

The Importance of Child Helplines for Child Protection in Europe



**Nearly five million
children and young people
contacted child helplines
in Europe in 2014** 

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Executive Summary

Child Helpline International (CHI) has been identified by the European Commission, DG Justice, as a strategic partner in strengthening the role of child helplines in Europe and selected for a three-year Framework Partnership Agreement.

Within that framework CHI has developed this study on the role of child helplines in child protection systems in the EU – to analyse the position and the role of child helplines in national child protection systems in Europe. The study provides key recommendations to Governments, Policy Makers and Child Helplines themselves and should be utilised as advocacy tool for CHI and its members.

To address the central research question – What is the position of child helplines within child protection systems in EU Member States and what role do child helplines play in those systems? – CHI examined a set of case studies and conducted desk research and semi-structured interviews with selected stakeholders.

Background

- Child helplines offer help and support services for children and fulfil children's fundamental right to be heard. Often, child helplines are a young person's first point of contact with child protection services and the most trusted and accessible gateway for them to find help.

- Child Helpline International (CHI) is the global network of child helplines and one of the world's largest collective impact organisations. CHI supports the creation and consolidation of national free-of-cost child helplines; offers the existing child helplines and other members a platform to communicate, network and share their expertise; and uses child helpline data to advocate for the rights of children and young people around the world.
- Child protection systems comprise a whole range of entities that enable an environment in which children are protected from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect.
- On the basis of twelve (12) semi-structured interviews with selected stakeholders, desk research and input from CHI's members, this study analysed the position and the role of child helplines in national child protection systems in EU Member States as well as child helplines' current operating practices.

Child Helplines in the EU

- The importance of child helplines has been recognised in a number of European policy documents and measures. For instance, the European Commission identified child helplines as services of social value and reserved the regionally harmonised number 116 111 for child helplines, and the Council of Europe emphasised the role of child helplines in protecting children from violence.
- CHI has 32 members in 27 EU Member States. All these child helplines provide services to children and young people who reach out to them, but they may differ in aspects such as the nature of the organisation and its position in the overall child protection system, funding structures, human resources, means of communication and hours of operation.

Role of Child Helplines in Child Protection Systems

Research conducted for this study confirmed that child helplines:

- Are safe entry points into child protection systems;
- Act, when needed, as a referral mechanism;
- Guide children through child protection systems;
- Inform children on their rights;
- Detect, highlight and fill gaps in child protection;
- Support policy making with data on children's needs; and
- May act as centres of expertise and advocates for children's rights.



Recommendations

- **Child Helplines should:** Continue to collect data as advocacy tool; seek for a balanced connection with governmental bodies to position in the child protection system; enter into protocol agreements with key partners and stakeholders; be fully available; operating free of costs and use a variety of channels of communication.
- **National governments should:** Recognise the role of child helplines in strengthening child protection systems and as safe-entry point to the system; facilitate the collaboration among relevant partners in COS; implement the 116111 number in cooperation with Child Helpline International; guarantee structural, long term funding to child helplines.
- **European policy-makers should:** Stimulate EU Member States in taking a proactive supporting role towards child helplines; provide project grants open to child helplines; provide operational funding for Child Helpline International to support its activities of harmonisation and development of common European standards and best practices; keep promoting the use of 116111; support knowledge sharing and interaction among different stakeholders working in Child Protection Systems.
- **Child Helpline International should:** Define minimum quality standards and best practices; advocate for European funding; maximise the sharing of expertise and knowledge between child helplines; harmonise, coordinate and centralise the data collection.

Background

This chapter briefly introduces the work of child helplines and Child Helpline International, and it summarises some definitions of child protection systems. The last part of the chapter explains the background of this study.

Child Helpline International and Child Helplines

Child Helpline International (CHI) is the global network of child helplines and one of the world's largest collective impact organisations. It brings together 183 organisations in 142 countries (as of December 2015), which receive over 14 million contacts a year from children and young people in need of care and protection.

Since its founding in 2003, CHI has been working with local, regional and national stakeholders and partners to support the creation and consolidation of national free-of-cost child helplines around the world. CHI supports existing child helplines and other members by offering them a platform to communicate, network and share their expertise. In addition, CHI collects data from its member child helplines worldwide on the number and nature of contacts they receive. Child helpline data and knowledge is used by CHI to highlight gaps in child protection, to advocate for the rights of children and young people around the world, as set down in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and to fight for the eradication of violence against children.

CHI uses child helpline data to highlight gaps in child protection, to advocate for the rights of children and young people, and to fight for the eradication of violence against children ≡

Child helplines offer help and support services for children and fulfil children's fundamental right to be heard, as outlined in the UNCRC. They empower children to help themselves, to find help and to prevent violence and other forms of harm.

Child helplines use a variety of methods to ensure that children can always access help and find someone to talk to. These methods include: telephone services; mobile phone; text messaging; online via email; chat and forums; drop-boxes in schools and community centres; postal services; radio and mobile outreach units. Child helplines also reach out to those who may not be able to access their services, including 'street' children, children with disabilities and children in marginalised areas or communities.

Often, child helplines are a young person's first point of contact with child protection services and the most trusted and accessible gateway for them to find help ≡

Child helpline counsellors actively listen and link the child to resources and emergency assistance when needed. Often, child helplines are a young person's first point of contact with child protection services and the most trusted and accessible gateway for them to find help.

Child Protection Systems

There is no general, universally accepted, definition of a child protection system.

