



National Rapporteur on Trafficking in
Human Beings and Sexual Violence
against Children

SUMMARY

Sexual Violence Against Children Victims Monitoring Report 2017-2021

sexual
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children

Summary

This victims monitoring report deals with the scale and scope of victimization of sexual violence against children in the Netherlands in the period 2017–2021, the support and protection victims receive, and relevant developments in the government approach to address sexual violence against children.

Increased focus on sexual violence will provide opportunities to make the improvements needed

Social awareness around sexual violence and sexually transgressive behaviour has grown in recent years. Recent revelations about sexual violence in, among other places, the media industry and sport have contributed to this. The subject is also receiving increasing attention at national level. Examples include the appointment of the government commissioner for sexually transgressive behaviour and sexual violence and the announcement of the National Action Plan against sexually transgressive behaviour and sexual violence. In this context the National Rapporteur sees opportunities to develop a better and more coordinated approach to dealing with sexual violence. This monitoring report contains evidence that such improvements remain necessary: a quarter of the victims of sexual violence against children will become known to the police as repeat victims of an offence within five years. In more than half of the cases, they are repeat victims of a sexual offence or have experienced serious violence. This shows that sexual violence against children is a complex and far-reaching problem that exists on a large scale and can have a lasting and disruptive impact on victims' lives.

Many young people experience a variety of forms of sexual violence

Determining the exact number of children who have experienced sexual violence is challenging, because most cases of sexual violence are not reported. The cases of sexual violence reported to the authorities or identified by care professionals are just the tip of the iceberg. However, prevalence studies can provide an estimate of the total number of children and young people who experience sexual violence. Those studies show that we are dealing with very large numbers.

It is estimated that a total of more than 95,000 girls and about 34,500 boys aged 16 or 17 experienced at least one form of sexual violence or harassment in the year before being surveyed. It is mainly this age group that experiences various forms of sexual violence. These findings were the result of new analyses carried out on data from a prevalence study from 2020 in which an estimated 13.9% of the girls and 3.1% of the boys aged 16 or 17 indicate that they had experienced a form of physical sexual violence during the twelve preceding months. These forms included being kissed against their will, touched in an unwanted sexual way or being subjected to more serious physical sexual violence such as rape. In addition, 21.7% of the girls and 6.4% of the boys in that age group had been the victims of a form of non-physical sexual harassment, including comments or jokes with sexual overtones or being stared at in a sexual way. 28.5% of the girls and 9.3% of the boys had experienced a form of online sexual harassment.

The type of sexual violence that children experience often varies depending on age group and life stage. For instance, analysis of police statistics shows that victims up to the age of 3 are more likely to be victims of physical sexual abuse within or outside the family, while sexual abuse, incest, offences against public decency and indecent assault are more common among children of primary school age. Young people aged between 13 and 17 are often victims of unwanted sexting, rape and indecent assault.

Greater focus on teenagers is required

The current monitoring report reveals a worrying picture of sexual violence among teenagers. Not only are they frequently victims of sexual violence, they are also more likely to fall victim of an offence *again* than younger children. It is concerning that so many young people experience sexual violence especially at an age where they are developmentally in a phase of exploring and developing relationships and their own sexuality. The children who have experienced sexual violence and who receive child protection services, are often in care. The question is whether taking children into care and providing support in a residential care setting is the most effective form of support and protection for these young people. Children who experience sexual violence often face additional challenges and vulnerabilities in their lives. Knowing that this group of victims often faces additional difficulties underlines the importance of special attention for this group of victims in both prevention and support strategies.

Proven effective prevention methods are barely used in schools

Prevention is the first step in a comprehensive approach to dealing with sexual violence against children. Victims often experience physical and psychological consequences of the sexual violence for many years after. It is therefore best to attempt to prevent children from experiencing sexual violence, sexually transgressive behaviour and sexual harassment in the first place. The National Rapporteur concludes that the prevention of sexual violence against children could be improved by providing schools with more guidance on the use of proven effective and approved prevention methods.

