underscore the importance of addressing these gaps in future research to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by children in contact with the justice system in Albania.

2.5 Ethics considerations

This section outlines the ethical considerations adhered to in this study, emphasizing informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, minimizing harm, sensitivity to vulnerability, transparency and honesty, legal and ethical compliance, participant welfare, cultural sensitivity, and collaboration with stakeholders.

This study obtained explicit consent from parents or legal guardians, ensuring they were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Additionally, assent was sought from the child participants through age-appropriate explanations, ensuring their comprehension and voluntary participation (2 case studies). Participants and their guardians were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative repercussions. Anonymity was maintained by employing coding systems and pseudonyms in place of real names. Data collected were securely stored with stringent access controls to prevent unauthorized access and breaches. Interviews and data collection sessions were conducted in private settings to encourage openness and protect participant confidentiality.

The study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits were communicated to all involved. Findings were reported honestly and accurately, with no fabrication or misrepresentation of data. The study adhered to all relevant legal and ethical guidelines, including local and international laws concerning child protection and research ethics. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, with assurances that police officers, child protection workers and children would feel coerced to participate. Participants were continually reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any adverse consequences.

Collaboration with police, child protection systems, and other relevant authorities was essential. This cooperation facilitated the ethical conduct of the study and enhanced the practical implementation of its findings and recommendations. Engaging with stakeholders ensured that the study was aligned with existing frameworks and contribute effectively to policy and practice.

3. Profile of children victims, witnesses and suspected offenders in police station

Very often, children are faced with laws, policies and practices that are not tailored to children's experiences or that otherwise lead to unjust, inequitable and inappropriate outcomes in administrative, civil and criminal cases. When reviewing the identified cases, it has been noted that deprivation of liberty of children as offenders or treatment of children as witnesses to a crime has a direct impact on their psychological and social development.¹⁸

For many young people today, traditional pathways connecting family, education, and work are being disrupted. The social structures that once facilitated smooth socialization processes are disintegrating, resulting in more diverse and unpredictable lifestyle trajectories. Changes such as the restructuring of the labor market, prolonged dependence of young adults on their families, and restricted opportunities for achieving independence are reshaping family dynamics, friendships, educational choices, job market participation, leisure activities, and overall lifestyles. This phenomenon is not confined to developed nations; developing countries are also experiencing new challenges as young people transition from childhood to adulthood. Issues such as rapid population growth, lack of housing and support services, poverty, youth unemployment and underemployment, weakening community authority, urban overcrowding, family breakdown, and ineffective educational systems are among the many pressures faced by young people.

3.1 Demographic profile of children victims, witnesses and suspected offenders

Based on the Minister of Interior's Instruction No. 274, dated 10.09.2014, "On Crime Statistics," and the Order of the General Director of the State Police No. 1531, dated 24.10.2014, "On the Preparation of Crime Statistics," the State

¹⁸ Commissioner for the Protection against Discrimination and the Albanian Rehabilitation Centre for Trauma and Torture (2016). *Children, access to justice and discrimination* An overview of judicial decisions in relation to children from the point of view of discrimination and equality (Retrieved from: https://www.unicef.org/albania/sites/unicef.org/albania/files/2018-12/2016-Access_to_Justice.pdf)

Police administers data on juvenile victims of criminal offenses, categorized by age (under 14 years old and 14-18 years old), gender, and residence. Data regarding their mental or physical health disabilities are not administered.

In accordance with Council of Ministers Decision No. 149, dated 20.03.2019, “On the establishment, organization, functioning, usage characteristics, and access for primary and secondary data, and the information provider for the Integrated Juvenile Justice Data System,” the General Director of the State Police approved Order No. 513, dated 04.06.2021, “On the use and registration of data in the Juvenile Justice Data System,” for recording data on minors involved in criminal activities as offenders, victims, and witnesses. This system registers data from multiple institutions involved in juvenile justice, including data from the Police. The data is categorized by age, gender, status of the child in contact with the law, geographic area, etc.

For several years, as a collaborating actor with the State Police, Nisma ARSIS has addressed gaps in available psycho-social support services, not only in police stations during the assistance of minors but also in cases referred to other local services. Since the start of this collaboration in 2011, Nisma ARSIS has provided demographic data on minors as victims or witnesses, contributing to statistical and comparative analyses for public institutions, which previously had data only on juvenile offenders.

The data collected by Nisma ARSIS, covering Tirana district and surrounding areas¹⁹, offers a more detailed perspective compared to the general data provided by the State Police at the national level. This report integrates Nisma ARSIS’s data in the following sections to provide a comprehensive understanding of minors assisted in Tirana police stations within the broader profile offered by the State Police in this report.

The inclusion of Nisma ARSIS data within the broader context of State Police statistics provides a more localized view within Tirana district. This includes detailed information on the profiles of child victims, witnesses, and suspected offenders, as well as specific types of criminal activities in which they are involved.

National level

Based on estimates from INSTAT in cooperation with State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child (SARPC), the total population of children aged 10-17 in the 12 counties of Albania in 2021²⁰ was 269,303. Within this context, the data from SARPC on the frequency distribution of children registered²¹ by police stations at the national level from 2019 to 2023 reveals

¹⁹ Municipality of Tirana, Kamëz and Vorë.

²⁰ SARPC, Të dhënat statistikore (Statistical data), Indicator 1. Available at: <http://statistikafemijet.gov.al/charts.php?ind=171&supInd=1>

²¹ In this context, “registered” refers to the instances where children aged 10-17 were officially recorded or documented by police stations

significant fluctuations over the five-year period. In 2019, 3,250 children were registered by the police, establishing a baseline for the observed period. The following year, 2020, saw a substantial increase, with the number rising to 4,343 children, marking an approximately 33.6% surge. However, in 2021, the number of registered children decreased sharply to 3,069, a decline of about 29.4% from the previous year. In 2022, the numbers showed a slight increase to 3,163, indicating a period of relative stability yet remaining below the 2020 peak. By 2023, the number rose again to 3,443, an 8.8% increase from the previous year.

The data reveals significant variability in the number of children registered by police stations over the years. The increase in 2020, followed by a notable decline in 2021 and subsequent rises in 2022 and 2023, highlights the importance of continuous monitoring and analysis to uncover the underlying causes of these fluctuations. It's essential to consider how the COVID-19 lockdown have influenced these numbers. The lockdown contributed to the 2020 peak due to increased household stress, disruptions in social services, and limited access to safe environments like schools, which have led to more incidents involving children and police. The subsequent decline in 2021 reflect the easing of restrictions and a gradual return to normalcy.

Table 1: Frequency distribution of the data of children victims and suspected offenders in national level

Statistics (Data on the rights and protection of the child from the SARPC)	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of children in total registered by police station	3250	4343	3069	3163	3443
Total	3250	4343	3069	3163	3443

*Source: SARPC, Të dhënat statistikore (Statistical data), Indicator 37&38. Available at: <http://statistikafemijet.gov.al/charts.php?ind=38> (accessed 29 April 2024).

Tirana County

Data from Nisma ARSIS reveals a concerning trend in the number of children suspected of criminal offenses, as well as child victims and witnesses, in Tirana district over the past five years. In 2019, the police recorded 264 children at Tirana police stations assisted by Nisma ARSIS, a number that saw a slight decrease to 206 in 2020. In 2021, however, the number of children suspected of wrongdoing rose to 282, surpassing previous years' figures. In 2022, the number of children assisted at Tirana police stations surged to 518, highlighting a growing issue that requires closer examination. The most significant increase occurred in 2023, with the number rising sharply to 896, almost doubling from the previous year. This steady and steep upward trajectory over the last two years underscores the need for increased efforts to analyze and understand this trend in greater detail.

Table 2: Frequency distribution of the data of children victims, witnesses and suspected offenders in Tirana country.

Statistics	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of children in total assisted by Nisma ARSIS at the police station	264	206	282	518	896
Total	264	206	282	518	896

Source: Nisma ARSIS database 2019-2023

Several factors may influence the observed trends. Socio-economic challenges, changes in the legal framework, police registration practices, lack of public awareness, and reporting of juvenile offenses are all potential contributors to fluctuations in the number of children recorded at police stations. However, accurately identifying the causes requires a more in-depth contextual analysis.

These variations are also linked to the type of data collected and the methods used for collection. Changes in data collection practices over time, shifts in what qualifies for registration, or adjustments in how incidents are classified can significantly impact the numbers. Understanding whether fluctuations are driven by actual changes in juvenile behavior or by changes in data collection methods is essential for accurately interpreting trends and designing effective interventions.

Most children in contact and conflict with the law come from economically challenged families affected by abuse, violence, or neglect (data from Nisma ARSIS). The offenses involving minors include theft, minor injuries, intentional harm, threats, possession of cold weapons, irregular driving, traffic violations, drug sales, and use. From 2019 to 2023, an average of 17 children per month found themselves facing criminal responsibility. (Nisma ARSIS reports).

3.1.1 Children suspected offenders (in conflict with the law)

Law no. 108/2014 “On State Police”¹³, Article 103, paragraph 2, Article 123 determines the measures to be taken by police officers in cases where a child who disrupts public order or security or who is identified as the offender of a criminal offense may be held in police premises, by age and psychological needs. These standards for the treatment with dignity and following the age and psychological needs of the child, together with the informing of their rights, legal representation and presumption of innocence have been the elements taken into account in this analysis²².

²² Save the Children and Albanian Rehabilitation Centre for Trauma and Torture (ARCT).(2019) *Children with[in] Judiciary system: Monitoring of child’ legal protection*



In 2015, a risk analysis conducted by the General Directorate of Prisons focused on children in conflict with the law. Based on statistical data from the previous five years, the analysis revealed a consistent upward trend in children’s involvement in criminal activities²³.

Nature of offenses at national and local level

The trend in children suspected of committing criminal offenses mirrors the positive decline seen in victims’ rates. In 2019, there were 2,024 children recorded as suspected offenders. This number peaked in 2020 at 3,308 but subsequently decreased to 1,940 in 2021 and to 1,630 in 2022. In 2023, of the 1,993 suspected child offenders, 337 were under the age of 14, while 1,656 were aged 15 to 18. This data highlights a significant reduction from 2019, and a slight increase in 2023.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of the number of children suspected offenders at national level

Statistics (Data on the rights and protection of the child from the SARPC)	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of children who are suspected perpetrators of criminal offenses registered by the police	2024	3308	1940	1630	1993
Total	2024	08	1940	1630	1993

*Source: SARPC, Të dhënat statistikore (Statistical data), Indicator 38. Available at: <http://statistikafemijet.gov.al/charts.php?ind=38> (accessed 29 April 2024).

The table 4 presents the distribution of suspected child offenders at the county level in Albania from 2019 to 2023, categorized by age groups (under 14 years old and 15-18 years old). Each row represents a county, and each column represents a specific year and age group, with the corresponding number of suspected offenders.

system and equitable access to justice in civil, administrative and criminal proceedings Uncertain Pathways: Bridging practice policy gaps in enabling access to justice for children in Albania (Retrieved from: <https://albania.savethechildren.net/sites/albania.savethechildren.net/files/library/Children%20with%5Bin%5D%20Judiciary%20system%20-%20ARCT.pdf>)

²³ Doci. B & Beqo.A (2015) *Juveniles in conflict with the law, Analysis of risk factors that influence the juveniles’ criminality* (Retrieved from: <https://dpbsh.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/1450093768-Faktoret-e-kriminalitetit-tek-te-miturit-studim.pdf>)

Table 4: Frequency distribution of the number of children suspected offenders at county level including group-age (12 counties)

Year	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
County	Under 14 y.o	15-18 y.o	Under 14 y.o	15-18 y.o	Under 14 y.o	15-18 y.o	Under 14 y.o	15-18 y.o	Under 14 y.o	15-18 y.o
Berat	10	71	9	37	13	46	13	40	10	50
Dibra	9	72	4	38	3	46	7	39	10	41
Durrës	21	194	25	221	26	161	40	114	30	139
Elbasan	24	88	17	72	17	84	15	57	17	79
Fier	7	77	2	77	20	68	7	58	15	108
Gjirokastra	15	31	3	26	7	20	11	41	14	51
Korca	16	145	4	52	11	70	17	70	27	60
Kukës	18	48	10	34	25	79	34	41	16	46
Lezha	17	140	14	66	18	85	20	75	7	69
Shkodra	9	101	27	77	7	59	33	77	11	101
Tirana	92	626	322	2016	369	575	197	506	148	795
Vlora	44	149	52	103	15	116	20	98	32	117
Total	282	1742	489	2819	531	1409	414	1216	337	1656

**Source: SARPC, Të dhënat statistikore (Statistical data), Indicator 38. Available at: (accessed 29 April 2024: <http://statistikafemijet.gov.al/charts.php?ind=38>).*

There are fluctuations in the number of suspected offenders over the years. For example, some districts show an increase or decrease in the number of suspected offenders from one year to the next. Overall, there are more suspected offenders in the 15-18 age group compared to those under 14 across all districts and years, suggesting that older adolescents are more frequently involved in suspected offenses. Certain districts consistently show a higher number of suspected offenders than others. For instance, Tirana consistently has the highest number of suspected offenders throughout the years, followed by Durrës and Vlora.