In its glossary of terms, CHI defines child protection as the legally-mandated obligation of the state to enact and enforce laws which protect children from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect; and a child protection system comprises a whole range of entities that enable a protective environment. These include government agencies (national and local governments from the Ministries of Social Welfare, Education, Health, Justice, Planning and Telecommunications), children and youth representatives, the Parliament, magistrates, the media, national and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), communities, multilateral and bilateral agencies, human rights activists and the private sector.¹

In a reflection paper published in 2015, the European Commission noted that child protection systems encompass “a wide range of interventions including prevention, identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment, follow-up, judicial involvement and effective procedures”.² The reflection paper also states that:

“In an integrated child protection system [emphasis added], components and services are multi-disciplinary, cross-sectorial and inter-agency, and they work together in a coherent manner. The integrated child protection system places children at the centre, putting in place laws and policies, governance, resources, monitoring and data collection, as well as prevention, protection and response services and care management.”

Coordination between sectors and levels is a necessary component of effective child protection systems ≡

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) defines a child protection system as “the set of laws, policies, regulations and services needed across all social sectors – especially social welfare, education, health, security and justice – to support prevention and response to protection-related risks.”³ UNICEF also notes that responsibilities “are often spread across government agencies, with services delivered by local authorities, non-State providers, and community groups,” therefore “coordination between sectors and levels, including routine referral systems” is considered to be “a necessary component of effective child protection systems”.⁴

Study on the Role of Child Helplines in Child Protection Systems

CHI has been identified by the European Commission (EC), DG Justice, as a strategic partner in strengthening the role of child helplines in Europe and selected for a three-year Framework Partnership Agreement.⁵

Within that framework CHI developed this study on the role of child helplines in child protection systems in the EU – to analyse the position and the role of child helplines in national child protection systems as well as the current operating practices. The study is intended to provide information for anyone interested in the work of child helplines and to serve as advocacy tool for CHI and its members, by highlighting the role of child helplines in national child protection systems and providing a set of recommendations for policy makers and other stakeholders.

¹ Child Helpline International. (January 2014). Glossary of terms. Retrieved from http://www.childhelplineinternational.org/media/134677/chi_glossary_2014_-_en.pdf

² DG Justice, European Commission. (30 April 2015). 9th European Forum on the Rights of the Child, Coordination and cooperation in integrated child protection systems, Reflection Paper. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/2015_forum_roc_background_en.pdf

³ United Nations Economic and Social Council (2008), UNICEF Child Protection Strategy, E/ICEF/2008/5/Rev.1, par. 12-13.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ European Commission. Justice Programme & REC Programme. Framework Partnership Agreements 2015-2017 & Operating Grants 2015. JUST/2014/SPOB/OG/NETW. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants1/calls/just_2014_spob_og_netw_en.htm

To address the central research question – *What is the position of child helplines within child protection systems in EU Member States and what role do child helplines play in those systems?* – CHI examined a set of case studies and conducted desk research and semi-structured interviews with selected stakeholders.

Four countries were selected as case studies: Croatia, Denmark, France and Poland. The respective child helplines were selected because representing really good practices in four respective fields: **Allo Enfance en Danger** for being part of the national child protection system; **Børns Vilkår** for the use of several means of communication; **Hrabri Telefon** because its running 116111; and **Fundacja Dzieci Niczyje** child helpline because it's free of cost and used to run 24/7.

These countries and their national child helplines partially capture the diversity of child protection systems and child helplines in the EU (presented in the next section). They do serve as a good basis for initial conclusions and recommendations as well as for future research and advocacy efforts.

An external consultant conducted the first round of research interviews and drafted a preliminary report between August and October 2015.⁶ In early 2016, this was followed by additional interviews and desk research conducted by CHI's team members who prepared this final report. Valuable input was provided by participants to the Sixth Regional Consultation and Second Policy Dialogue who discussed preliminary findings in November 2015, and especially by the members of CHI's European Advocacy Taskforce, which had been set up within the same Framework Partnership Agreement with DG Justice.

In total, 17 interviewees contributed to this final report during 12 interviews. Apart from the four child helplines that operate in case study countries, interviewees included representatives of organisations that regularly cooperate with child helplines in their countries, members of CHI's European Youth Advisory Council and five European policy makers who are actively involved in child protection policies (see Annex 1 for a full list of interviewees).

In the future, this research effort should be built upon with additional countries and stakeholders, such as national policy makers, ombudsmen, representatives of social services and other parts of national child protection systems built upon with additional countries and stakeholders, such as national policy makers, ombudsmen, representatives of social services and other parts of national child protection systems.

⁶ Ellen Stassart, ESJA consulting.

Child Helplines in the EU

To enable a better understanding of the outcomes of research interviews that are reported in the rest of the report, this chapter provides a summary of how child helplines have been featured in European-level policy; a brief overview of CHI's membership in the EU; and country-level context for the four case studies that featured in our research.

Child Helplines and European Policy

In Europe, the importance of child helplines has been recognised in a number of policy documents and measures.

The European Commission (EC) identified child helplines as services of social value and reserved the regionally harmonised number 116 111 for child helplines in 2007.⁷ In its 2011 directive on combating sexual abuse, sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, the EC noted that 116 111 should be promoted as a part of the system of reporting on such abuse and exploitation of children and helping children in need.⁸

Child helplines were also noted by the EC in its 2011 Communication on protecting children in the digital world⁹ and in 2012 in the Communication on the European strategy for a better internet for children.¹⁰ In the Reflection Paper on coordination and cooperation in integrated child protection systems, which accompanied the 9th European Forum on the Rights of the Child,¹¹ the EC pointed to helplines within the 10 principles set forth for discussion on integrated child protection systems: as child-sensitive complaint and reporting mechanisms which should be well-publicised, continuously accessible and integrated in the system.¹²

The importance of child helplines has been recognised in a number of policy documents and measures ≡