Even though most of the numerous preventive interventions are focused on delivery in schools, they do not reach all young people in education. In addition, many intervention methods focus on preventing or stopping undesirable behaviour, but far fewer pay attention to the positive aspects of, and a healthy approach to, sexuality. Moreover, the effectiveness of initiatives, measures and interventions is often not assessed. While a large number of interventions is approved, it is difficult to say whether they actually contribute to the prevention of sexual violence against children and are therefore effective. This is worrying, because the use of non-effective interventions can be counterproductive. In addition, approved interventions are not widely used in schools and, where they are used, are not used in the right way. For instance, research conducted by Rutgers shows that 62% of biology teachers and 79% of social studies teachers in secondary education do not use approved interventions. Of the teachers who do use approved interventions, 2% and 0%, respectively, indicate that they implemented the teaching method fully in accordance with the instructions.

RECOMMENDATION 1**Provide a coherent range of effective preventive interventions and ensure broad, uniform implementation**

The National Rapporteur recommends that the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science and the Minister for Primary and Secondary Education examine the effectiveness of existing preventive interventions in the area of sexual violence against children, provide a coherent range of interventions that have proven to be effective, and ensure the broad and uniform implementation of these interventions. If they are to achieve this, schools need to be given more guidance on how to fulfil their responsibility in providing sex education and contribute to the prevention of sexual violence against children.

Increase in the identification of sexual violence

Although a focus on effective prevention is very important, it is impossible to prevent sexual violence altogether. The timely identification of sexual violence therefore remains crucial. The National Rapporteur considers the increased attention to the importance of reporting and identifying sexual violence to be a welcome development. For instance, the number of reports made to the Centre for Sexual Violence (CSG) and Veilig Thuis (Domestic Violence Advice and Reporting Centre) soared in the period 2017–2021. Moreover, victims increasingly find their way to support services which offer anonymous specialist support. Chat services from support organisations such as Helpwanted.nl, Chat met CSG and Chat met Fier reach victims who have until now been less visible to formal support services.

Police numbers show that the total number of victims known to the police has largely remained the same over the years. That said, the types of sexual offences for which victims are known to the police differ. A striking aspect is the decrease in the number of victims reporting online forms of sexual violence in 2021, such as grooming and unwanted sexting. Based on prevalence studies and the number of contacts and requests for support received by support services such as Helpwanted.nl, it seems unlikely that the number of incidents has in fact decreased. The fact that many of these victims are not known to the police is concerning because of the potential support the police can provide in identifying and stopping sexual violence. The number of reports made by child victims of physical sexual violence to the police actually increased significantly in 2021 compared to 2020: reports of rape increased by 21% and indecent assault by as much as 31%. In addition, the number of very young victims aged 0 to 3 increased in 2021 by 7% compared to 2020. Here, too, greater public awareness of sexual violence and sexually transgressive behaviour appears to be playing a part.

IT IS NOT CLEAR WHAT IMPACT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS HAD

As this monitoring report shows, it is not clear what impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on reports of sexual violence. For instance, the Inspectorate of Education received fewer reports of sexual abuse and sexual harassment during the COVID-19 pandemic, probably because schools were closed for certain periods during the various lockdowns. The CSG, Helpwanted.nl and Chat met Fier, by contrast, saw an increase in the number of children asking questions or asking for help online. This can in part be explained by the fact that children were spending far more time at home because of the restrictions and therefore spending more time on the internet. On the other hand, the numbers of the police and Veilig Thuis, for example, show no significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The creation of new hotlines also has its disadvantages

The creation of new hotlines and support agencies simultaneously gives rise to a patchwork of support and help for victims. Not only does this mean that victims themselves have to find the right place to obtain appropriate help, it is also possible that a single victim will be known to various different agencies. As a result, victims can fall between the cracks, meaning that agencies can end up working in parallel. Limited insight makes it challenging to reflect on and improve the support and protection services offered to victims. Insight in who the victims are and what their (support) needs are is essential in order to improve the support provided to them. The National Rapporteur expects much of the National Action Plan and the government commissioner in this aspect, too. National coordination can support implementing agencies better in carrying out their work and collaborate efficiently.