“...during the year 2024 in Vlora, there has been a notably high number of minors in legal conflict. These cases primarily involve theft and unauthorized vehicle driving. The most common ages range from 15 to 17 years old...” (respondent child protection unit in Vlora Municipality - KII)

The vast majority of offenses by children are petty and non-violent offenses

Most juvenile offenders are arrested for property crimes, such as petty theft. These offenses are often driven by poverty and the migration of minors’ families from rural areas to urban centers in Albania, which has exacerbated issues like unemployment, high living costs, inadequate social services, and discrimination.

Data and reports from institutions such as the State Police and Nisma ARSIS in



the municipalities of Tirana and Kamëz indicate that a significant percentage of children in conflict with the law have committed minor offenses. Children are primarily involved in property crimes and, to a lesser extent, offenses against individuals. The most common offense committed by minors is theft, according to classifications in the Penal Code. Additionally, there has been an increase in minors involved in drug-related crimes, including trafficking or use, especially in recent years.²⁴

Table 5: Frequency distribution of the offenses of children in years 2021-2023 in national level

Year	2021	2022	2023
Offenses			
Murder (Articles 76 – 79 Criminal Code)	2	1	4
Attempted Murder (Article 22, 76 -79 Criminal Code)	1	3	0
Assault (Article 84 Criminal Code)	16	14	32
Intentional serious injury (Article 88 Criminal Code)	23	15	27
Intentional minor injury (Article 89 Criminal Code)	92	128	137
Other intentional damages (Article 90 Criminal Code)	80	85	132
Sexual crimes (Articles 100 – 108 Criminal Code)	7	11	8
Theft (Article 134 Criminal Code)	771	389	112
Robbery (Article 139 Criminal Code)	11	21	17
Armed robbery (Article 140 Criminal Code)	2	1	0
Property destruction (Article 150 Criminal Code)	66	113	55
Disturbance of public order and peace (Article 274 Criminal Code)		24	19
Failure to obey police officer (Article 242 Criminal Code)	11	18	14
Unauthorized production/possession of firearms/ammunition (Article 278 Criminal Code)	31	20	17
Unauthorized production and possession of cold weapons (Article 279 Criminal Code)	90	106	136
Production and sale of narcotics (Article 283 Criminal Code)	98	141	154
Cultivation of Narcotic Plants (Article 284 Criminal Code)	14	7	3
Violation of traffic regulations (Articles 290 & 291 Criminal Code)	400	343	399
Other			
Total	1715	1440	1266

Source: State Police Data, 28 May 2024

In 2021, crimes against property, particularly theft presented in table 5, were extremely high, with 771 reported incidents. This number significantly decreased over the next two years, with 389 cases in 2022 and 112 cases in 2023. Despite this decrease, property crimes still constitute a significant portion of the total offenses. **Overall, approximately 71.1% of the crimes committed by suspected offenders in the analyzed period were property-related offenses. This high proportion underscores the prevalence of property crimes, with theft being the most common offense.**

²⁴ Docì. B & Beqo.A (2015) *Juveniles in conflict with the law, Analysis of risk factors that influence the juveniles' criminality* (Retrieved from: <https://dpbsh.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/1450093768-Faktoret-e-kriminalitetit-tek-te-miturit-studim.pdf>)

Substance-related offenses, including the production and sale of narcotics and the cultivation of narcotic plants, have shown a concerning trend. In 2021, there were 112 such cases (98 for production and sale, 14 for cultivation). These numbers increased to 148 in 2022 and 157 in 2023. The proportion of substance-related offenses among suspected offenders stands at 21.3%, highlighting significant involvement in illegal drug activities. **This trend is concerning and indicates a growing issue with drug-related crimes among the youth.**

Additionally, violent crimes, including murder, attempted murder, assault, and intentional injuries, have fluctuated over the three years. Notably, cases of assault and intentional injuries have shown an increase in 2023 compared to previous years. **The data indicates a rise in violent behavior among suspected offenders, with 32 assault cases and 164 intentional injury cases (serious and minor) in 2023.**

Other significant offenses in the last three years are offenses against public order, failure to obey police officers, and violations of traffic regulations also contribute significantly to the overall crime rate. Violation of traffic regulations remains consistently high, with around 400 cases each year, indicating ongoing issues with traffic law compliance among suspected offenders.

Tirana County

In 2019, the organization Nisma ARSIS registered 106 children suspected offenders, marking the beginning of the documented period. The following year, 2020, saw a slight decrease to 89 registered cases. However, in 2021, there was an uptick with 126 cases recorded, indicating a fluctuating trend early on. The data takes a more significant turn in 2022, where the number of registered children suspected offenders notably rose to 264. This increase suggests a substantial shift or an intensified focus on addressing youth involvement in legal issues during that particular year. By 2023, the trend continued its upward trajectory, with Nisma ARSIS registering 408 cases of children suspected offenders in Tirana County.

Table 6: Frequency distribution of the number of children suspected offenders in Tirana County

Statistics	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of children suspected offenders registered by Nisma ARSIS	106	89	126	264	408
Total	106	89	126	264	408

Source: Nisma ARSIS database 2019-2023

The data highlights 2022 and 2023 as peak years for reported offenses. **Assault emerged as a consistently increasing offense**, reflecting ongoing issues with physical altercations among children. Theft also showed a steady rise nationwide, indicating persistent challenges related to property crimes, as presented in



Table 7. Assault (120 cases), theft (119 cases), and unauthorized production and possession of cold weapons (44 cases) were the most prominently reported offenses.

However, it's important to note that regional trends can differ. For instance, when analyzing Table 5, which focuses on Tirana, theft appears to be declining, contrary to the national trend.

Table 7: Frequency distribution of the offenses of children for 2019-2023 in Tirana County from Nisma ARSIS

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Offenses					
Attempted Murder (Article 22, 76 -79 Criminal Code)	0	0	1	0	0
Assault (Article 84 Criminal Code)	29	14	37	54	120
Intentional serious injury (Article 88 Criminal Code)	2	7	0	4	0
Intentional minor injury (Article 89 Criminal Code)	0	2	13	8	1
Other intentional damages (Article 90 Criminal Code)	9	3	5	13	6
Sexual crimes (Articles 100 – 108 Criminal Code)	0	3	2	7	4
Theft (Article 134 Criminal Code)	46	35	23	63	119
Robbery (Article 139 Criminal Code)	0	0	0	12	0
Armed robbery (Article 140 Criminal Code)	0	0	0	0	0
Property destruction (Article 150 Criminal Code)	1	3	4	9	6
Disturbance of public order and peace (Article 274 Criminal Code)	0	0	0	1	0
Failure to obey police officer (Article 242 Criminal Code)	5	0	1	1	1
Unauthorized production/possession of firearms/ammunition (Article 278 Criminal Code)	0	2	0	1	0
Unauthorized production and possession of cold weapons (Article 279 Criminal Code)	5	4	8	20	44
Production and sale of narcotics (Article 283 Criminal Code)	0	4	20	40	39
Cultivation of Narcotic Plants (Article 284 Criminal Code)	0	0	0	0	0
Violation of traffic regulations (Articles 290 & 291 Criminal Code)	0	1	1	14	22
Other ²⁶	9	11	11	17	46
Total	106	89	126	264	408

Source: Nisma ARSIS data 2019-2023

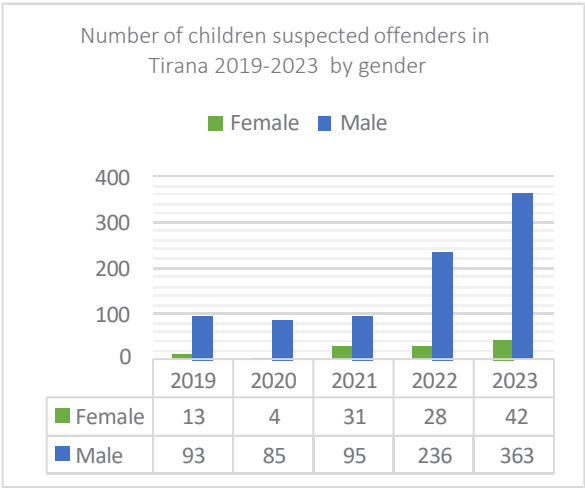
Offenses and gender

Criminologists generally observe that women are responsible for a smaller proportion of indictable offenses compared to men, accounting for approximately 13 percent of all prosecutions in Europe²⁵, including those involving children. However, these statistics only provide a partial understanding of the experiences of girls and boys who encounter legal conflicts and the disparities in their encounters with the law. **While it's recognized that girls engage in far fewer offenses, it's also important to consider the influence of gender roles,**

²⁵ Aebi, Marcelo F., Bruno Aubusson de Cavarlay, Gordon Barclay, Beata Gruszczynska, Stefan Harrendorf, Markku Heiskanen, Vasilika Hysi, et al. 2010. European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics. Lausanne: Université de Lausanne, Institut de criminologie et de droit pénal.

societal control over girls, their limited access to public spaces in many contexts, and the various coping mechanisms that girls are compelled to employ. These factors can sometimes lead to reduced rates of criminalization for girls, while in other instances, they may result in increased rates.

Graphic 1 analyzes the number of suspected juvenile offenders in Tirana district over the past five years, from 2019 to 2023, broken down by gender.²⁶ This data provides insights into time trends and specific gender disparities in offense rates. Data from Tirana district from 2019 to 2023 show an increase in juvenile crime, with a pronounced gender disparity favoring male offenders. The number of juvenile offenders has significantly increased over the past five years, with a notable rise in the number of male suspects. Starting from 60 cases in 2019, the number of male juvenile offenders reached 370 by 2023, marking an increase of more than sixfold.



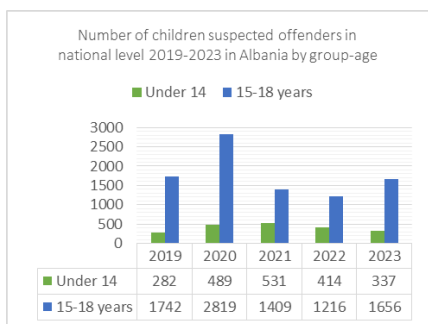
Graphic 1: Number of children suspected offenders in Tirana county level 2019-2023 by gender

Offenses and age

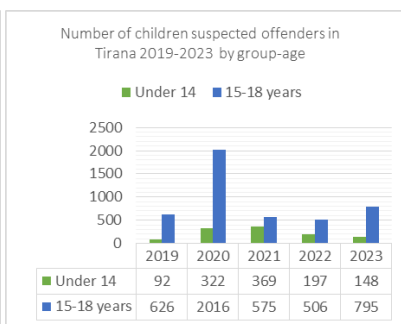
Both at the national level and in Tirana, the number of suspected offenders under 14 years old generally fluctuates but tends to be lower compared to the 15-18 age group. There are variations from year to year, with peaks observed in 2021 for under 14 and 2020 for 15-18 years. In 2020, the number of suspected offenders spiked significantly in Tirana across both age groups, while at the national level, the increase was also notable but more evenly distributed between 2019 and 2020.

²⁶ National-level data on the gender of suspected minors is missing from the general public statistics on the ASHDMF website and from the police. For this reason, gender data is limited to the Tirana district only.





Graphic 2: Number of children suspected offenders in national level 2019-2023 in Albania by group-age



Graphic 3: Number of children suspected offenders in Tirana county level 2019-2023 by group-age

Circumstances of entry into the criminal activities

Juvenile delinquency across 12 counties is driven by a combination of socio-economic issues, family dynamics, and educational factors. Respondents has stated that offenses like driving without a license, theft, and violence are prevalent, with underlying causes such as poverty, family dysfunction, and negative social media influence playing significant roles.

“...Efforts to manage and prevent juvenile delinquency should include early intervention and the involvement of school security officers, though challenges persist in terms of legal support and efficient case management...” (respondent child protection worker in Tirana Municipality – FGD)

Recidivist cases of children suspected offenders

Findings from the Police of Tirana indicates that recidivist cases predominantly involve the Roma and Egyptian communities. These cases typically concern very young children who are economically exploited by adults to commit various thefts, engage in street vending, or beg. Despite multiple referrals to the prosecutor’s office, such cases have been consistently dismissed by the prosecutor. Recidivist cases involve minors primarily as perpetrators of criminal acts rather than as victims or witnesses. These cases are well-known to the police and have been referred to other authorities’ multiple times. Recently, there has been a notable increase in minors involved in drug consumption being identified as perpetrators within police precincts. However, necessary rehabilitation services for these minors are lacking. The age group most commonly involved in criminal activities ranges from 11 to 17 years old.

Nisma ARSIS has assisted out of a total of 993 children suspected offenders, a significant subset of 190 children have been identified as recidivists. This designation of “recidivist” indicates that these children have re-offended after previous encounters with the justice system or similar interventions.

The recurring offenses primarily center around Assault and Theft, highlighting

persistent challenges within this specific demographic. These crimes not only underscore ongoing behavioral issues but also suggest underlying social and economic factors contributing to their involvement in illegal activities. The data paints a concerning picture of a subset of children who, despite initial intervention or contact with support services, continue to engage in criminal behavior. This pattern not only poses risks to community safety but also reflects systemic shortcomings in addressing the root causes of youth crime.

History of Domestic Violence

The history of domestic violence has a significant impact on children, often leading them to engage in criminal activities, as supported by feedback from professionals participating in this study. These professionals identified violence, abuse, and neglect within the family as primary reasons for children's involvement in the justice system. Children exposed to domestic violence often suffer from trauma, which manifests as noticeable regressive changes in behavior. Additionally, growing up in a violent environment normalizes the use of violence as a means of solving problems, which is reflected in minors assisted at police stations.