⁷ European Commission. (29 October 2007). Decision 2007/698/EC amending Decision 2007/116/EC as regards the introduction of additional reserved numbers beginning with '116'. Retrieved from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2007:284:0031:0032:EN:PDF>

⁸ European Commission. (13 December 2011). Directive 2011/92/EU on Combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography. Retrieved from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:335:0001:0014:EN:PDF>

⁹ European Commission. (13 September 2011). Report (COM(2011)556 final) on Protecting children in the digital world. Retrieved from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2011:0556:FIN:en:PDF>

¹⁰ European Commission. (2 May 2012). Communication (COM(2012)196 final) European strategy for a better internet for children. Retrieved from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2012:0196:FIN:EN:PDF>

¹¹ European Commission. (30 April 2015). 9th European Forum on the Rights of the Child, Coordination and cooperation in integrated child protection systems, Reflection Paper. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/2015_forum_roc_background_en.pdf

¹² Ibid.

Council of Europe pointed to helplines with regard to the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse when it adopted the so-called Lanzarote Convention in 2007. Article 13 of this convention stipulates: “Each Party shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to encourage and support the setting up of information services, such as telephone or Internet helplines, to provide advice to callers, even confidentially or with due regard for their anonymity.”¹³ In 2009 Council of Europe included helplines in integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence, by recommending that: “An independent, confidential, well-advertised, easy to memorise, toll-free telephone help line should be made available for children to seek confidential and professional counselling and to report violence.”¹⁴ Due to their role as providers of information, including legal information, helplines were also recognised by Council of Europe in 2010 as an element of child-friendly justice.¹⁵

CHI's Membership

CHI has child helpline members in every EU Member State except Cyprus. In total, CHI's membership in the EU, which is the main reference point for this study, comprises 32 child helplines (presented in Annex 2). They all provide similar services to children and young people in need of support, but they may differ in aspects such as the nature of the organisation and its position in the overall child protection system, funding structures, means of communication, hours of operation, etc.

**CHI has 32
child helpline members
in 27 EU Member States** ≡

As Annex 2 shows, a vast majority of child helplines are run by NGO's, but there are also a few cases where they are operated by governmental actors/agencies. A few child helplines focus on specific issues or target populations, but generally child helplines welcome contacts from children and young people on any issue they want to discuss. With one exception, calls are toll free for the caller, but they are currently not free of phone cost for many child helplines (see Annex 2).¹⁶ Funding structures vary from country to country and from year to year, with funding from the national public budgets, private donors and international organisations featuring in child helplines' total operational budgets in different proportions.

Along with technological developments, child helplines have expanded their accessibility via different means of communication, so that most of them are now not only accessible and responsive via the telephone but also by email, short text messages and/or online chat and web posts, while some other means such as regular mail and fax are ever less favoured by children and young people. Notably, in most EU Member States the regionally harmonised number 116 111 dedicated to child helplines is either already operational or has been assigned to an existing child helpline.¹⁷ The operating hours of child helplines vary (see Annex 2). At the time of writing, less than one-third of CHI's membership in the EU is able to answer children in need 24 hours per day, seven days per week (24/7).

**Contacts with child helplines
are typically toll free
for the callers, but they are
currently not free of cost
for many child helplines** ≡

¹³ Council of Europe. (25 October 2007). Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Retrieved from http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/children/1in5/Source/Lanzarote%20Convention_EN.pdf

¹⁴ Council of Europe. (18 November 2009). Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)10 on Integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence. Retrieved from https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805d023d

¹⁵ Council of Europe. (17 November 2010). Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice. Retrieved from <http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/cdcj/CDCJ%20Recommendations/GuidelinesChild-FriendlyJusticeE.pdf>

¹⁶ Making the calls free-of-charge for both, the caller and the child helpline, is one of central points of CHI's advocacy efforts.

¹⁷ 116 111 is operational in 23 EU Member States. (<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/116-helplines>)

Case Study Countries and Child Helplines

As already mentioned in “Study on the Role of Child Helplines in Child Protection Systems”, four countries were selected for a closer examination in this study. Country-level context and national child helplines are briefly presented below. Note that the descriptions of national child protection systems are fully based on research conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA).¹⁸

Croatia

According to FRA, Croatia is among the EU Members States which established a distinct authority to coordinate and monitor implementation of national policy and legislation. The main authorities with coordination responsibilities at national level are the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth and Council for Children. FRA also reports that Croatia is among EU Members States which have protocols of cooperation or referral mechanisms in place as a form of inter-agency cooperation between the actors operating in the field of child protection.

The child helpline Brave Phone (Hrabri telefon) is operated by a nongovernmental, not-for-profit organisation established in 1997, with the aim of helping and protecting abused and neglected children and implementing social services for children, their parents and professionals.¹⁹ Initially, the organisation focused on supporting children with the experience of abuse and neglect, and operated the child helpline primarily with financial support from international donors. Through the years Brave Phone’s activities expanded, so that they now also include the prevention of child abuse and neglect, providing psychosocial services to families and encouraging volunteering by future mental health professionals. This expansion has led to a broader donor base, which now also includes local governments, public authorities, business sector and private individuals. The organisation regularly publishes educational materials and conducts studies on various issues related to children’s wellbeing. When the organisation started operating the number 116 111 as the child helpline number, its old child helpline number became the designated helpline number for parents.

Helping Rebuild a Young Life

We received a call from Marina, a 14-year-old girl who struggled with depressive thoughts and behaviours. She told the counsellor that she had a rough year, having been bullied at school and having lost her father who had died six months earlier.

