

# POLICY PAPER

## Reforming Youth Corrections



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Sentenced children differ from the convicted adult population for their unique developmental needs, vulnerabilities, and potential for rehabilitation. Unlike adults, children are still in the process of physical, emotional, and cognitive development, and their actions are often influenced by their stage of maturity. Actual recognition of the individual needs of sentenced and detained children requires providing them with access to education, mental health support, family engagement, and positive role models—all of which are essential for their rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society.

Prison and probation staff working with children sentenced to imprisonment, detention for the purposes of educational supervision, or community service, need to possess specific competencies to perform their highly responsible and sensitive in nature roles. Convicted children necessitate specialised care and support to meet their developmental needs and reduce the likelihood of reoffending. Proper training ensures that staff is equipped with the essential knowledge and skills to effectively engage young people, respond to their behaviour adequately, safeguard their rights, and improve their chances of breaking the cycle of crime from early on.

All countries in the EU<sup>[1]</sup> have unique juvenile justice system characterised by national procedural safeguards and judicial culture. Bulgaria and Greece, for example, apply a special legal framework for all minors, established through special provisions enshrined into their Penal codes and Criminal Procedure codes. In Portugal, persons over the age of 16 are subject to ordinary criminal law, but special legal provisions also apply to them. Cyprus, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain and Sweden have all adopted specific juvenile criminal justice legislation delineating the applicable rules and treatment of juvenile offenders. Despite the regulatory differences, common needs, standards, and considerations emerged in all of the examined countries, primarily due to their EU membership and their participation in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, rendering the EU acquis on procedural safeguards applicable to all Member States.<sup>[2]</sup>

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1] The conclusions are based on a comparative research among 10 EU countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. For more information, please see, ARISA Child „Reforming Youth Corrections: Comparative report assessing the training needs of prison and probation staff working with convicted children“.

[2] Please, check ARISA Child research for further comparative findings in relation to the minimum age of criminal responsibility, the application of procedural safeguards, and the policies and practices related to non-prosecution, conditions of detention, and the application of alternative measures for children in conflict with the law.

EU countries apply various approaches to the organisation of their juvenile correctional and supervision systems. In some countries, juvenile facilities and services are entirely public while others operate under a mixed public-private governance. Moreover, in some countries, there is an alarming merging of adult and juvenile detention facilities. International rules require children to be placed separately from adults, in facilities specially adapted to their needs.[3] However, the limited public resources directed at the prison system are a prerequisite for inadequate infrastructure that places adult and youth prison populations in close proximity. In Cyprus, for example, the law requires children serving custodial sentences to be held in specialised facilities. However, to date, there are no children's detention centres built, and convicted children continue to be held in the country's only prison in Nicosia. Greece and Bulgaria are plagued by similar problems. There is a need to reform the infrastructure, including the creation of youth-friendly areas, to enhance the qualification of the staff and establish better channels for cooperation between the relevant actors involved in youth delinquency and rehabilitation.

Quality education and training are critical to enable the correctional service staff to build and maintain a safe and supportive environment within correctional settings, thereby promoting a positive impact on young offenders and society at large. Correctional services staff need to understand the underlying factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency, such as trauma, mental health issues, and socio-economic challenges, in order to respond with empathy and tailored support. To this end, they need advanced multidisciplinary training that is regularly updated and built upon.