Social Environment

Different from what is seen in most cases, especially highlighted by respondents from Tirana County, there is a misconception that juvenile delinquency is limited to children from vulnerable families. Recent cases in the Municipality of Tirana reveal that children in conflict with the law come from a variety of backgrounds, including those with parents who are socially and economically well-off. The root problem often lies not in the parents' educational level but in the lack of positive communication and inadequate parental capacity. Schools report cases to relevant structures when they struggle to maintain effective communication with the parents or families, suggesting that parental education or socio-economic status does not necessarily correlate with effective parenting.

3.1.2 Children victims and witnesses of crime

In Albania, as in many European countries, children victims and witnesses or how is often used in contact with the law face numerous challenges when it comes to accessing justice. These challenges are often compounded by systemic issues and socio-economic disparities that particularly affect marginalized communities.

Since the adoption of the Council of Europe Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice in 2010, efforts to regulate and harmonize children's rights and justice systems in Europe have progressed significantly. In Albania, the approval of the Intersectoral Strategy for the Protection of Victims of Crime 2024-2030

(ISPVC)²⁷ in late 2023 marks a crucial step forward. This strategy aims to strengthen the position of victims of crime within the criminal justice system by ensuring their rights to information, participation, access to services, and compensation. Importantly, it also focuses on preventing re-victimization and secondary victimization, aligning with the needs of child victims in contact with the law.²⁸

At the central level, there is no single coordinator and national coordination mechanism for victims of crime, but there are national coordinators and mechanisms for specific groups of victims, like the National Mechanism for Gender Equality, National Council for the Rights and Protection of the Child, etc. Regarding children's rights, the National Council for Child Rights and Protection is an advisory body created for its coordinated work on issues of child rights and protection. Currently, works under the Ministry of Health and Social Protection. Cooperation Agreement "For operation of the national referral mechanism for victims and potential victims of human trafficking" after it has been consulted and agreed with all parties, is signed on June 26, 2023. The main focus of this agreement is the victim and its protection, examining each situation case by case and building some accepted standards from everyone about how the entire process of identification, referral and, subsequently, protection of the victim of trafficking. In addition to victims of trafficking, this agreement takes in protection and possible victims of trafficking, thus aiming to exercise protection prevention for those persons who may be potential victims of trafficking.²⁹

Local self-government units are institutions responsible for providing services for socially integration of the crime victims through special service structures, social needs assessment and referral units. At the local level, function the Coordinated Domestic Violence Referral Mechanism, which operates at the municipal level, in all 61 municipalities and administrative units. Child Protection Units near municipalities and administrative units are responsible for children in need of protection, including child victims, also at the local level are the cross-sectoral mechanisms for child victims of violence.

"...Within the scope of work, we may encounter 4 to 5 cases per day, as they may involve minors in conflict with the law, injured individuals, or victims. We have established a highly effective collaboration with

²⁷ DCM no. 729, dated 13.12.2023 for the approval of the intersectoral strategy for the protection of victims of crime 2024–2030, its action plan and passports of indicators (Retrieved from: <https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/vendim-2023-12-13-729-SNMVK.pdf>)

²⁸ Council of Europe (2010) (Retrieved from: [https://search.coe.int/cm/#\[%2CoEIdentifier%22:%2209000016804b2cf3%22\],%22sort%22:\[%22CoEValidationDate%20Descending%22\]}](https://search.coe.int/cm/#[%2CoEIdentifier%22:%2209000016804b2cf3%22],%22sort%22:[%22CoEValidationDate%20Descending%22]}))

²⁹ DCM No. 659, date 03.11.2021 "for the approval of the National Agenda on the Rights of the Child 2021–2026" (Retrieved from: https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/4396/file/NARC%202021-2026_ENG.pdf)

the Child Protection Unit in the Municipality of Tirana for the referred cases...” (respondent from the Directory of Police in Tirana in the focus group discussion)

As for social care services for crime victims, the legislation provides integrated services to victims of crime. Their extent throughout the territory and providing services according to the specific needs of victims remains a challenge. The study “Mapping of Social Services in Albania”³⁰, highlights that, in a good part of the country’s municipalities, there is a lack of services for excluded youth, for victims of trafficking, for youth in conflict with the law, for victims of domestic violence and families in need, for elderly persons, as and other crime victim groups.

Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime adopted by the United Nations Economic and Social Council provide a framework for states that recognize the particular vulnerability of child victims and witnesses and their need for protection within justice systems. The Guidelines reaffirm the fundamental principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and assert that child victims and witnesses have various rights, including to:

- be treated with dignity and compassion
- be protected from discrimination ‘
- be informed
- be heard and given opportunities to express views and concerns effective assistance privacy
- be protected from hardship during the justice process, safety reparation, special preventative measures.

Source: Resolution adopted by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime, ECOSOC Resolution 2005/20, 22 July 2005.

During the period 2018–2022, 86,348 victims of criminal offenses were registered, of which 23,505 were women.³¹ According to police data, the number of victims of criminal offenses has decreased during the period 2016–2022, while victims of sexual crimes, criminal offenses against children, marriage and family have increased.³² Women and girls are more victims of criminal acts of

³⁰ The study “Mapping of social services in Albania”, published by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection and UNDP, Tirana, 2021. (Retrieved from: <https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/mapping-social-services-albania>)

³¹ INSTAT Albania, Crime and criminal justice statistics, 2022

³² Ibid, 16.

domestic violence, crimes of sexual and criminal offenses against morality and dignity. In 2022, 40% of the people injured for crimes against the person were women, mainly victims of sexual crimes, crimes against children, marriage and family, as well as crimes against morality and dignity.

The General Prosecutor’s Report on the State of Criminality for the Year 2022 indicates an increase in criminal proceedings related to offenses against children, marriage, and family. Specifically, there is a rise in cases of child abandonment by 11.54% and child maltreatment by 40.63% compared to the previous year. These statistics highlight a concerning trend of growing criminality against children, emphasizing the urgent need for enhanced measures to protect child victims in contact with the law.

The population of Albania as of January 1, 2023, stood at 2,761,785, with children aged 0-19 years comprising a significant 22.3% of the total population. Specifically, there were 615,303 children, with 302,660 girls and 312,643 boys. Within this demographic, a worrying number of children have been identified as victims of criminal activities. In 2019, police records showed 2,273 child victims, a stark reminder of the prevalence of violence and abuse affecting the youngest members of society. Over the following years, however, there was a significant decrease in these numbers. By 2023, the number of child victims had dropped to 1450, with 690 of these victims under the age of 14 and 760 aged 15 to 18.

Table 8: Frequency distribution of the number of children victims in national level

Statistics (Data on the rights and protection of the child from the SARPC)	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of children victims registered by police	1226	1035	1129	1533	1450
Total	1226	1035	1129	1533	1450

**Source: SARPC, Të dhënat statistikore (Statistical data), Indicator 37. Available at: <http://statistikafemijet.gov.al/charts.php?ind=37> (accessed 29 April 2024). Note: The discrepancy between the 2,273 child victims reported in the narrative for 2019 and the 1,226 child victims recorded in Table 8 can be attributed to differences in data sources and definitions. The higher figure likely includes a broader range of cases or incidents that were captured by police. In contrast, the number reported in Table 8 reflects a more specific subset of cases that met particular criteria for formal registration by police, as tracked by the State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child (SARPC).*

The data in Table 9 provides a breakdown of the number of children who were victims of criminal offenses in Albania from 2019 to 2023, categorized by age group (under 14 years old and 15-18 years old) and by county. The number of child victims in both age groups decreased in 2020 compared to 2019. This might be partially due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns,

which could have led to fewer opportunities for criminal offenses or changes in reporting practices.

There is a noticeable spike in the number of victims aged 15-18 years in 2022, particularly in Tirana, which almost doubled compared to previous years. This trend continues in 2023, though with slight variations in some counties. Consistently, Tirana has the highest number of child victims in both age groups, which is expected given its larger population. However, the sharp increase in the 15-18 age group in 2022 and 2023 suggests a growing issue among older children in the capital.

Durres and Elbasan also show significant increases in both age groups, particularly in 2023. Durres had a dramatic rise in victims under 14 in 2023, jumping from 42 in 2022 to 115 in 2023. Fier and Vlora show more fluctuation, with some years experiencing a decrease in one age group while the other remains stable or increases. Shkodra shows a steady increase in both age groups over the years, particularly in the 15-18 category.

Table 9: Frequency distribution of the number of children victims of criminal offenses based on county level and age

Year	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
County	Under 14 y.o	15-18 y.o	Under 14 y.o	15-18 y.o	Under 14 y.o	15-18 y.o	Under 14 y.o	15-18 y.o	Under 14 y.o	15-18 y.o
Berat	13	29	14	10	10	30	21	46	26	28
Dibra	16	23	8	27	15	10	17	33	14	19
Durres	68	74	57	66	58	83	42	99	115	84
Elbasan	52	34	40	42	34	47	53	89	68	50
Fier	35	50	28	48	43	37	25	54	55	56
Gjirokastra	18	11	17	15	16	19	14	30	13	29
Korca	47	52	23	24	19	16	26	49	41	45
Kukes	12	11	11	29	20	25	22	44	6	17
Lezha	25	59	25	34	24	53	23	59	24	44
Shkodra	22	37	20	36	15	42	37	74	33	43
Tirana	184	232	166	193	197	206	147	358	258	313
Vlora	42	80	43	59	53	57	59	112	37	32
Total	534	692	452	583	504	625	486	1047	690	760

*Source: SARPC, Të dhënat statistikore (Statistical data), Indicator 37 Available at: <http://statistikafemijet.gov.al/charts.php?ind=37> (accessed 29 April 2024).

Table 10: Frequency of distribution of the number of children victims from criminal offenses in years in national level

Year	2021	2022	2023
Victims of criminal offenses			
Murder (Articles 76 – 79 Criminal Code)	2	2	5
Attempted Murder (Article 22, 76 –79 Criminal Code)	0	0	4
Assault (Article 84 Criminal Code)	35	43	46
Intentional serious injury (Article 88 Criminal Code)	20	18	24
Intentional minor injury (Article 89 Criminal Code)	97	106	122
Other intentional damages (Article 90 Criminal Code)	125	101	139
Sexual crimes (Articles 100 – 108 Criminal Code)	87	79	72
Theft (Article 134 Criminal Code)	41	35	45
Robbery (Article 139 Criminal Code)	5	5	13
Armed robbery (Article 140 Criminal Code)	0	0	0
Abandonment of minors (Article 124)	54	21	33
Mistreatment of minors (Article 124/b)	41	50	85
Violation of traffic regulations (Articles 290 & 291 Criminal Code)	435	300	514
Disturbance of public order and peace (Article 274 Criminal Code)	0	0	0
Other			
Total			

Source: State Police Data, 28 May 2024

The data indicates several concerning trends in child victimization from criminal offenses over the three years. There is a notable increase in severe crimes such as murder, attempted murder, and assault. While some categories like sexual crimes and abandonment of minors show a decrease, the overall high numbers still reflect significant risks to children’s safety. The rise in mistreatment of minors and violations of traffic regulations are particularly troubling, highlighting areas where protective measures and preventive strategies need to be strengthened.

According to the data of the prosecution,³³ during the year 2022, 873 child victims were registered, of which 310 girls and 563 boys. State police report for the period 2020-2022 (Table 11) presents over the three-year period, the total number of child victims (cases of abuse and violence against children, including domestic violence, corporal punishment, sexual abuse of children both inside and outside the home, trafficking, and sexual and online abuse) reported has shown a slight decline. In 2020, there were 175 reported cases, which decreased to 137 in 2021 and further dropped to 115 in 2022. Despite this overall reduction, **certain crimes continue to pose a significant threat to children, especially those related to sexual and domestic violence**. A closer look at the age distribution indicates that older children, specifically those aged 14-18, are more frequently victimized compared to younger children under 14. This trend is particularly evident in offenses like domestic violence and sexual harassment. Gender analysis reveals a stark disparity, with females consistently

³³ Report of the general prosecutor on the state of criminality, year 2022, p. 19 (Retrieved from: <https://www.pp.gov.al/Dokumente/>)

being more affected than males across almost all types of offenses. This gender disparity underscores the heightened vulnerability of female children to criminal offenses.

Table 11: Frequency distribution of the number of children of victims of severe forms of abuse and exploitation³⁴ (Gender and age distributed in years 2020-2022) in national level

Year	2020				2021				2022 (January-30 November)			
Victims of criminal offenses	Under 14 y.o		14-18 y.o		Under 14 y.o		14-18 y.o		Under 14 y.o		14-18 y.o	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Sexual/Homosexual Relations with Minors (Article 100)	12	2	5	1	5	0	2	0	6	0	2	1
Sexual/Homosexual Relations with Violence, Ages 14 to 18 (Article 101)	0	0	7	2	0	0	8	1	1	0	7	2
Sexual or Homosexual Relations with Incapacitated Persons (Article 103)	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shameful Acts (Article 108)	8	2	0	1	12	2	3	1	7	5	0	1
Sexual Harassment (Article 108/a)	13	3	10	1	19	3	4	1	11	0	8	2
Exploitation of Prostitution (Article 114)	1	0	9	3	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0
Pornography (Article 117/2)	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Trafficking of Minors (Article 128/b)	0	0	1	1	0	1	3	1	1	0	0	0
Domestic Violence (Article 130/a)	20	17	27	26	10	17	21	17	8	13	20	20
Total	55	24	60	36	46	23	46	22	34	18	37	26

Source: State Police Report to CRC 2023

Data for the number of children identified as victims/potential victims of trafficking for the years 2020, 2021, 2022 (up to November) reported by Police are presented in table 12. The data on child trafficking from 2020 to 2022 underscores the evolving nature of this issue. The significant rise in identified victims from 2020 to 2021, followed by a decrease in 2022, highlights the importance of adaptive strategies in combatting trafficking. The emergence of male victims of sexual exploitation in 2022 and the persistence of begging and criminal exploitation are particularly concerning trends.