Marina spoke about the changes she noticed about herself: she was crying every day, became withdrawn, could not sleep and was thinking very negatively about her life. She felt that her mother and other grown-ups around her were not supportive, and she feared telling her friends about her problems. The day before she called the helpline she had self-harmed for the first time and had suicidal thoughts. She felt hopeless, sad, lonely and frightened.

Marina clearly needed to be supported and understood, and the counsellor listened to everything she had to say and gave her the opportunity to express her feelings. Then the counsellor helped Marina make a plan: she was going to ask her mother for help, engage in some activities she likes, such as studying and going dancing, and call our child helpline if she felt helpless again.

After that first call, Marina contacted us several times. She reported her lack of courage to approach anybody and said that talking with the child helpline was the only thing helping her, but we noticed that her condition was worsening. She talked about having ever more thoughts about taking her own life, self-harming and depression. One day, she contacted us with a very detailed plan of committing a suicide. The counsellor strongly suggested calling an ambulance, but Marina rejected every idea about searching for help. In accordance with the protocols of our helpline, program coordinators called the police and reported this case, and the counsellor informed Marina about this step. After a while, police contacted us with the information that they found Marina and made sure she was safe. They also contacted the Centre for social welfare.

A few days after, Marina contacted us again. She was angry because we had called the police, but we explained that it was for her sake and it was our responsibility. Marina told us that she was having regular appointments with a psychiatrist and talking to her mother about her problems as well. It was still a hard period for her, but she was in the hands of mental health professionals who were rebuilding her young life.

¹⁸ Fundamental Rights Agency. (February 2015). Mapping Child Protection Systems in the EU. Retrieved from <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/comparative-data/child-protection>

¹⁹ This short presentation is based on Hrabri Telefon website, “About” section. Retrieved from <http://www.hrabritelefon.hr/about/>

Denmark

Rather than having a children's act or a legal instrument devoted solely to child protection and child rights, Denmark regulates national child protection through the Act on Social Services. FRA also reports that there is no specific national policy framework or strategy on child rights and child protection, but specific policies exist (and are mandatory in some areas such as child abuse) at sub-national levels. Coordination responsibility at the national level rests with the National Board of Social Services and the National Social Appeals Board, but the overall system is decentralised and responsibilities for child protection are assigned to local-municipal authorities. Municipalities develop agreements with the regional authorities to ensure the coordination of local authorities and local social services with regional institutions. According to FRA, Denmark is one of the EU Member States which allocate a specific budget item in their annual state budget to child protection and one of seven where specific provisions on the multidisciplinary assessment of child protection cases have statutory value.

The Danish child helpline, Børne Telefonen, was established in 1987 and is operated by a nongovernmental organisation called Children's Welfare (Børns Vilkår).²⁰ It offers toll-free, anonymous, and professional counselling. The child helpline has expanded from the toll-free number (116 111) to include a children's chatroom, text message counselling, a letter box as well as a 'children guide children' facility and a helpline for parents. The organisation additionally provides school visits to primary schools by giving presentations on how to create well-being and an environment in the classroom without bullying; and plays a prominent role in supporting neglected children by sending duty of care responses, providing guidance to professionals and offering adult representation to children who require the support of an adult in their encounter with the social authorities. Finally, the organisation engages actively in awareness raising and advocacy activities for children's rights.

Support beyond the Initial Contact

Samira was 16 when she first contacted Børns Vilkår through the online chat service. She explained that she was being beaten and locked up by her mother who did not want Samira to engage with her peers. Samira wanted to get away from her mother and be placed in a foster family, but was worried that not having a Danish citizenship, both her and her mother, could cause problems.

Samira accepted our child helpline's offer for her to be accompanied by our staff member, an observer (Bisidder), at official meetings, so that she could be prepared and assisted with explanations if needed. She later changed her mind and did not want to attend a planned meeting with the municipality, saying she was afraid that it was all happening too fast and that there could be consequences for her mother and siblings.

Samira first contacted our child helpline following advice from her teacher, and the school simultaneously informed the municipal authorities about her situation. The municipality wanted to remove Samira from her mother for the sake of her safety. When Samira's mother learned that Samira had spoken to the municipality, she forced her out of their home. The municipality found placement for Samira with a temporary foster family, and Samira was pleased with this solution.

About a month later, the municipality intended to move Samira from the temporary foster family to a child care institution, but Samira disagreed. Our child helpline's observer helped her file a complaint about the choice of placement, and the municipality initiated an investigation to determine whether Samira could stay with the foster family. During the procedure, Samira remained with the foster family and was attending a nearby school. The conclusion was that Samira was granted to stay with the foster family until the age of 18. Samira's mother agreed to this arrangement, which is consequently considered a voluntary, rather than a forced placement.

²⁰ This short summary is based on Børns Vilkar leaflet "Children Welfare". Retrieved from https://issuu.com/bornsvilkar/docs/profilfolder_eng_final_web

France

The main legal instrument on child protection in France is Law No. 2007-293 of 5 March 2007 reforming child protection. At the time of FRA's research,²¹ a draft national policy on child protection was in the adoption process and was due to be launched by the end of 2014. The main authority with coordination responsibility at the national level is Secretary of State for the Family, the Elderly and Autonomy at the Ministry of Social Affairs, Health and Women's Rights, but decentralised child protection responsibilities are assigned to regional authorities.

Cooperation among relevant agencies is reported to be embedded in the system and based on several protocols of cooperation between the Departmental Councils and relevant ministries. These protocols allow for better coordination and sharing of information, including on children in danger in each Department. In addition, there are legislative provisions that require mandatory actions and measures to be taken by the relevant actors. The budget allocated to child protection is included in the overall expenditure for social policy and social welfare, but a specific budget item is allocated to child protection.