A large number of victims become repeat victims, but receive no child protection services

A quarter of the victims of sexual violence against children known to the police become repeat victims of an offence within five years. This number is higher compared to the general Dutch population. In more than half of the cases, they are repeat victims of a sexual offence or have experienced serious violence. Roughly one third of the victims are even known to the police as multiple repeat victims. It is noteworthy that adolescents are more likely to be repeat victims than younger victims. At least 35% of 13- to 17-year-olds become known to the police as repeat victims within five years, compared with 14% of 0- to 12-year olds.

Other research shows that, without adequate help, half of the victims will experience sexual violence again.¹ While not all victims need the support of child protection services for protection or recovery after experiencing sexual violence, it is still noteworthy that 62% of victims known to the police do not receive any such assistance in the year after they experienced sexual violence especially considering that they are more likely than other children to face other challenges and difficulties. A previous study conducted by the National Rapporteur showed that experiencing sexual violence or sexual exploitation is often not the only problem in the lives of these victims. It is not clear whether children who do not receive support from child protection services get with the support they need to address the consequences of sexual violence in other ways. However, it does raise the question to what extent support services meet the needs of victims. It also raises the question to what extent the various support services and hotlines are aware of each other's interventions.

Of the victims aged 13 to 17 known to the police, 38% received support from child protection services in the year after they experienced sexual violence. It is not possible to establish whether the sexual violence was the reason for starting child protection support. This monitoring report shows that these young people are most likely to receive support from child protection services at the site of the support organisation. Compared to all young people in the Netherlands receiving support from child protection services, victims are more likely to be placed in a secure residential care facility: 7% receive child protection services in a secure residential care facility. That said, there has been a marked decrease in that number since 2017. This is a positive development, because placement in a secure facility can have a negative impact on victims of sexual violence against children. Despite this positive development, many victims are still taken into care and placed in non-secure residential care facilities.

RECOMMENDATION 2**Provide support that meets the needs of victims of sexual violence against children**

The National Rapporteur recommends that the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science and the Minister for Legal Protection arrange the provision of support that meets the personal needs of the child, is appropriate for the type of sexual violence a child has experienced, the context in which it took place

¹ Walker, 2019.

and the age of the child. The support should take into account the factors and vulnerabilities in children's lives that contribute to children's vulnerability to experiencing sexual violence. When care cannot be provided at home, ensure residential care is provided in small group settings.

Thorough forensic medical examinations of children under pressure

When it comes to specialist experts, the National Rapporteur is concerned, in particular, about the forensic medical examinations of child victims of sexual violence. Owing to a serious shortage of forensic medical examiners, the Netherlands Forensic Institute (NFI) stopped performing such examinations in March 2022. At the moment, there is no solution that will guarantee quality in the long term and on a sustainable basis. Carrying out forensic medical examinations of children requires a level of expertise that must be actively maintained and in which not every standard forensic medical examiner is adequately trained. It is essential that children receive proper care and are treated in a child-appropriate manner after having been identified as victims, preventing further trauma. Forensic medical examinations can also facilitate criminal proceedings by correctly securing potential evidence.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Implement a sustainable solution for carrying out forensic medical examinations of child victims of sexual violence

The National Rapporteur recommends that the Minister of Justice and Security implements a long-term and sustainable solution for carrying out forensic medical examinations of child victims of sexual violence. The appropriate forensic medical expertise must be guaranteed, and doctors must be able to maintain that expertise.



Who is the National Rapporteur?

The National Rapporteur is Conny Rijken. The Dutch National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children consists of the National Rapporteur and a team of enthusiastic employees with a multi-disciplinary background.

What does the National Rapporteur do against human trafficking and sexual violence against children?

The National Rapporteur investigates the nature and scope of human trafficking and sexual violence against children in the Netherlands and the impact of policy measures on these issues. In the annual monitoring reports and the thematic studies, the emphasis is on monitoring and improving the strategies for tackling human trafficking and sexual violence against children.

Based on information from a wide range of sources, the National Rapporteur advises national and local government, other administrative bodies, international organisations and professionals who provide help and support, on how to prevent and combat human trafficking and sexual violence against children.

Postal address

National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence
against Children
P.O. Box 20301
2500 EH The Hague
The Netherlands
Phone number: +31 (0) 70 370 45 14
www.dutchrapporteur.nl
[@NLRapporteur](https://twitter.com/NLRapporteur)

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