³⁴ Cases of abuse and violence against children, including domestic violence, corporal punishment, sexual abuse of children both inside and outside the home, trafficking, and sexual and online abuse

Table 12: Frequency distribution in years of children victims of trafficking in national level

Victims of trafficking	2020		2021		2022	
	F	M	F	M	F	M
Sexually exploited	24		22		1	31
Exploited for begging		2	18	32	16	16
Exploited for minor criminal activities		7	11	20	2	7
Exploited for labor		25	2	7		
Total	24	34	53	59	19	54

Source: State Police Report to CRC 2023

Tirana County

In the last 5 years 2019-2023 Nisma ARSIS has been assisting with the psychosocial support in police stations during the child interview of children victims or witnesses of criminal offenses. The data represents the information for the county of Tirana and its outskirts as an example of segregated information about the children victims and witnesses and their demographic data. The table 13 presents the frequency of children victims and witnesses in total. The category witnesses are missing in the national data provided by police. In the data provided by Nisma ARSIS this category is involved and generated as information presented in this section. **From the study its noted the importance of including the category of witnesses in data collection and category that further support in specific cases.**

From 2019 to 2023, there has been a significant rise in the total number of children affected by criminal offenses, either as victims or witnesses. In 2019, the total number of registered cases was 158, comprising 127 victims and 31 witnesses. In 2023, this number had surged to 485, with 289 victims and 196 witnesses.

Table 13: Frequency distribution of the number of children victims and witnesses in Tirana County

Statistics	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of children victims registered Nisma ARSIS	127	103	119	179	289
Number of children witnesses registered Nisma ARSIS	31	18	26	74	196
Total	158	121	145	253	485

Source: Nisma ARSIS database 2019-2023

The provided data in table 13 reflects a concerning trend in the victimization of children by various criminal offenses in Tirana from 2019 to 2023. This period witnessed a notable increase in the number of child victims. From 2019 to 2023, the total number of child victims of criminal offenses in Tirana has seen a steady rise. Starting at 127 victims in 2019, the number almost doubled to 289

by 2023. Assault (Article 84 Criminal Code) emerged as the most significant offense, with cases surging from 30 in 2019 to 116 in 2023. Assault emerged as the most significant offense affecting children, with the number of victims rising from 30 in 2019 to 116 in 2023. This consistent increase highlights a troubling trend of escalating violence against children. Although the number of sexual crime victims fluctuated over the years, it remained a persistent issue. The number of victims was 22 in 2019, dipping to 9 in 2021, and then slightly increasing to 23 in 2023.

Table 14: Frequency distribution of children victims of criminal offenses in Tirana

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Victims of criminal offenses					
Assault (Article 84 Criminal Code)	30	35	39	90	116
Intentional serious injury (Article 88 Criminal Code)	1			2	
Intentional minor injury (Article 89 Criminal Code)			2	1	2
Other intentional damages (Article 90 Criminal Code)	13	11	5	25	47
Sexual crimes (Articles 100 – 108 Criminal Code)	22	15	9	22	23
Theft (Article 134 Criminal Code)	7		27	9	22
Robbery (Article 139 Criminal Code)				2	
Disturbance of public order and peace (Article 274 Criminal Code)	1	0	0	0	0
Production and sale of narcotics (Article 283 Criminal Code)			5	1	
Unauthorized production and possession of cold weapons (Article 279 Criminal Code)			5		2
Violation of traffic regulations (Articles 290 & 291 Criminal Code)			3	1	
Other ³⁷	53	42	24	26	77
Total	127	103	119	179	289

Source: Nisma ARSIS report based on the data collected every year (Database 2019-2023)

The data from Table 15 provides a comprehensive look at the number of children who have witnessed various criminal offenses in Tirana over a five-year period (2019-2023). This analysis sheds light on the exposure of children to criminal activities, emphasizing the increasing trend in such occurrences and the different types of offenses witnessed. These category of children is observed by the presence of Nisma ARSIS in police stations, but is an indicator that is not measured by state police or by Statistics of SARPC.

There has been a noticeable increase in the number of children who are witnesses to criminal acts, rising from 31 in 2019 to 196 in 2023. The number of children witnessing violence has also grown, from 22 in 2019 to 106 in 2023. This suggests an increasing exposure of children to violent incidents, closely resembling those affecting child victims. This rising exposure is concerning, as it indicates that more children are being placed in environments where they are at risk of trauma and long-term psychological effects.

Table 15: Frequency distribution of children witness of criminal offenses in Tirana

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Victims of criminal offenses					
Assault (Article 84 Criminal Code)	22	2	20	40	106
Intentional serious injury (Article 88 Criminal Code)		1			
Failure to obey police officer (Article 242 Criminal Code)			2		
Other intentional damages (Article 90 Criminal Code)	2	3	2	10	1
Sexual crimes (Articles 100 – 108 Criminal Code)	2	1		4	
Theft (Article 134 Criminal Code)	3	4	2	11	35
Production and sale of narcotics (Article 283 Criminal Code)				1	9
Unauthorized production and possession of cold weapons (Article 279 Criminal Code)				1	6
Violation of traffic regulations (Articles 290 & 291 Criminal Code)	1				
Property destruction (Article 150 Criminal Code)				3	3
Other	1			4	36
Total	31	11	26	74	196

Source: Nisma ARSIS report based on the data collected every year (Database 2019-2023)

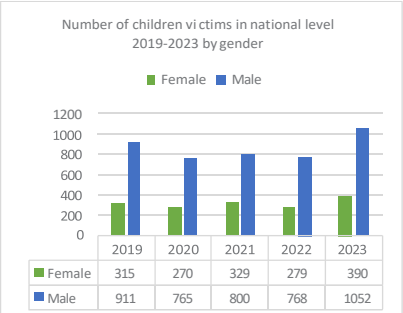
Victims and gender

At the national level, the numbers show a consistent trend over the years: **males consistently report higher numbers of victimization compared to females.** For instance, in 2019, a staggering 911 males reported being victims, contrasting with 315 females. This pattern fluctuates annually but maintains a steady imbalance favoring males throughout the observed period. This disparity suggests several possible dynamics at play. It could reflect higher rates of crimes that typically affect males, such as physical assaults or robberies. Alternatively, societal expectations and reporting behaviors might influence these numbers—males potentially feeling more compelled to report incidents due to societal norms or the nature of crimes they experience. Tirana, the capital city’s data presents, unlike the national trend, there isn’t a clear gender dominance in reported victimization from year to year. For example, while males outnumbered females in reported cases in 2019 (56 versus 71), the pattern fluctuates significantly across subsequent years. In 2023, for instance, females reported 133 incidents compared to males’ 156—a departure from the national narrative.

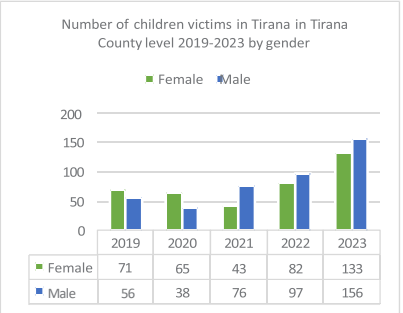
Witnesses and gender³⁵

The data reveals a significant and concerning upward trend in the number of child witnesses, with a notable gender disparity. Over the five-year period,

³⁵ The data on the section witnesses gender are based on the analysis of only the county level due to lack of information about the category of witnesses in national level from official public authorities.

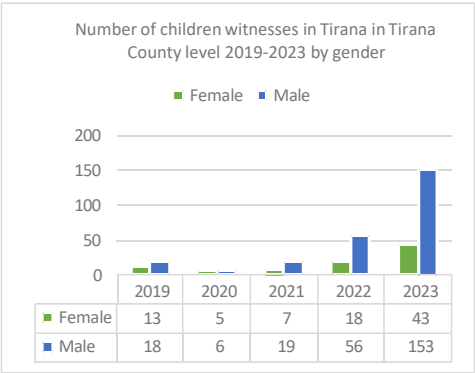


Graphic 4: Number of children victims in national level 2019-2023 in Albania by gender



Graphic 5: Number of children victims in Tirana county level 2019-2023 by gender

there has been a clear and substantial upward trend in the number of children witnessing criminal offenses. The total number increased from 31 in 2019 to 196 in 2023. Throughout the period, male witnesses consistently outnumbered female witnesses. The disparity became particularly significant in the latter years, with 2022 and 2023 showing a pronounced increase in the number of male witnesses compared to female witnesses.



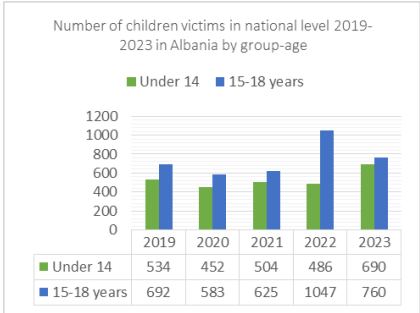
Graphic 6: Number of children witnesses in Tirana county level 2019-2023 by gender

The increase in 2022 and 2023, particularly among male children, suggests an escalating exposure to criminal environments.

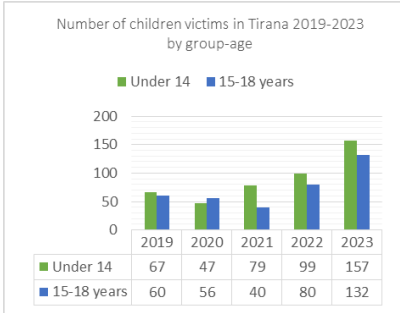
Victims and age

Graphic 7 illustrates the number of child victims across Albania, categorized by age groups, from 2019 to 2023. The number of child victims under 14 years started at 534 in 2019, fluctuated in subsequent years, and notably increased to

690 by 2023. The age group 15-18 years started with 692 victims in 2019, saw fluctuations, peaked in 2022 at 1047, and then decreased to 760 by 2023.



Graphic 7: Number of children victims in national level 2019-2023 in Albania by group-age



Graphic 8: Number of children victims in Tirana County level 2019-2023 by group-age

Graphic 8 focuses on child victimization within Tirana County, also categorized by age groups, from 2019 to 2023. Tirana County started with 67 victims under 14 years in 2019, fluctuated annually, and reached 157 victims by 2023. Similarly, the age group 15-18 years started with 60 victims in 2019, fluctuated, and saw an increase to 132 victims by 2023.

In national level both age groups showed varying trends, with peaks observed in different years. The under 14 years’ age group saw a steady increase towards 2023, while the 15-18 years’ age group peaked in 2022 before decreasing. Similar patterns were observed in Tirana county with fluctuations in victim numbers. Both age groups showed increases over the years, with 2023 marking higher victim counts compared to 2019.

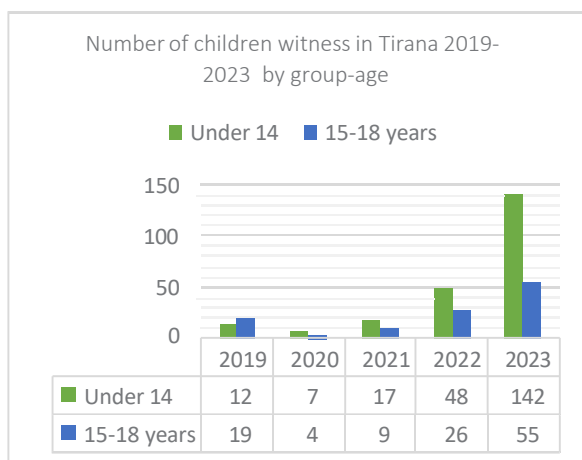
Both the national level and Tirana county saw increases in victim numbers under 14 years, with Tirana County consistently reporting lower numbers compared to the national average. The age group 15-18 years showed more volatile changes, with Tirana county mirroring national trends but with slightly lower peaks. The data underscores the persistent issue of child victimization across Albania, with variations between national and regional levels.

Witnesses age



Under 14 age group showed a more significant rise in witness reports compared to adolescents aged 15-18 years. The sharp increase in 2023 raises concerns about the vulnerability of younger children to witnessing criminal acts and the potential impact on their well-being.

While witnessing reports among the 15-18 age group were lower than in the under 14 age group, there was still a notable upward trend, especially in 2022



*Graphic 9: Number of children witness in Tirana
County level 2019-2023 by group-age*

and 2023. This suggests ongoing challenges in protecting older children from exposure to criminal environments.