The French child helpline was launched as a result of the adoption (in 1989) of legislation on child protection and the prevention of child abuse.²² This child helpline is fully embedded in governmental structures, operates as a part of public services and is fully funded from public funds. Since 1997 the child helpline has been using the three-digit number 119, which does not appear on the phone owner's detailed phone bill, and since 2003, the number has had the status of an emergency phone number. In 2007, the amended child protection legislation broadened the mission of the helpline, and its name became *Service National d'Accueil Téléphonique de l'Enfance en Danger* (SNATED; National Hotline Service for Children in Danger), commonly known as 119 - *Allô Enfance en Danger*. The law defines the following main missions of the child helpline: (1) Answering the phone calls made by children in danger or at risk of becoming so, as well as by any person confronted to this type of situation, so as to better identify and protect children in danger; (2) Transmitting all information regarding these children to the relevant child protection services supervised by the general councils of the départements; (3) Taking action to prevent situations where children are in danger or at risk of becoming so.

Breaking the Cycle of Violence

In March 2014, our child helpline dealt with a difficult situation faced by two teenage sisters. Charlotte was 16 and Carla 14 at the time. Carla called from a phone booth and told the counsellor that they had run away from home five days earlier, to escape parental violence. After having stayed with their friend, Charlotte decided to return to the sisters' family home, but Carla refused to join her because she was afraid of their parents' reaction and especially of her father.

Carla's voice was very weak and she sobbed as she talked to the counsellor. She explained that the sisters were born in South America and adopted when they were six and eight years old, respectively. For many years, Carla had been subject to insults from the adoptive parents who would tell her she was stupid, a bitch, that the family would be better off without her ... In the year before the call, Carla had stopped listening to the insults in silence and started talking back. The father then started physically abusing both girls because Charlotte sided with Carla. Carla also said that the parents were trying to isolate the girls from other family members so as to make it impossible for the girls to alarm them about their situation.

The counsellor actively listened to Carla and inquired whether the sisters had already contacted the police, social workers or any other child care professionals. Carla explained that the sisters had gone to a social service dedicated to teenagers, and a professional social worker then visited the parents' residence and spoke with the father. However, physical violence resumed only two days later, when the father hit Carla and Caroline very hard. The social worker from the service for teenagers informed the school, but the social worker there told the girls that she could not intervene.

The counsellor explained to Carla that calling the child helpline was a good idea, but that she was in danger while being on the run, and that the best next step would be to call the police. Carla agreed and stayed at the phone booth, talking to the counsellor, until officers from the specialised police department for minors reached her.

Our service then wrote a report and immediately sent it to the social service (the CRIP). We knew that the CRIP can decide on an emergency placement for Carla and Charlotte in a children's home. The CRIP had already been aware of and was conducting an assessment of the situation. Because of the parents' violence and their reluctance to change the way they were upbringing the sisters, the case was referred to the public prosecutor who decided that there were grounds for a judicial intervention. The public prosecutor ordered an emergency placement of the girls in a children's home for the duration of court proceedings.

²¹ Research conducted from December 2013 to March 2014. Retrieved from <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/comparative-data/child-protection>

²² This summary is based on 119/Allo enfance en danger leaflet. September 2014. "Children in danger? Parents experiencing difficulties? Talking about it helps". September 2014. Retrieved from http://www.allo119.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/upload/content/in_english/plaquette-en-sept2014.pdf

Poland

There is no key legal act on child protection in Poland and no specific national policy framework or a national strategy on child rights and child protection. Council of Ministers and the Parliamentary Commission for Social Policy and Family are the national bodies responsible for monitoring the child protection system's performance at the national level, and additional independent monitoring of child protection is conducted by the Ombudsman for Children's Rights.

Coordination responsibility at the national level lies with the Minister of Labour and Social Policy. Overall, the system is decentralised, and Poland is one of nine Member States where regional and local authorities share child protection responsibilities. Rather than through a specific budget chapter or item, Poland covers different expenditures connected to child protection through multiple budget items allocated to specific institutions. There are specific provisions on the multidisciplinary assessment of child protection cases, but they do not have statutory value.

The Polish child helpline was launched in 2007 and is operated by the Nobody's Children Foundation (Fundacja Dzieci Niczyje).²³ Through a range of programmes, this not-for-profit NGO pursues the goal of protecting children from abuse and providing help for abused children, their families and caregivers. The child helpline (116 111) aims at helping children and young people in need of support, care, and protection. Among other activities, the organisation also operates a helpline for parents and teachers who need support and information to be able to help children and runs preventive activities to reduce threats to children on the Internet. The child helpline provides both telephone and online support and also undertakes educational and promotional efforts to raise awareness on the existence of the helpline and encourage people to seek help.²⁴

A Teenager's Life Saved

Ania was 16 when she called the 116 111 child helpline. She talked about feeling down lately, about having nobody to talk to and finally about her diagnosed depression. During the conversation with the counsellor, Ania admitted having taken sleeping pills and drunk alcohol just before the call. She was reluctant to share her address and allow the child helpline team to call the paramedics, as she felt that it would not change anything. She told the counsellor that her previous attempts to seek help were ineffective, as her parents refused to accept the diagnosis set by a psychiatrist.

The situation was getting more and more dramatic, as Ania first started to lose her focus and then her consciousness altogether, so an intervention was clearly needed. With her open, child-centred, helping and persistent attitude, the counsellor persuaded Ania to disclose her address, and then immediately informed the police about the situation, together with the shift manager. While the paramedics and the police were making their way to Ania's address, the counsellor maintained contact with her, trying to learn more about her situation and to keep her awake. She told the counsellor that her parents and her brother were close by, in another room, but she was unwilling to reach out to her family. By the time the counsellor managed to convince her to ask them for help, she was already unable to walk, so the counsellor tried to keep her attention, but at some point, she went completely silent. Just minutes later the police and an ambulance reached Ania's house. They took over the intervention and informed the counsellor.