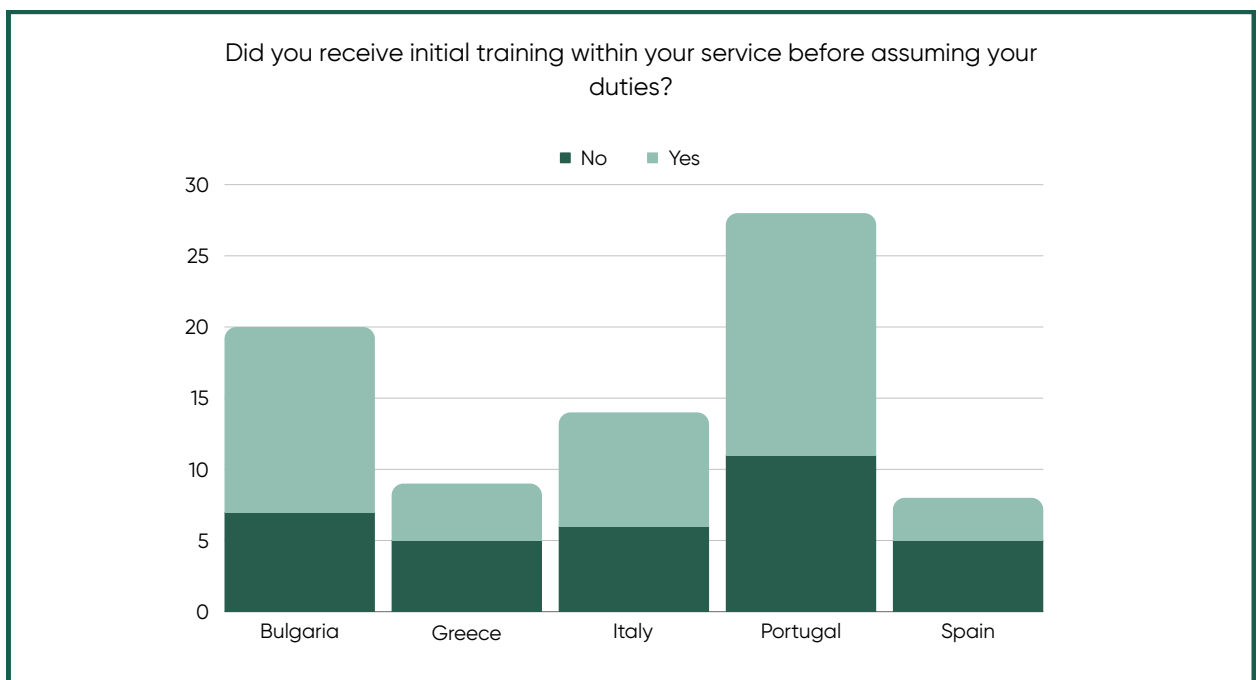


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[3] [Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice](#), adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 17 November 2010.

Typically, they receive initial training or an introductory course, but the duration, content, and delivery of training varies considerably depending on the national context. Moreover, it is common practice for prison officers to transfer from adult to children’s prison and detention facilities through a simple application process without receiving specialised training or re-qualification in juvenile justice prior to the transition. Often there is no compulsory training for wardens working in the juvenile units, where such units exist in some adult prisons and detention centres, as they are appointed through a different administrative procedure than those employed directly in juvenile facilities. Germany and Sweden offer good examples in this respect. In Germany, selected prison and probation officers working with children undergo a multifaceted initial training lasting 2 years, whereas in Sweden, they receive systematic continuing training, both face-to-face and distance learning, to inform them about all innovative and practical aspects of their work.

**FIGURE 1 – Number of correctional/supervision staff that have received initial training**



Source: ARISA Child „Reforming Youth Corrections: Comparative report assessing the training needs of prison and probation staff working with convicted children“

The availability, range and content of training in dealing with young offenders also varies among countries. The ARISA Child research in five EU countries revealed that:

43%

43% of respondents have never received training on children's rights or the principles of child-friendly justice, vs. 57% who have

48%

48% of respondents self-assessed their knowledge of international law and guidelines on the rights of the child and on child-friendly justice as fairly good, while 44% rated it as basic (3% reported excellent knowledge, and 5% no knowledge)

52%

The majority of respondents (52%) had not received interdisciplinary training on child psychology and child-friendly communication, compared to 48% who had; the greatest discrepancy in this regard was observed in Bulgaria, where 85% responded negatively, compared to 15% responding affirmatively;

78%

Although the vast majority (78%) of respondents reported that meeting the needs of children from diverse backgrounds was part of their daily work, there was no measurable evidence of relevant training being delivered.

**Prison and supervision staff rank among the least trained justice professionals in the EU.**

Prison and supervision staff rank among the least trained justice professionals in the EU, as indicated by the annual Judicial Training Reports issued by the European Commission.[4] The deficiency in training, particularly continuous training for correctional services staff, is exacerbated by the absence of uniform qualification requirements for their appointment. This lack may result in differential treatment of children in detention or supervision, even within the same jurisdiction. The research under the ARISA Child Initiative revealed a deficit of key competencies essential for working with children in conflict with the law. This includes knowledge and skills in child psychology, age-appropriate communication, and diversity training. The latter is particularly vital in light of the increased representation of migrant children in the criminal justice systems of some states.[5] According to the guidelines prepared by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, these are fundamental skills for all professionals working with children. The guidelines stipulate that: "All professionals working with and for children should receive necessary interdisciplinary training on the rights and needs of children of different age groups, and on proceedings that are adapted to them. Professionals having direct contact with children should also be trained in communicating with them at all ages and stages of development, and with children in situations of particular vulnerability". [6]

Furthermore, it is important to consider forms of deviance in the context of juvenile delinquency, which are constantly changing, particularly given the impact of technology on youth. The typology of offences committed by minors or young adults has changed; whereas in the past they were often limited primarily to theft, today violent crimes are more widespread and varied, and instances of violent behaviour in prisons are on the rise. In addition, the average age of children in custody or under supervision is becoming lower.

Training gaps for correctional and supervisory officers suggest the need to develop and implement targeted and up-to-date training programs. Policy makers and training providers at national and EU level should consider introducing a range of measures similar to those proposed below.

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[4] Available at [European Commission's website](#).