Circumstances of being a victim or witness

Being a victim of crime, particularly violent crime, can have life-changing consequences for children. The United Nations Human Rights Council has emphasized “the importance of accountability for violations and abuses of the rights of the child, including those committed within the family, at school, and other institutions and the need to bring perpetrators to justice.”³⁶

The 2017 report on the Well-being of Children in Albania by the organization “World Vision” indicated that violence against children remains consistent over the years, as it did in the previous year. Seven out of ten children aged 8 to 18 reported experiencing at least one form of violence, while eight out of ten parents admitted to using violence as a means of discipline.

Also, 58% of surveyed Albanian children are highly exposed to violence and abuse, especially from other family members and friends, with boys more likely to be physically abused. 24% of children have heard about sexual violence in their community and 26% have heard about the online harm.”³⁷

³⁶ United Nations, Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/25/L.10, United Nations, Geneva, 25 March 2014.

³⁷ World Vision Middle East and Eastern Europe World Vision Albania (2021) Empowered Women Empowered Children Mixed Method design to examine the relationship between Women’s empowerment and the well-being of children in structured families in Albania (Retrieved from: https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Empowered%20Women%20-%20Empowered%20Children_GESI%20research%20WVA.pdf)

The most recent study on various forms of sexual violence, including online, against children worldwide, highlights some of the common reasons why children refrain from reporting such violence when they experience it. They may fear stigmatization or exclusion, even social punishment, or they might blame themselves and feel guilty or embarrassed.³⁸

The assortment of official statistics presented in this study only offers a partial depiction of child victimization levels in Albania.

Being a victim of crime is a key entry point for children's involvement in the justice system. As witnesses, children may be obliged by law to give evidence and to participate in criminal proceedings. Such participation can take various forms: Children can be drawn into the justice process as complainants; as sources of physical evidence; and as parties to the proceedings, providing testimony and/or expressing views³⁹. Justice processes in Albania are often not equipped with the safeguards needed to minimize the impact of proceedings on children and to reduce the potential for re-victimization based on the highlights of the respondents in the study.

Responses of justice sector professionals (police officers, responsible persons in the sector for minors in directory of police and child protection workers) identified being a victim of crime as a key entry point for children's involvement in the justice system in almost 75% of the professionals participating in the study. These findings have been also identified from the study realized in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia region.⁴⁰ As witnesses, children may be obliged by law to give evidence and to participate in criminal proceedings.

The data on child victims and witnesses from 2019 to 2023 underscores the increasing vulnerability of children to criminal activities, with a notable rise in both victimization and witnessing reports over the years. **These experiences not only expose children to harm but also compel their involvement in legal proceedings as sources of evidence and testimony.** Justice sector professionals in Albania have identified victimization as a primary factor leading to children's participation in legal processes, highlighting the lack of adequate safeguards to mitigate the impact of these proceedings on children.

History of Domestic Violence

Almost all of the respondents interviewed emphasized that violence, abuse, and neglect within the family are among the key factors leading to children's involvement in legal proceedings. One of the primary reasons children find

³⁸ Braithwaite J, 2018, Colonized silence: Confronting the colonial link in rural Alaska Native Survivors' non-disclosure of child sexual abuse. Journal of Child Sexual Abuse

³⁹ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), The Regional Office for CEE/CIS, Children's Equitable Access to Justice, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, UNICEF, Geneva, 2015 (Retrieved from:

https://www.unicef.org/media/50996/file/Equitable_access_to_justice_for_children_in_Central_and_Eastern_Europe_and_Central_Asia_-_v2_1.pdf)

⁴⁰ Ibid, 45, page 52.

themselves entangled in legal issues is the breakdown of their family and protective structures. Whether stemming from domestic violence, parental loss, divorce, separation during emergencies, or migration due to chronic poverty, such breakdowns significantly heighten a child's vulnerability to both violence and legal entanglements, as these two are intricately intertwined. When children are forced to fend for themselves, often taking on responsibilities for younger siblings, and resort to living or working on the streets or in precarious environments, their lack of stable social circumstances and legal status, coupled with the criminalization of many survival strategies, exacerbates what is already a personal crisis, potentially leading to conflicts with the law.

The children's perceptions about the factors/causes that lead to deviant behavior, were specifically related to their home (family) environment and they listed a number of factors that contribute to problematic behaviors, ranked as follows: a) psychological or physical violence, and verbal abuse by or against members of their own household. b) the family's social and economic status. c) disputes/ disagreements in general.⁴¹

The cycle of shifting between care and justice responses for children deemed "at risk" highlights a systemic issue to child welfare. While families bear the primary responsibility for caring for children, they also serve as significant status-bestowing institutions. When children are marginalized or excluded from their families, they often lose not only the essential care provided by familial structures but also their social standing. This loss of status can be profound, leading to stigmatizing labels such as "orphan" or "street child," which further exacerbate their vulnerability and hinder their access to support and opportunities for positive development.

"...In our country, there is a critical need for minors involved in legal proceedings—whether as perpetrators, victims, or witnesses—to be continuously supported by social services and other local services. It is essential to provide services that reach the child's location to address their needs comprehensively. Failing to consider the needs of these minors and not conducting thorough assessments of the underlying causes of their actions will likely increase the number of recidivist cases..." (Respondent from police in Dibra from the KII)

Also, the increasing trend of divorces impacting juvenile delinquency, particularly in cases where children find themselves repeatedly involved with law enforcement. This trend is often seen in well-educated and financially well-off families, where parents accuse each other of child abuse during divorce proceedings. The children are frequently interviewed at police stations as a result. The underlying problem is that these parents are using allegations of child

⁴¹ Community Development Center "Today for the Future" (2021) Social Integration and Re-integration Programme of children in contact or conflict with the law through norms, values and a law-abiding lifestyle

abuse strategically to influence the division of assets and custody arrangements, rather than prioritizing the best interests of the child.

Social Environment

The children's perceptions about the factors/causes that lead to deviant behavior part of the research were related to with the school environment, among. Among the factors, they listed: bullying, the feeling of being marginalized, social exclusion, conflicts among peers and relations with the teachers about school progress and in the social environment., In addition, they listed factors such as: insults, bullying - whether direct (individual or in group) or in the social media/networks (Facebook, Instagram etc.), and different types of threats, as a more aggravated level of conflictual situations.⁴²

One of the perspectives focuses on the broader socio-economic context, emphasizing that poverty and discrimination significantly impact children's rights and contribute to deviant behavior. It suggests that socio-economic disadvantages are a primary factor in hindering access to essential services and opportunities, leading to behaviors perceived as problematic, the realization of children's rights, including education, health care, social benefits, and full participation in society⁴³.

The other perspective shifts the focus to the role of parental influence and communication, challenging the notion that only children from disadvantaged backgrounds exhibit deviant behavior. It suggests that ineffective parenting and poor communication can occur across different socio-economic strata, highlighting that problems with juvenile delinquency are not solely confined to economically disadvantaged families.

Both perspectives are valuable in understanding the complexities of juvenile delinquency. While poverty and socio-economic disadvantage undoubtedly create significant barriers and are strongly linked to deviant behavior, it is also crucial to recognize that deviant behavior can arise in a variety of contexts, including those not necessarily associated with economic disadvantage.

The systems responsible for the care and protection of children play the main role in their well-being and development. For children who find themselves in conflict with the law, their exposure to violence often precedes their initial encounter with legal authorities. This exposure is frequently a significant factor in their involvement in unlawful activities. Moreover, when traditional familial support systems fail to provide adequate protection for children deemed "at risk," violence can become an unfortunate consequence. However, it's essential to recognize that violence can also result from misguided criminal justice policies, which may unjustly label children's coping mechanisms and behaviors as criminal, limiting their available options and pushing them towards riskier behaviors. Understanding the intricate relationship between violence and

⁴² Ibid, 47.

⁴³ Ibid, 45, page 53.

criminalization is paramount to effectively addressing the challenges faced by these children, their families, and their communities.

3.2 Child view: immediate response in Police Stations and Protection System

This study describes two case studies: one involving a victim and the other a suspected offender, both of whom are children. The methodology for these case studies included conducting two structured interviews with each child. These interviews aimed to understand their perspectives on how the legal system affects their lives. A significant focus was on the children’ initial encounters with the law, typically involving the police. By tailoring the interview process to meet the specific needs of the child, the study ensured that the minors could share their stories authentically and without alteration. This approach provided deeper insights into their experiences and the impact of the legal system on their lives.

Determination of child’s best interest is important to the process of eliminating the need for repeated interviews for the child. The protocols of interview that each police officer should be equipped with should be in place to assure that the child’s interview or disclosure cannot be used against them in any other proceedings. The communication in this process is multifaceted. The environment provides an inviting, calming and child friendly backdrop of helping the child to feel comfortable. Creating a connection with the child and lessening his/her anxiety is essential for the setting of the interview.

From a child perspective the process of being in the police station is both a source of support and a source of uncertainty or fear. From the point of view of a victim the system is considered as a place where they seek help and protection from abuse, neglect or harmful situations. But from the view of an offender this support can evoke a range of emotions and perceptions. The process for them is intimidating, punitive and adversarial particularly when they feel unfairly targeted and misunderstood.

For a child suspected offender:	For a child victim:
Experience feelings of guilt, shame, regret, anger after the interview process	Experience feelings of vulnerability, traumatization, need for safety and support
Feel reluctant to share experience and to cooperate with authorities	Share willingness to collaborate with the authorities
Perceive the authorities as adversarial forces by threatening their freedom or reputation.	Perceive authorities as supportive and protective

Some factors influence the perception of a child view in experiencing situations in contact with the law. Some of them are similar for victims, offenders, or witnesses:



- Age limitations affect children's understanding of legal procedures, and they may feel more vulnerable and confused during interactions with law enforcement or the legal system.
- Children who have had negative experiences in the past may approach interactions with law enforcement with fear and distrust.
- Cultural beliefs and values can shape a child's perception of the legal system.
- The family's attitude, shaped by their beliefs, can significantly influence a child's perception of the legal system. In particular, children in police stations often come from backgrounds with insufficient family dynamics, neglect, exploitation, domestic violence, lack of parenting capacity, etc.
- Children who are repeat offenders or in immediate need of protection experience increased anxiety or distress when interacting with police officers or the legal system.
- Children from low-income families or disadvantaged backgrounds are highly influenced by delinquent situations or risk factors that may lead to victimization or offending.
- Specifically, children in contact with the legal system often face high rates of school dropout, irregular attendance, or lack of support from their social environment.
- Differences in cognitive development affect their understanding of legal concepts, their ability to process information, and their capacity to communicate effectively.

Child-centered interventions in the legal system support the child and provide appropriate tools for professionals to work with a witness, victim, or offender effectively.

Case Study 1: The Victim's Perspective

Experience at the Police Station

Elia felt scared but relieved to be away from the abuse. At the police station, a kind police officer spoke to her gently, offering a warm environment and reassuring her that she was safe under her presence and with the support of a psychologist.

Elia felt nervous during the interview but appreciated that the officer listened without judgment. She shared details of the abuse, feeling supported by the

Elia

Elia is a 10-year-old girl who lives with her single mother and younger brother in a low-income neighborhood. Due to financial difficulties, Elia's mother works long hours, leaving the children unsupervised at times. Recently, Elia's mother noticed changes in her behavior—Elia became withdrawn and fearful, often refusing to go home after school.

One evening, Elia's teacher noticed bruises on her arms and gently asked her about them. With tears in her eyes, Elia confided that her mother's boyfriend had beaten her while her mother was at work. The teacher immediately reported the abuse to the child protection unit, leading to Elia being escorted for questioning by the police.

officer's empathy. Elia was temporarily placed in an emergency shelter while authorities investigated the abuse, and child protection workers conducted necessary assessments to develop a protection plan for her. With the help of social workers and psychologists, Elia began to feel better. The legal process provided her with a sense of protection and empowerment to speak out against her abuser.

The Child's perspective in the interview process

From the victim's perspective, emotions vary greatly, from deep fear and anxiety to intense anger and sadness. These feelings are shaped by multiple factors such as living conditions, childhood trauma and neglect, individual resilience, exposure to abusive factors and situations, interpersonal dynamics, parental models and roles, family dynamics, and the presence of community as a supportive resource. In many cases, the child experiences isolation and distrust, with a fractured sense of belonging and safety.

Fear is the most common emotion, reflecting insecurity and childhood trauma that impacts the victim's well-being when interviewed by the psychologist and police officer. From the victim's perspective, the interview process initially feels negative and intrusive, with resurfacing memories of the traumatic event. This psychological state has accompanied the victim for months before the abuse was uncovered.

The psychological state of the minor is marked by symptoms of avoidance, thoughts on the consequences of disclosing the abuse, feelings of guilt, and anger. The feeling of distancing from others is common in the victim's behavior during the interview at the police station. She expresses her emotions and hesitation to cooperate in this process as an initial step. Building trust takes time, understanding, empathy, and a supportive system, which should naturally develop throughout the interview.

The professional work of the police officer and the psychologist helped her feel more secure and cooperative, preparing her emotional and cognitive response to

narrating the event. After the initial phase of preparing the victim for the interview process, the minor feels confident in using her coping skills and answering each question directed by the officer about the incident. In this continuous journey of building the victim's trust and understanding her perspective, the intervention stands as a testament to her determination to overcome trauma and the potential for recovery after the challenging experiences related to the event.