The next day the police sent a formal notice, informing the 116 111 counsellors that Ania had been transported to a hospital for gastric lavage. Although the parents were reluctant to agree to that, she was kept at the hospital for another day. She was referred to a local psychiatric ward, even though her parents resisted it. Ania later called 116 111 to thank the helpline.

After a month, the helpline received a thick folder of files from the police. The counsellors learned that soon after being admitted to the psychiatric ward, Ania decided it had all been a mistake and asked her parents to take her home. They willingly obliged, as they believed that the whole 'fuss' was unnecessary. They were obligated to sign up their daughter for therapy and take good care of her. However, police officers were unconvinced about the parents' good will, so they checked with Ania's school and the referral institution. They found out that Ania had never come to therapy, even though her parents claimed otherwise. Over the course of about two weeks, the police formed the suspicion that the parents could not be trusted and that the girl needed help was confirmed, and they reported the situation to the court.

The main role of the 116 111 counsellor in this case was to connect Ania, a child who desperately needed help, and the adults who could take control of the situation and help her. Without the counsellor having established this link, the suicide attempt would not have ended as just an attempt. The instant reaction of both, 116 111 counsellors and police officers, saved Ania's life, and the subsequent persistent attitude and actions of the local police. The information shared by the helpline and the police, together with the police investigation resulted in long-term help for the girl being granted by the court.

²³ This summary is based on Nobody's Children Foundation website, "Home Section". Retrieved from <http://fdn.pl/en>

²⁴ Nobody's Children Foundation. 2014. Activity Report. Retrieved from <http://fdn.pl/en/annual-activity-reports>

Operating Practices and Context

On the basis of interviews with various stakeholders (see Annex 1), this chapter presents some key features of child helplines' operating practices and context, including: the positioning of child helplines within national child protection systems; the practice of referring children who contact child helplines to other services; protocols and agreements between child helplines and other parts of child protection systems; the availability and accessibility of child helplines; child online protection; and the collection and the use of child helpline data.

National Child Protection Systems and the Positioning of Child Helplines

During the interviews, child helplines assessed their own national child protection systems as well organized and clearly structured. However, they also revealed that there may be issues even where the general assessment is positive. These issues include:

- Constraints in reporting by children;
- Limited availability of child protection services, i.e. they are not necessarily available 24/7;
- Waiting times for the reported issues to be managed by the relevant child protection service; and
- Gaps in the child protection system, i.e. not every problem that a child is confronted with is necessarily addressed by the existing services included in the child protection system.

Concerning the role of child helplines within child protection systems, interviewees from the four child helplines included in the study emphasised that specific legislation on child protection does not suffice on its own for the child helplines to be able to play an optimal role. Rather, it is a clear positioning of the

child helpline within the child protection system that can make a real difference, and this can be achieved even if the area is regulated in several different acts rather than in a single law on child protection.

A clearly defined position of a child helpline in a child protection system allows the child helpline to operate more efficiently and effectively ≡

In one of the cases the child helpline is fully embedded in the legal framework, and its role and positioning are undisputed and stipulated by law in a detailed manner. Where the positioning of child helplines is not defined by a specific law, it may be a result of practice and/or the fulfilment of roles and tasks in

line with a series of laws and regulations. In such cases the actual positioning of child helplines may be subject to debate about their limitations, the reporting structure within the child protection system or the co-operation with other stakeholders.

Whereas some interviewees thought that child helplines should be fully integrated into the national child protection systems, some others argued against this. For instance, one child helpline interviewee emphasised

the need for the child helpline to maintain a degree of independence from the overall child protection system, so that the child helpline can serve as a watchdog and raise issues such as poor performance or entry barriers.

Overall, however, the interviews with child helpline representatives indicated that a clearly defined position of a child helpline in the child protection system allows the child helpline to operate more efficiently and effectively.

Referral and Case Follow-up/Feedback

In CHI's Glossary of Terms, referral is defined in a broad sense, as "providing information to a caller in need about another source of help and/or contacting the other source to assist the caller in need".²⁵

Whereas child helplines conduct referral in various ways, the interviewed child helpline representatives laid emphasis on the situations in which child helplines refer children to other child protection professionals because the health and well-being, or even the life, of a child is seriously endangered. In such cases a referral to another child protection service may constitute a direct intervention – which may be a legal obligation – rather than limiting the assistance to the provision of information on further sources of support.

The child is always informed why referral could be necessary ≡

Child helpline interviewees pointed out that child helplines highly value children's opinions, always informing the caller when a referral to another service might be needed. Child helplines consider it to be a part of their role to convince children to consent to a referral of the reported problem, especially in those circumstances where the child might otherwise end up in a life-threatening situation.

Allô Enfance en Danger, which is a part of public services, reported that the decision-making process with regard to referrals is prescribed by law. In fact, the child protection system includes a separate body that assesses the need for a referral and the possibility of there being a life-threatening situation (Cellule de Recueillement des Informations Préoccupantes – CRIP). This body also coordinates the referral itself and provides guidance on the case for other professionals in the child protection system.²⁶ Other child helplines included in the study conduct the assessment of whether there is need for a referral by themselves, and there is no overall coordination of referrals within the national child protections systems.

Another important aspect of child protection systems is the presence or absence of follow-up and feedback among child protection professionals and services, including child helplines. In some cases social workers and others are obliged to provide feedback on a problem reported by a child, but in other cases there is no legal basis for sharing such information, or it would even be illegal to share it.