[5] Respondents from Greece, Italy, and Spain reported this issue in the frame of the ARISA Child research.

[6] [Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice](#), adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 17 November 2010, Guidelines 14, 15.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Introduce minimum requirements of qualifications and competencies, with a focus on children's rights, psychology, social work, and education.**

Establishing such standards ensures that professionals working with youth offenders have the necessary expertise and experience to deal effectively with the complex needs of this vulnerable population. Formal training in areas such as children's rights gives the professionals a thorough understanding of legal frameworks and principles that are essential to safeguarding the rights and welfare of young offenders. Moreover, knowledge in the fields of psychology, social work, and education is critical to the implementation of a holistic approach that addresses the factors contributing to juvenile delinquency and applies evidence-based interventions tailored to individual needs.

## **Fill the data gaps on the training needs of correctional and supervision officers, through needs assessments directly involving professionals**

These prison, probation and other correctional officers play a pivotal role in shaping the lives and futures of the juveniles in their care. By involving them directly in the needs assessment process, correctional authorities benefit from the staff's practical knowledge and insights, ensuring that training activities are tailored to the nuanced challenges of working with young offenders. By participating in the process, officers become active stakeholders in the development of training programs, which reinforces their sense of ownership and commitment to implementing best practices in their daily work. Moreover, by systematically identifying and addressing gaps in training, correctional authorities enhance the quality of care, support, and guidance provided to sentenced children, thereby amplifying opportunities for their rehabilitation, successful reintegration into society, and ultimately, the reducing recidivism rates.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Introduce compulsory initial and continuous training with an emphasis on practical and interdisciplinary elements**

Practicality and interdisciplinarity are vital features of training that can equip officers with the wide range of skills needed to carry out their duties in dealing with young offenders. Such training should not only be centered on maintaining security in correctional facilities, but also on the importance of building constructive relationships, understanding child development, and implementing evidence-based interventions. In addition, continuing training ensures that officers stay abreast of evolving best practices, legislative amendments, and advancements in the juvenile justice field. Incorporating insights from a variety of disciplines enables professionals to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing juvenile behaviour; hence, they are better prepared to provide tailored support and rehabilitation opportunities.

## **Revise regularly the training programs to encompass the novel developments in juvenile delinquency, including in cooperation with the academia and civil society sectors**

The regular updating of training curricula should incorporate the latest scientific and research findings in the field of juvenile justice and youth delinquency, taking into account various aspects, best practices, and innovative approaches to training programs. As our collective understanding of juvenile behaviour, trauma-informed care, and evidence-based interventions continues to evolve, it is essential to keep the correctional practices relevant by using up-to-date knowledge. Training programs must keep pace with scientific advances to enable correctional officers to meet the complex needs of young offenders in their care.



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Implementing cross-professional training and mutual learning opportunities to facilitate cross-sectoral cooperation**

Bringing together professionals from diverse fields such as law enforcement, social work, education, mental health, and juvenile justice, foster a collaborative approach to tackling the underlying causes of youth offending. Cross-professional training allows participants to gain insights into the perspectives, methodologies, and resources of other disciplines, enabling them to develop a more comprehensive understanding of juvenile delinquency and its root causes. Sharing best practices, exchanging knowledge, and building networks, help professionals enhance their capacity to work together seamlessly, coordinate interventions, and provide holistic support to young offenders and their families.

## **Foster experience exchange between facilities to support the transfer of good practices**

The dialogue and collaboration between correctional institutions, probation offices, civil society organisations, and other relevant actors can be extremely beneficial, enabling the professionals to share valuable insights, strategies, and success stories with counterparts from other local contexts. This exchange allows institutions and officers to learn from each other's experiences, identify innovative approaches, and implement practices that proved to be successful. Furthermore, the exchange promotes a culture of constant desire for improvement, encouraging facilities to critically evaluate their practices and explore new avenues for their professional work.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Introduce guidelines and protocols supporting the work of correctional and supervision staff**

Professionals in many of the EU countries examined in the ARISA Child research reported their personal uncertainty and unawareness about how to apply international standards on child-friendly justice and fulfil their respective obligations. These feelings intensify when they have to handle cases of additional complexity, such as cases involving children with mental health problems or children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Prison and correctional authorities should support professionals in their day-to-day work through specific guidance on the implementation of national strategic planning for child-friendly justice. National policy-makers should therefore consider:

- Updating existing or creating new guidelines on the treatment of children in detention or under supervision, based on relevant international standards and norms on justice for children;
- Developing cooperation protocols, involving all key actors, along with step-by-step guidance on the identification and referral of vulnerable children to the appropriate support services.
- Appointing cultural mediators within courts, prisons, and supervision services.



*Assessing the Risk of Isolation of Sentenced and Accused:  
Enhancing the Capacity of Correctional Services to Work with  
Convicted Children - ARISA Child*

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