Case Study 2: The Perspective of the suspected offender

Experience at the Police Station

Marko felt fear and anger. He believed the police saw him as a troublemaker and worried about how his father would react to his arrest. During the interview,

Marko

Marko, a 16-year-old, lives in a marginalized community with his unemployed father. Facing financial hardship and peer pressure, Marko began stealing to meet basic needs and fit in with his friends. One day, he was caught stealing from a local shop and taken to the police station for questioning. This was not his first offense, and as a result, he faced the risk of further consequences for his actions.

Marko was defensive and hesitant to admit guilt. He felt the questions were accusatory and that the officers didn't understand the pressures and difficulties he was facing.

Marko was charged with theft and enrolled in counseling sessions as part of an alternative program for minors involved in criminal activities.

The Minor's Perspective in the Interview Process

Interviewing a suspected young offender is a complex process that involves hesitation in narrating events and providing details of repeated incidents. The interview room at the police station was familiar to Marko, so it did not provoke a strong emotional response. At the beginning of the process, he refused to answer questions, felt insecure, and was unwilling to reveal his accomplices. The interviewing officer intervened calmly, embracing Marko's perspective and offering support to help establish a trusting relationship in a supportive environment. Due to previous experiences, Marko harbored significant distrust toward institutional responses and support mechanisms for himself and his family. He perceived the process as challenging, with numerous communication barriers, and felt that the help received by him and his family was insufficient. Marko resisted providing additional information about his offense and was more focused on understanding the legal consequences he might face. He showed a sense of responsibility for his actions, despite having a distant relationship with his parents. His traumatic experiences were affecting

his ability to cooperate during the interview process, as he expressed feelings of loneliness and abandonment by his family, which often exerted psychological pressure on him.

During the interview, when Marko was present with his parents, the situation became tense, reviving past traumatic experiences of family violence. The police officer did not seek Marko's consent for this, creating challenges during the interview. From Marko's perspective, he often viewed himself as a victim and expressed a need for help and support. He was aware of the roots of his deviant behavior and admitted to the psychologist that he needed help to improve his behavior. Marko perceived the police station as a place of interrogation where he was questioned rather than heard. He viewed the system as focused solely on legal pursuit without a deep understanding of minors' needs like his.

Despite these feelings, Marko wanted to make a positive change in his life but lacked the proper guidance on how to shift his behavior and attitudes.



4. Needs and sensitivities of children in police stations

The findings are derived from field research, which includes 12 interviews conducted with professionals within the justice sector, as well as 9 interviews and 2 focused group discussions involving a total of 22 police officers and child protection workers. Additionally, 2 children from demographics recognized as vulnerable were treated as case studies, reflecting the perspective from the children themselves. The findings indicate that children's interactions with the justice system are "system-driven" rather than "needs-driven." Children, particularly those who are vulnerable, have a wide range of needs related to protection, development, and the realization of fundamental rights. A considerable majority of justice sector professionals assessed that children have needs for access to justice that current systems and processes fail to adequately address. Justice sector professionals identified a series of needs for the justice system, as documented rights violations clearly show that children's need and demand for justice exceed what is provided.

Below is an analysis of the responses from justice and child protection professionals to the question: "How sensitive are law enforcement mechanisms and processes towards children?"

4.1 Child Interview at police station

During criminal proceedings, there are cases when children undergo multiple interviews, which is traumatic and overwhelming, particularly if they are not adequately prepared or supported. This process is particularly challenging for those children who have already experienced abuse or trauma.

From the Elbasan police officer, it has been described that after a preliminary assessment is conducted, necessary conditions for the child are ensured, and consultation is sought with the willing prosecutor for the minor, the lawyer, psychologist, legal guardian, and representatives from the municipality such as CPW. Guidance is then received from the prosecutor, and the interviewing process proceeds with the presence of the aforementioned actors. Additionally, the time limit for questioning the minor is adhered to, extending until 10:00 PM.

Recent studies in Europe have highlighted the vulnerability of children/youth offenders and victims within the justice system. Processes are often not child-friendly, lacking the necessary sensitivity and support mechanisms tailored to the needs of children. Moreover, while there may be efforts to reform systems, these initiatives are not always accompanied by sufficient human and financial resources. Responses from police officers across 12 districts highlighted that despite efforts by International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) to set up dedicated interview rooms for children in each district, officers are often resistant to using these facilities. The reasons provided by the officers themselves for not using these rooms are related to:

- Difficulties in accessing the designated interview rooms within police stations, as the equipment provided in these rooms is not always functional due to a lack of technological maintenance, making the interview process challenging.
- Challenges in accurately understanding the procedures for audio and video recording and insecurity in handling it. This insecurity mainly stems from inadequate training and unfamiliarity with the involved technology, as well as a lack of administration of the materials needed for interviews.

In Police Stations, depending on the territory covered and the number of documented incidents, there were 1 to 3 organic roles of “Specialist for crime investigation and juveniles and domestic violence,” who were trained and specialized in handling cases involving minors. With recent structural changes, the organization within stations is now based on police zones, and each crime specialist also handles juvenile cases according to the zone they cover. **This change complicates the process, as not all officers have received proper training in interviewing children, potentially leading to less effective handling of these sensitive cases.**

4.2 Qualification of professionals

For children to be treated with sensitivity, fairness and respect throughout any legal matter, all professionals should be properly trained to understand children’s needs. As well as core competencies in child-sensitive communication techniques to best interests’ determination (BID) procedures.

Many juvenile justice laws fail to include a clause that a child shall not be questioned by a police officer or a prosecutor without a parent, guardian or responsible adult being present. The presence of a parent, guardian or responsible adult is important in that it provides a high level of protection against ill-treatment of child suspects by police.⁴⁴ Similarly, the United Nations

⁴⁴ Rule 15, United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice, deals with “legal counsel, parents and guardians” but this comes under part 3 of the rules pertaining to “Adjudication and Disposition”

Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems provide specifically that States should establish child-friendly legal aid systems that enable children to contact their parents or guardians at once and to prohibit any interview in the absence of a parent or guardian, and lawyer or other legal aid provider. A recent study of juvenile justice systems in Eastern Europe and Central Asia recognizes that some countries have legislated to provide for the presence of lawyers during interrogation.⁴⁵

In Albania, the continuous collaboration between the police academy and various training structures plays a crucial role in preparing new police officers. However, interviews with police officers from 12 counties revealed significant challenges and gaps in the qualification of professionals, especially those dealing with children. **A persistent issue highlighted by the officers is the frequent transfers between different departments and sectors. This constant movement prevents officers from gaining specialized knowledge and expertise in handling cases involving children.** Without the opportunity to remain in one area and develop their skills, officers struggle to provide the consistent and knowledgeable support that children require. Moreover, the need for ongoing education emerged as a critical concern. While initial training is provided, there is a lack of continuous professional development focused on the treatment of children. Officers feel in difficulty to handle the unique challenges presented by these cases, underscoring the necessity for regular, specialized training sessions.

Mentorship and support from experienced colleagues, as well as from prosecutors and judges, were also identified as important components missing from the current system. Officers emphasized the importance of having mentors to guide them through the complexities of dealing with children, helping them navigate the legal and emotional intricacies involved. The support from legal professionals is essential in fostering a multidisciplinary approach, ensuring that all facets of a children's case are handled with care and expertise. The current police reform, which removed the specialization for officers handling children, has further complicated the situation. Now, any officer may be responsible for interviewing minors, regardless of their training or experience in this area. This change has led to inconsistencies in how children are treated and has highlighted the urgent need for specialized training programs.

4.3 Measures to protect children from discrimination

The Guidelines on Justice in Matters Involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime note that a key component of being protected from discrimination is justice processes and support services that are “sensitive to the child’s age,

⁴⁵ UNICEF, The development of juvenile justice systems in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Lessons from Albania, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkey and Ukraine (2009)

wishes, understanding, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic and social background, socio-economic condition, and immigration or refugee status, as well as to the special needs of the child, including health, abilities, and capacities.”⁴⁶

In Albania, the confidentiality of children during their interaction with the legal system and their referral to other services has emerged as a significant concern. Parents and children alike have reported that the handling of children often leads to the inadvertent disclosure of their situations. This breach of confidentiality results in the children’s circumstances becoming known to peers and members of their community, leading to stigmatization and discrimination. Such breaches are particularly harmful in school settings, where affected children may face bullying or social exclusion, negatively impacting their psychological well-being and academic performance.

The problem is further compounded when minors are required to spend extended hours at police stations before being interviewed, or when they are held in isolation rooms while awaiting court decisions. During these prolonged periods in police custody, the visibility of the children’s presence and circumstances increases the likelihood of their situation being disclosed, thereby intensifying the risk of stigmatization.

Confidentiality breaches are not confined to police stations. When children are referred to other agencies for management and service provision, their personal information is often inadequately protected. This lack of confidentiality can follow them back to their communities and schools, leading to ongoing discrimination and stigmatization.

4.4 Guaranteeing the right to be informed

Based on the Prosecutor General’s Instruction No. 08, dated 15.11.2021, “On the Investigation and Prosecution of Cases Involving Juveniles in Conflict with the Law, as Victims, and/or Witnesses,” the General Directorate of the State Police has undertaken institutional obligations and disseminated this instruction to local police structures for implementation. This includes providing the Information Letter on the Rights of Juveniles Subject to Criminal Prosecution (due to suspicion of committing a criminal offense) and the Information Letter on the Rights of Juvenile Victims of a Criminal Offense.

In compliance with this Instruction, the Juvenile Justice Code, and procedural criminal provisions, Judicial Police Officers handling cases involving juveniles are obliged to immediately inform the juvenile, in a manner appropriate to their development, either directly or through their legal representative, about the charges brought against them and their rights during the criminal process.

⁴⁶ Resolution adopted by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime, ECOSOC Resolution 2005/20, 22 July 2005, para. 16.

The role of the lawyer in the interviewing process of children is crucial, yet often lacks the emphasis needed to ensure their rights, particularly the right to be informed.

“...there are significant deficiencies in the lawyer’s friendly access to children, which can confuse them regarding the changes in the narrative of events aimed at facilitating leniency in measures against them...” (Respondent from Police)

Psychologically, this lack of clear and supportive legal guidance from lawyers can complicate cognitive and emotional processes for offenders, especially when recounting traumatic events, they may have experienced. The lawyer-client relationship often remains procedural, failing to provide the necessary legal support that could extend into the ongoing stages of the case. This limitation heavily depends on the economic resources available to the families, as their ability to afford continued legal representation in subsequent phases of the legal process varies widely.

4.5 Provision of psychological and social support services

In addition to Tirana, which is covered somehow by adequate services, other counties in Albania face shortages of psychologists and their availability during official working hours. This shortage significantly impacts the provision of psychological and social support to children involved in legal processes.

Recent reforms in the Albanian State Police have led to the removal of dedicated psychologists for handling cases involving children as part of the police staff, and started engaging them as external experts. Currently, psychologists are only available for the staff of directorates of police, except in cases involving victims of sexual violence, where psychologists from respective directorates may be present.

“...the absence of a psychologist makes the judicial process difficult. The psychologist’s issue has long been evident as they are only called upon on a personal and friendly basis. We have also utilized organizations or private psychologists for prosecutors or prosecutor’s psychologist to resolve the situation...” (Police officer in Elbasan)

The respondents have highlighted that the current structure lacks a dedicated psychologist at police stations, leading to a gap in immediate and effective psychological support for children. While there is a proposal to increase the number of psychologists as experts, the cost is considered prohibitive, making it challenging to implement across all districts.

“...psychological services need to be available in real-time at police stations, as demonstrated by the successful model employed by Nisma

ARSIS. Prolonged waiting times at police stations without access to a responding psychologist are detrimental to the child's well-being..."
(Police officer in Tirana)

SARPC also has emphasized that the absence of psychologists in police stations represents a major gap. This shortage hampers the ability to provide necessary psychological support to juveniles during their interactions with the police, affecting the overall quality of the process.

Two promising models, established in Fier and Shkodër established by the MHSP and UNICEF, operate as one-stop centers providing immediate psychological and social support. These centers represent a positive step towards addressing the immediate needs of children, offering comprehensive assistance that integrates both psychological and social aspects. However, the general lack of dedicated psychologists for children remains a significant challenge. This deficit hinders timely and specialized support for children navigating the legal system, potentially affecting their well-being and the effectiveness of legal proceedings.

4.6 Accessing legal assistance and legal aid

As stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child deprived of his or her liberty shall have the right to prompt access to legal and other appropriate assistance.

A critical issue is the lack of clear information provided to children about their rights. This lack of this crucial information can leave children unaware of their legal entitlements and how to navigate the legal system effectively. Missing child-friendliness, as well as language barriers, further compound this problem, making it difficult for children from minority groups, migrant and asylum-seeking children, or those with disabilities and cognitive issues to understand relevant information and legal assistance.

Despite efforts to improve provisions for the protection of children victims, witnesses and offenders, there are still gaps in access to legal assistance. Finding a specialized lawyer skilled in dealing with cases involving children can be challenging, particularly in regions with limited resources or where legal services are not adequately available.

4.7 Protecting the right to privacy

The Albanian Commissioner for Personal Data Protection found violations in the publication and dissemination of personal information about children in the media and on official court websites, leading the Commissioner to demand that the courts (and Ministry of Justice) preserve information and data in compliance with the Law on Personal Data Protection, especially where a child

is involved⁴⁷.