In France, for instance, with the already mentioned coordinating body, the referral, the follow-up and the feedback are coordinated on the basis of the underlying legislation. In this model, there is a chain of actors that implement specific protection measures, and feedback regarding referred cases is standard practice. Interviewees considered this to be very important, as it allows the child helpline

²⁵ Child Helpline International. (January 2014). Glossary of terms. Retrieved from http://www.childhelplineinternational.org/media/134677/chi_glossary_2014_-_en.pdf

²⁶ One shortcoming of this model is that – whereas the child helpline shares information on situations of risk 24/7 – CRIP only operates during regular office hours. Clearly, this can delay the follow-up and coordination.

to manage calls on the same case or similar cases more effectively and generally assures the quality of the work delivered by these professionals.

An example of a rather different approach is Denmark, where the child helpline is embedded in the child protection system in a different manner altogether. Namely, unless the child remains in direct contact with the child helpline, the helpline does not receive feedback after referral due to the prohibition of sharing or exchanging information regarding the child and the specifics of his or her situation. All information provided by the child to the child protection professional to whom the case has been referred remains confidential and cannot be subject to further exchange or sharing. In this set up, the sharing of personal information about a child between the different child protection services must be at the minimum needed to secure the child the help he or she needs without violating his or her right to confidentiality. The only exception are cases in which the child's life is in danger and the child helpline has – despite the central operating premise of anonymity – enough information for the child to be identifiable, due to an accidental or intentional disclosure of personal information by the child. In such cases, the child helpline has a legal duty to inform the appropriate authorities, and it receives feedback on the cases in question.

The information gathered through the four case studies indicated that there is great variety among EU Member States in the way referral, follow-up and feedback are conducted. There is even variety within Member States, when the tasks and mandates of child protection professionals are stipulated in different legislative acts. One general feature of child protection systems that our research pointed to is that when life-threatening situations are involved, other parts of child protection systems are – sometimes by law – obliged to provide feedback on the case to the child helpline after it had made the referral.

Confidentiality and/or anonymity are central premises of child helplines' work, and they are only broken in extreme circumstances. However, confidentiality is an operating principle rather than a legal obligation, whereas other parts of child protection systems – such as local enforcement agencies and the professionals in the health and social welfare sector – may be legally bound by professional secrecy.²⁷ Both, the principle of confidentiality and the legal obligation of professional secrecy, pose significant challenges in relation to referrals, feedback and follow-up,²⁸ and it is a difficult balancing act for all stakeholders to fulfil their obligations and act in the best interest of the child.

There is great variety among EU Member States in the way referral, follow-up and feedback are conducted ≡

Protocols and Agreements

One of the four child helplines included in the study has agreements in place with regional departments, two have concluded a protocol agreement with the police but not with other parts of the respective child protection systems, and one child helpline operates without any protocol agreements with other parts of the child protection system. Regardless of these differences, there was broad consensus among the interviewed representatives of child helplines that protocol agreements can improve the functioning of child protection systems.

Protocol agreements can improve the functioning of child protection systems ≡

²⁷ Note that the staff of the French child helpline, which is a part of public services, is also bound by professional secrecy.

²⁸ An example from child helpline interviews is the conflict between the approach of the justice department – i.e. parents exercising their right to access information that pertains to their children – and the need to keep all information shared by the child with the child helpline confidential.

In the case where the child helpline is a part of public services, the collaboration and coordination between all professionals working within the child protection system is fully regulated by law. The child helpline nevertheless also has formal agreements with other, regional-level parties of the child protection system. The interviewees emphasised the necessity of such agreements to guarantee a sustainable working protocol, secure intervention and provide clear definition of roles and responsibilities. However, such agreements are not required by law to start up and operate a new helpline.

Although their positions within child protection systems are different, other interviewees also pointed to the usefulness of protocol agreements. They indicated that collaboration is certainly possible without such agreements, but it is not always straightforward and easy to manage. Interviewees assessed that protocol agreements facilitate more effective cooperation and contribute to the mutual respect for each of the partners' roles and responsibilities, including their limitations. In addition, protocols avoid the co-operation being linked to a specific individual or organisation, and instead support longer term collaboration. Protocols also guarantee that child helplines can act swiftly and adequately, which is crucial in life-threatening situations.

The coordination and consistency of the work by all actors and institutions involved in the child protection system is essential. To achieve such coordination and consistency, helplines and other protection services must adopt cooperation protocols or agreements, where communication and coordination procedures between institutions are defined, so that they can provide a rapid and optimal response.

European Policy Maker

Dedicated EU Number for Child Helplines: 116 111

As mentioned in “Child Helplines and European Policy”, the European Commission reserved the regionally harmonised number 116 111 for child helplines in 2007. At the national level, 116 111 has been assigned to all four child helplines included in the study, but in France this number is not yet fully operational. From a technical point of view everything is prepared to provide services to children who call this number. However, the phone number that the child helpline currently uses has the status of an emergency number whereas 116 111 has not been approved by the government as such a number. This has concrete implications in terms of operating practices and budgets, and it remains to be seen how the number can be optimally implemented in that national context.


Child helplines included in the study which already operate the regionally harmonised number 116 111 succeeded in making it known through actions such as: posters in schools; workshops conducted in schools aimed at raising awareness on the existence and the role of the child helpline; and an answering machine which immediately refers anyone who dials the old child helpline number to 116 111.