Cases involving children often become publicized both through media coverage and disclosures by police personnel. One notable observation, especially in cases handled by emergency services provided by Nisma ARSIS, is that information regarding the whereabouts of a child often reaches the parent through frontline information officers who are the initial point of contact with the public. The lack of awareness among these frontline personnel about the importance of confidentiality in handling such cases is a significant concern. This knowledge gap can lead to unintentional breaches of the children's privacy, impacting their confidentiality and potentially exposing sensitive information to the public.

The media's role in reporting on cases involving children also raises concerns about privacy protection. Publicizing details of a child's case without adequate safeguards can lead to stigmatization, social repercussions, and emotional distress for the child and their family.

"...often the problem is the sharing of information by spokespersons or the Media and Communication Sectors with the media, providing information involving minors that has no value for the public, except for harming them..." (police officer during focus group)

4.8 Duration of proceedings

The handling and progression of legal procedures for children in police station often lack transparency and coordination within police stations. This lack of clarity extends to district and county-level coordinators for addressing violence who may not have detailed information about the procedures being followed for children—whether they are under investigation, awaiting trial, or undergoing rehabilitation.

When children involved in legal proceedings lack accurate contact information, particularly those who no longer live with their parents and have unreliable phone contacts, it poses significant challenges. Inaccurate or outdated contact details hinder the ability of authorities to maintain consistent communication with the child, which can delay important legal processes such as court hearings, interviews, and interactions with social services. Additionally, difficulties in reaching the child or their current guardians can result in missed appointments and extended legal proceedings. This not only impacts the efficiency of the legal process but also compromises the child's access to timely support and intervention, potentially affecting their safety and well-being.

"...there are significant delays in processing cases involving minors, with children often kept in police stations for extended periods. This

⁴⁷ Albanian Data Protection Commissioner, '2013 Annual Report', 2014

problem is worsened by unexpected delays from key actors, such as the psychologist or lawyer, who are essential for a swift and fair handling of the case...” (representative from the SARPC)

4.9 Child-friendly interview rooms, use of audio-visual equipment and other testimonial aids

The establishment of child-friendly interview rooms within the State Police has been a significant step in fulfilling the obligations of the Juvenile Justice Code. These facilities ensure that interviews with children—whether they are suspects, victims, or witnesses—are conducted in settings that prioritize children’s safety and well-being, while also safeguarding the integrity and quality of the information provided. With support from partners like UNICEF and the Albanian-Swedish Juvenile Justice Program, 15 child interview units have been set up within police directorates and local stations nationwide. These units were established in line with the Standard Procedures for “Child Interview Units, technical standards, and procedures for using these facilities,” approved by the General Director of the State Police under Order No. 715, dated 05.06.2019.

Each unit is equipped with audio and video recording devices, creating a child-friendly environment for minors in contact with the police. Procedural safeguards specified in the Juvenile Justice Code, particularly Article 39, which details special rules for interviewing a minor who is a victim or witness, ensure that audiovisual recordings are copied in an unalterable (read-only) format onto CDs/DVDs. These recordings are then sent to the Prosecutor’s Office along with other procedural materials and can be used in court proceedings.

In addition to the physical infrastructure, significant efforts have been made to equip police personnel with the necessary skills to conduct interviews with minors. A curriculum and training program titled «Scientific Techniques for Interviewing Minors» was developed and approved, resulting in the training of 105 police officers, judicial police officers, and psychologists. Furthermore, a specialized training program was implemented for police officers handling cases involving minors, leading to the training and certification of 205 officers through «Training for the Investigation of Crimes Involving Minors» sessions.

While considerable progress has been made in establishing and equipping juvenile interview units throughout Albania, maintaining the sustainability and functionality of these rooms remains a critical issue. Without ongoing maintenance and adequate funding, the objective of creating a safe and supportive environment for interviewing minors in legal procedures cannot be fully realized. This situation highlights the need for a coordinated effort to

ensure that these facilities are not only established but also properly maintained and staffed with appropriately trained personnel to meet the needs of all minors involved in legal processes.

“...the environment where interviews are conducted is often unsuitable for minors. Poor conditions can contribute to increased stress and anxiety for the child, further complicating the interview process and potentially affecting the quality of their responses...” (representative from the State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child)

To ensure the continued functionality of these child-friendly interview rooms, the State Police budget must also account for the costs of software licenses and their technical maintenance.

Moreover, in some police stations, infrastructure remains inadequate for the needs of interviewing minors. Offices are often improvised, lacking a suitable environment for interviewing minors. Issues such as inadequate furnishings, poor heating, and lack of necessary equipment have been observed, especially in stations like Kruja, where the environment is entirely unsuitable for interviewing minors.

Additionally, in some stations, such as those in Lezhë, there are functional child-friendly environments with basic audiovisual capabilities, though they still lack specific elements for children, such as age-appropriate and developmentally suitable materials. This limitation affects their effectiveness. The absence of these facilities in regions like Kurbin and Mirditë forces children from these areas to travel to Lezhë for interviews, adding logistical and emotional challenges for the child. Similarly, in Vlorë, although there are dedicated rooms, issues such as high humidity levels and the need to transport minors to Tirana for forensic examinations due to insufficient local resources underscore the ongoing challenges in ensuring these environments truly serve the best interests of the child.

4.10 Avoiding confrontation with the accused

The United Nations Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime recommend that child victims and witnesses “be interviewed, and examined in court, out of sight of the alleged perpetrator, and separate courthouse waiting rooms and private interview areas should be provided”.⁴⁸

Despite efforts to avoid direct confrontation during legal processes, in some

⁴⁸ Resolution adopted by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime, ECOSOC Resolution 2005/20, 22 July 2005, para. 31(b)

police station, it is impossible for children not to encounter other parties due to inadequate infrastructure. The current infrastructure constraints often make it challenging to provide separate spaces where children can be interviewed or processed without coming into contact with the accused or other individuals involved in the case. This situation not only compromises the confidentiality and comfort of children but also risks influencing their statements and perceptions during critical legal interactions.

Efforts are underway within directorates to address these shortcomings by equipping dedicated rooms in courts and prosecutor's offices specifically designed for victims.



4.11 Fulfilling the right to protection and rehabilitation

The right to protection and rehabilitation for minors involved in legal proceedings is supported by measures implemented by CPUs (Child Protection Units) at the directorate level at the Municipality. However, these measures are not always well-known or recognized by officers at local police stations, highlighting a gap in knowledge and implementation within the law enforcement sector.

For children in conflict with the law, the integrated child protection system in Albania provides two pathways for case management: the civil route for children under the age of criminal responsibility and a combined criminal and civil route for children of criminal responsibility age.

With the adoption of Law 18/2017 "On the Rights and Protection of the Child," children in conflict with the law and those under the age of criminal responsibility are, for the first time, treated within the child protection system as a category in need of special protection.

When a child under the age of criminal responsibility (under 14 years) comes into conflict with the law, their case is managed exclusively through civil procedures. The child protection worker acts as the case manager, overseeing the process from the identification of the case to its closure.

For children who are of criminal responsibility age and come into conflict with the law, the case is managed through the criminal justice system, which can be broken down into three key stages: 1) Prevention - Intervening at early stages with children who are at risk of committing criminal offenses to prevent escalation; 2) Criminal Proceedings - This includes all steps and interactions between the minor and the justice system institutions dhe 3) Ri-integrimi - This phase begins while the minor is still serving their sentence and continues after the completion of the sentence, focusing on their reintegration into society.

CPUs play a crucial role in coordinating efforts to ensure children receive adequate protection and support throughout legal processes. They are

responsible for implementing rehabilitation programs and facilitating access to necessary services aimed at reintegrating minors into society and preventing reoffending. Despite these efforts, officers at local police stations are not fully aware of these rehabilitation processes and support mechanisms that the system has.

“...the difficulties in taking a child into protection are not as apparent as the challenges in providing services that rehabilitate the child and the entire family system. The lack of services that meet the child’s needs presents a clear challenge at local level...” (respondent from the Police at the district of Dibra)

Despite the provision of various services, some recidivist children continue to exhibit problematic behavior, and the interventions have limited impact. The courts and prosecution face constraints in enforcing behavioral change, which complicates efforts to uphold the child’s right to effective rehabilitation. For children who have committed offenses multiple times, referrals to employment offices for vocational training or professional courses are made; however, these efforts are often insufficient due to a lack of effective collaboration and coordination among service providers. The ongoing difficulties in addressing these cases highlight the need for improved systems and cooperation to better meet the right to protection and rehabilitation for all children.

4.12 Taking decisions in the best interests of the child

Making decisions in the best interests of the child is a fundamental principle when dealing with cases involving children, whether they are victims, witnesses, or authors. However, this analysis reveals significant challenges that complicate the process of ensuring decisions are both fair and truly in the child’s best interest.

One of the primary challenges is the difficulty in assembling intersectoral teams, which include representatives from the police, social services, and other relevant structures. This often leads to delays in decision-making, risking that the final decision may not fully reflect the child’s best interests. Poor coordination among these structures creates an environment where the child’s needs may be overlooked or inadequately addressed. Another issue identified is the challenge professionals face in separating their professional responsibilities from personal or local connections, particularly when they are familiar with the child’s family or social circle. This conflict can impact the objectivity of the decisions made, leading to outcomes that may be influenced by personal relationships or external pressures rather than the child’s best interests.

Decisions regarding the best interests of the child are often constrained by the capacities of the structures in place to protect and ensure the child’s well-being. This highlights a limitation in institutional and structural capacity, where

decisions may not always align with the child's actual needs but are instead based on the resources available at the time. For instance, the lack of specialized psychologists during the interview process with children is a significant issue that affects the quality of support provided to the child throughout the legal proceedings.

Despite these challenges, there is notable sensitivity from legal structures, such as prosecutors, who often try to provide lenient measures for children or close cases when possible. This reflects an effort to respect the best interests of the child but also underscores the need for improved infrastructure and procedures that can better support these decisions. A further problem is the extended time children spend in police stations, often waiting for parents or psychologists to arrive before the interview process can begin. This is a clear violation of the child's rights and highlights a significant lack of organization and coordination among the involved structures. Such delays can cause unnecessary stress and anxiety for the child, undermining their well-being during an already challenging situation.



5. Conclusions

The conclusions of this study highlight several key areas where reforms are needed to improve the situation of children in contact with the justice system in Albania, whether they are victims, witnesses, or suspected offenders.

Over the past five years, data has shown significant fluctuations in the number of child victims, witnesses, and offenders at both the national level and in Tirana. The rapid increase in juvenile delinquency, especially in Tirana, underscores the urgent need for intervention and a deeper analysis of the factors driving these trends. Socioeconomic stressors such as poverty, family dysfunction, and domestic violence play a significant role in juvenile delinquency. Children exposed to violence or neglect are more likely to develop behavioral problems, which often lead them into conflict with the law. These issues reveal a clear difficulty within the system to address needs, particularly concerning psychosocial support.

A trend identified in the study is the gender disparity in juvenile criminal activities, with boys constituting the majority of criminal actions. This gap has widened in recent years, indicating a need to address juvenile delinquency also from the perspective of gender roles. Furthermore, the increase in criminal offenses involving minors also reflects gender inequalities that may manifest in different forms. What remains important is a multidimensional approach to the role of education and awareness, access to services, treatment by authorities or institutions, and decision-making processes that influence how boys and girls experience the legal process.

Recidivism remains a widespread phenomenon, especially regarding the number of minors in contact with the law. Many children, particularly those from marginalized communities, are re-engaged in criminal activities due to the lack of effective rehabilitation services. Successive ineffective efforts to address cases involving economically exploited children, including those from minorities, reflect systemic shortcomings. Without appropriate interventions, these children remain trapped in a cycle of criminal behavior, further marginalized by society itself.

The study also revealed an increase in children's exposure to violent environments, both as victims and as witnesses. The number of children

witnessing criminal acts, particularly violent ones, has risen significantly over the past five years, especially in Tirana. This exposure has long-term psychological consequences and can lead to further trauma and re-victimization. The lack of comprehensive support systems for these children, especially in rural areas, exacerbates their vulnerabilities, further emphasizing the need for long-term social and psychological services adapted to the family or community context in which the child resides.

The history of domestic violence plays a crucial role in children's involvement in legal processes. Many children in conflict with the law come from families with damaged dynamics where abuse, neglect, and poverty are present. The study underscores the importance of timely interventions to prevent harm and re-victimization by ensuring these children receive the necessary psychosocial support for treatment and reintegration into their communities.

The findings also challenge the common perception that juvenile delinquency and victimization are limited to disadvantaged families. The study emphasizes that children who live in families with significant economic and social resources are just as vulnerable as other children raised in families with limited economic and social means. Lack of parental communication, divorces, and the strategic use of child abuse accusations during custody battles contribute to the involvement of children in legal proceedings. This highlights the broader socio-economic and family dynamics that can affect children's behavior and vulnerability.

These children face systemic challenges that fail to adequately address their specific needs, especially those who are more vulnerable. One of the key findings is the lack of continuous and specialized training for frontline personnel within the state police and child protection systems. Frequent structural changes in police stations have worsened the situation, as there is no longer a clear division of specialized staff for child-related cases. Police personnel need guidance not only on legal procedures but also on effective communication with children, trauma-informed care, and ethical handling of minors in stressful or potentially retraumatizing situations. This kind of training is essential to ensure that police officers respond appropriately to emotionally charged situations involving children.

The physical infrastructure of police stations is another very important element. In some cases, child-friendly environments have been created, but many stations still lack the necessary spaces adapted to children's needs. Transforming these spaces into welcoming and supportive environments with appropriate decor, child-friendly interview rooms, and specialized waiting areas is essential to reduce the emotional burden these environments may impose on children during interactions with police personnel.

The role of the media in reporting cases involving children is another identified concern, especially regarding the protection of children's privacy. Publishing

sensitive information without adequate protective measures can lead to stigmatization, social consequences, and emotional distress for the child and their family. Such unnecessary exposure increases the risk of discrimination and can significantly worsen the child's well-being, especially in terms of their psychological and social development.

The study also highlights a significant lack of psychological and social support for children in police stations. The absence of psychologists available during the permitted hours, as stipulated in the KDM (Kosovo Demographic and Monitoring Report), complicates the provision of immediate assistance for children, especially those involved in legal proceedings. Collaboration between police and external organizations, such as Nisma ARSIS, helps respond quickly to the need for psychosocial support during the interview of a minor. Such services that fill the current system's gaps offer a valuable opportunity to establish a model and assess the need for further development in the field of juvenile justice.

Furthermore, the study underscores the need for sustainable partnerships between law enforcement agencies, social and child protection services, and mental health professionals. This multidisciplinary approach is essential to provide real-time psychological support, conduct in-depth assessments, and ensure that the emotional and developmental needs of children are addressed during legal procedures. These partnerships would also aid in more effective case management in the rehabilitation, integration, or prevention phase for children at risk of recidivism.

The need for the uniform implementation of protocols across all police stations to ensure that children, regardless of their geographical location, receive the same standard of care and protection is a challenge faced by both child protection structures and police officers in some districts. The implementation of these national protocols should comply with international conventions on children's rights, ensuring that legal procedures are fair and in line with international legal frameworks (ILF). These protocols remain a priority that needs monitoring and supervision by relevant structures to ensure better coordination by addressing any challenges or successes encountered during the protocols' implementation, aiming for ongoing diversification and improvement.

Alongside these systemic reforms, there is an urgent need to strengthen community-based services and social support mechanisms. These services should work closely with the justice system to prevent re-victimization and ensure the reintegration of children into family and community life.

In conclusion, although Albania has made progress in improving the legal framework, there is still a lack of a complete package for the protection and rehabilitation of children who are victims, witnesses, or alleged offenders. Strengthening intersectoral cooperation, prioritizing children in budgetary analyses, and planning social interventions at the local level create a new

step toward improving outcomes for children in contact or conflict with the justice system. Only through sustainable reforms, targeted interventions, and a multidisciplinary approach can Albania ensure that its justice system serves the best interests of its most vulnerable population—its children.



6. Way forward and recommendations

The following recommendations aim to improve the treatment and outcomes for children involved in the justice system, whether as victims, witnesses, or offenders. These recommendations emphasize the importance of child-sensitive proceedings, the integration of non-judicial professionals, capacity building, access to information, implementation of protocols, and the strengthening of links between justice and child protection systems.

a. Specialized procedures for questioning and hearing children in police station

These measures include limiting the frequency of interviews to prevent re-traumatization, ensuring that children are not confronted with the accused before, during, or after testimony, and restricting the number of authorized professionals who can question them. Furthermore, the use of audio-visual recording during forensic interviews is mandated to enhance transparency and accuracy in legal proceedings. Flexibility in the order of testimony and the incorporation of low-tech measures, such as child-friendly interview environments, are also prioritized to create a supportive atmosphere conducive to effective communication.

b. Dedicated child officers in every police station

Each police station should appoint specialized officers responsible solely for handling cases involving children. These dedicated officers should receive comprehensive training in child psychology, communication techniques, and a legal framework adapted to minors. By having officers who focus exclusively on children's needs, police stations can ensure a more consistent, sensitive, and effective approach to cases involving minors—whether as victims, witnesses, or offenders.

This specialization would help reduce inconsistencies that arise with general officers who may lack the expertise or experience necessary for working with children, thus providing a more child-friendly approach. Furthermore, it would streamline the interview process, minimize trauma, and ensure that the child's best interests are always the top priority in every interaction. Dedicated officers could also collaborate more effectively with social

services, psychologists, and legal professionals to create a comprehensive support system for children involved in legal proceedings.

c. Value of child-sensitive proceedings

Child-sensitive proceedings are crucial in ensuring that children are treated with the care and understanding they need throughout legal processes. Implementing child-friendly approaches within judicial and non-judicial settings significantly reduces trauma and increases the effectiveness of justice outcomes. This involves using age-appropriate language, providing psychological support, and ensuring a safe environment for children to express themselves.

d. Capacity-building of judicial and non-legal personnel

Investing in the training and capacity-building of judicial and non-legal personnel, including judges, lawyers, police officers, and social workers, is essential. Training should focus on child rights, child psychology, trauma-informed care, and best practices for handling cases involving children. This will ensure that all personnel are equipped to address the unique needs of children in the justice system.

e. Strengthen access to information

Ensuring that children, youth, parents, and stakeholders have access to comprehensive and understandable information about legal processes, rights, and available support services is crucial. Information should be disseminated through multiple channels, including schools, community centers, and online platforms, to reach a broad audience effectively.

f. Implementation of protocols and standard operating procedures (SOPs)

Developing and implementing clear protocols and SOPs for handling cases involving children in police station can standardize practices and ensure consistency across the justice system. These protocols should be designed with input from child protection experts and be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect best practices and emerging research.

g. Stronger links between justice and child protection systems

Strengthening the connections between the justice system and child protection services is important for providing comprehensive support to children. Effective collaboration and communication between these systems ensure that children receive the protection and care they need throughout legal proceedings and beyond and avoid recidivism.

h. Ensuring access to justice for marginalized groups

Special attention must be given to ensuring access to justice for child victims and witnesses from marginalized groups, including those from minority communities, children with disabilities, and those living in poverty. Tailored approaches are needed to address the unique barriers these children face in accessing justice.

i. Ensuring availability and access to support services for children

Encouraging and bolstering decentralized, community-based, multidisciplinary information and support centers is crucial. These centers, strategically located even within the most vulnerable communities, play an important role in facilitating children and their families' access to essential resources such as information, legal aid, advice, and referrals to support services. Leveraging existing community resources is essential in this endeavor, maximizing outreach and impact.

j. Enhancing data collection and evidence-based policy making

Continuing to enhance data collection efforts is essential for understanding the scope and nature of children's involvement in the justice system. Reliable data inform evidence-based policymaking, helping to develop targeted interventions and measure the impact of existing policies.

k. Suggestions for future research

Future research should focus on identifying gaps in current practices and exploring innovative approaches to improving the justice system for children. Areas of interest could include the long-term impacts of child-sensitive proceedings, the effectiveness of different support services, and the role of technology in facilitating access to justice.

l. Comprehensive review of services

Public authorities should undertake a comprehensive review of the entire spectrum of services available to children linked to the justice system. This review should not only focus on police and court services but also include teachers, child protection structures, social workers, psychologists, and other community stakeholders who interact with children facing justice issues. Such a review can identify gaps, enhance coordination, and improve the overall quality of services provided to children.

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Annexes

Annex 1: List of Key interviewees and focus groups

COUNTY	RDP /PO	CPU/CPW	CHILD PROTECTION SECTOR
BERAT	1	1	
DIBER	1	1	
DURRES	1	1	1
ELBASAN	2		
TIRANE	2 (1 nga te cilet FOKUS GRUP)	2 (1 nga te cilet FOKUS GRUP)	1
KUKES	1		
LEZHE	2	1	
SHKODER	1	1	
VLORE	1	1	
Total			

Annex 2: Structured interview questionnaire for key informants

Interview Questions for Police Officers

1. Identification and Statistics of Children Involved

1. Who are the children considered victims, witnesses, and offenders in Albania?
 - Can you describe the typical profiles or characteristics of children in these roles?
 - Are there specific demographic factors that are common among these children?

2. How many children are categorized as victims, witnesses, and offenders within your jurisdiction?

- Can you provide statistics or estimates on the number of children in each category?
- How do these numbers compare to previous years or trends you have observed?

2. Child-Sensitivity in Law Enforcement Mechanisms

3. How child-sensitive are the law enforcement mechanisms and processes in your station?

- What procedures are in place to ensure that the needs and sensitivities of children are considered during police interactions?
- How do you adapt your approach when dealing with children compared to adults?

4. What specific measures are taken to create a child-friendly environment at your police station?

- Are there designated spaces or personnel trained to handle cases involving children?
- How do these measures impact the experience of children in contact with the law?

5. How do you assess the effectiveness of these child-sensitive practices in your station?

- Are there feedback mechanisms or evaluations in place to gauge how well the practices are working?
- Can you provide examples of how these practices have positively or negatively impacted cases involving children?

6. What challenges do you face in implementing child-sensitive practices in law enforcement?

- Are there any obstacles or limitations that affect your ability to handle cases involving children sensitively?
- How do you address or overcome these challenges?

7. How is training and ongoing education provided to ensure that all personnel are equipped to handle cases involving children?

- What does the training entail, and how often is it updated?
- How does this training influence the way officers interact with child victims, witnesses, and offenders?

8. What improvements do you think are needed to enhance the child-sensitivity of law enforcement processes?

- Are there any specific areas where you believe changes or additions are necessary?
- How would these improvements benefit the handling of cases involving children?

Interview Questions for Child Protection Agencies

1. Identification and Statistics of Children Involved

1. Who are the children considered victims, witnesses, and offenders in your work?

- Can you describe the typical profiles or characteristics of these children?
- Are there specific demographic factors or situations that are common among these children?

2. How many children are categorized as victims, witnesses, and offenders within your area of responsibility?

- Can you provide statistics or estimates on the number of children in each category?
- How have these numbers changed over time, and what trends have you observed?

2. Child-Sensitivity in Protection Mechanisms and Processes

3. How child-sensitive are the protection mechanisms and processes in place for children under your care?

- What procedures are implemented to ensure that the needs and sensitivities of children are considered?
- How do you adapt your approach to different needs among children?

- 4. What specific measures are taken to create a child-friendly environment in your services?**
- Are there dedicated spaces, resources, or personnel trained to handle cases involving children?
 - How do these measures impact the experience and well-being of children in your care?
- 5. How do you assess the effectiveness of these child-sensitive practices in your services?**
- Are there feedback mechanisms or evaluations to gauge how well these practices are working?
 - Can you provide examples of how these practices have positively or negatively impacted cases involving children?
- 6. What challenges do you face in implementing child-sensitive practices in child protection services?**
- Are there specific obstacles or limitations that affect your ability to handle cases involving children sensitively?
 - How do you address or overcome these challenges?
- 7. How is training and ongoing education provided to ensure that all personnel are equipped to handle cases involving children?**
- What does the training entail, and how frequently is it updated?
 - How does this training influence the way staff interact with child victims, witnesses, and offenders?
- 8. What improvements do you think are needed to enhance the child-sensitivity of protection mechanisms and processes?**
- Are there particular areas where changes or additions are necessary?
 - How would these improvements benefit the handling of cases involving children?
- 9. How do you collaborate with law enforcement and other agencies to ensure the best outcomes for children in protection cases?**

- What is the nature of this collaboration, and how effective is it?
- What improvements could be made to enhance inter-agency cooperation?

10. What measures or programs have you found to be most effective in supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of children who are victims, witnesses, or offenders?

- Can you provide examples of successful programs or interventions?
- What factors contributed to their success?

Annex 3: Focus group guidelines

Focus Group Discussion Guidelines for Child Protection Workers and Police Officers

A. Roles and responsibilities

- 1. Describe the typical roles and responsibilities of child protection workers and police officers in handling cases involving children.**
 - How do these roles complement each other in addressing cases?
- 2. What are the most common types of cases involving children that you handle?**
 - Can you provide examples of recent cases and their outcomes?

B. Effectiveness of current practices

- 3. How effective are the current child protection mechanisms and processes from both perspectives?**
 - What aspects are working well, and where are the gaps?
- 4. How child-sensitive are the practices and procedures in both child protection and law enforcement?**
 - Are there specific practices that have been particularly successful or problematic?

C. Challenges and barriers

- 5. What are the main challenges you face when working with children who are victims, witnesses, or offenders?**
 - How do these challenges impact your ability to provide support and enforce the law?
- 6. Are there systemic or organizational barriers that hinder effective collaboration between child protection services and law enforcement?**
 - How do these barriers affect your work?

D. Coordination and collaboration

- 7. How do child protection workers and police officers collaborate on cases involving children?**
 - What works well in these collaborations, and what could be improved?
- 8. What communication and coordination strategies could enhance the effectiveness of joint efforts in child protection and law enforcement?**

E. Support and resources

- 9. What types of support or resources would help both child protection workers and police officers better serve the needs of children?**
 - Are there gaps in training, resources, or support that you have identified?
- 10. What ongoing education or professional development opportunities would be beneficial for both child protection workers and police officers?**
 - How can these opportunities improve your work with children?

F. Recommendations for improvement

- 11. What improvements or changes would you suggest to enhance the child protection and law enforcement systems?**
 - How can these changes address the challenges you have discussed?
- 12. Are there any best practices or successful strategies that you believe should be implemented more broadly?**
 - Can you provide examples of successful interventions or programs