The sometimes expressed fear that changing the number could be an obstacle for children to contact the child helpline – because of their unfamiliarity with the change – proved to be unfounded. The child helpline that recently started operating 116 111 reported having been positively surprised by how quickly children became familiar with the new number. Notably, some child helpline interviewees, as well as members of the European Youth Advisory Council, pointed out that the knowledge of the existence of child helplines is more crucial than knowing the actual telephone number, because it is very easy for children to find the number when they need it.

Some child helpline interviewees pointed to the fact that the number is a result of the recognition of the importance of child helplines at the EU level, and this makes it easier for them to highlight their role at the national level. That has had an impact on the funding and the recognition by authorities and other stakeholders such as telecommunication providers. Even where it took a long time to convince the government to fully support the setup of the dedicated child helpline number 116 111, the government now provides more support in terms of quality assurance and by facilitating protocol agreements with other child protection system professionals.

Other interviewees had different opinions on the impact of the dedicated EU child helpline number. An interviewee representing a partner/referral organisation assessed that the use of 116 111 was the only way toward more standardisation of services and quality assurance. Another interviewed stakeholder noted that it is important that children know this number and can use it even when they are not in their home country.

A European policy maker emphasised that operating 116 111 is key for the child helpline to really make a difference. According to this interviewee, operating 116 111 is the only way for a child helpline to be fully integrated in the child protection system, to be known by all children and to be able to work as effectively and as economically as possible. Another interviewee noted that everything depends on the country-level context. Yet another European policy maker said it was essential to ensure that 116 111 is managed at the national level – as a single, harmonised and whole service²⁹ – rather than regionally or locally, as is currently the case in at least one Member State. Operating the number in a fragmented manner can be, according to this interviewee, damaging for children because it can, among other things, lead to the child having to retell the traumatic story many times; cause difficulties with following-up individual cases; and bring about inconsistent in protocols of action. These issues could erode confidence in the service altogether.

The fear that changing the child helpline number to 116 111 could be an obstacle for children proved to be unfounded 

Availability and Accessibility of Child Helplines

Means of Communication

Depending on the nature of the issue they are faced with, their general communication habits and the use of technology, children may have different preferences in terms of how they reach out to a child helpline. Accordingly, most child helplines have expanded their services and are accessible in multiple ways: via telephones, emails, online chat, short text messages, web posting and social media, among others. The exact combinations of means of communication used by individual child helplines vary.

The child helpline which is a part of public services is the only one included in this study that is accessible only through calls from landline or mobile phones. This is due to the already mentioned fact that the child helpline is fully regulated by law, and the law foresees telephone as the only means of communication. Other child helplines are accessible via different means of communication, and child helpline interviewees noted that the use of new means of communication has been rapidly spreading among children.

²⁹ The reference is to the case of Spain, where the 116 111 is managed by the governments of the Autonomous Communities resulting in the same service run by different entities.

Accessibility through different means of communication is in a child's best interest, but it poses additional challenges for child helplines ≡

The interviewees with the experience of using different means of communication considered accessibility via various channels to be in a child's best interest, and indicated that adding new means of communication to child helpline services is an asset. On the other hand, this also poses additional challenges for child helplines: there is more data to process, which raises the need for more staff, and there are different channels to operate, which implies extra operating costs.

All other interviewees also generally agreed that child helplines should be accessible through various means of communication, and several pointed to the expanding use of modern technology among children. One European policy maker pointed out that email and chat services are an important resource for children who feel more comfortable writing than speaking about their problems, and they also enable access to child helpline services to children who have hearing or speech impairments.

Phone Costs

As indicated in "CHI's Membership" and Annex 2, calls made to all but one child helpline in the EU are free-of-charge, but they are not necessarily cost-free for child helplines.

In the case of the French child helpline, which is a part of public services and operates a number that has been granted the status of an emergency number, calls are free both for the callers and for the child helpline. Namely, the government can impose a requirement on telecom providers to absorb the cost associated with emergency numbers.³⁰

The cost of calls is sometimes also absorbed by telecommunication providers – with or without financial support from the government – in cases where child helplines operate the dedicated EU child helpline number 116 111. In one of the case studies, however, the majority of the cost of calls is covered by the child helpline itself at the time of reporting.

Interviewees from CHI's European Youth Advisory Council noted that free-of-charge communication is of critical importance. In their opinion, many children and young people would not contact child helplines if there were costs attached.

Many children and young people would not contact child helplines if there were costs attached ≡

The interviewed European policy makers also considered the free-of-cost availability to be essential. As one of them explained, a child helpline is not really accessible if it is not free-of-cost for the children. Another European-level interviewee emphasised that calls made from mobile phones must be free-of-cost as well, as children in difficult situations might not want to call child helplines from the landlines in their homes.

In this regard, an interviewee from a partner/referral organisation underlined the importance of cooperation between child helplines and the telecommunication sector and added that a child looking for help should normally be considered as an emergency situation.

Availability 24/7

Although available data suggested that the number of contacts made with child helplines during the night is substantially lower than during the day, there was general agreement among interviewees that around-the-clock availability of child helplines is desirable.

There was general agreement among interviewees that around-the-clock availability of child helplines is desirable ≡

Among the child helplines included in the study, two are available 24/7, whereas the other two have extended operating hours. In the case of the child helpline which is a part of public services, 24/7 assistance is available via the emergency

³⁰ It is unclear whether the government pays these service providers any compensation.

telephone number, whereas the other child helpline with 24/7 service provides written feedback through child helpline's website. Interviewees from these helplines noted that availability 24/7 is a real added value that the child helpline brings to the child protection system, since most other services are only reachable during a limited timeframe. Other child helpline interviewees also saw added value in constant availability, and in one case the child helpline is actively striving for a switch from the current extended operating hours to 24/7 availability.

European policy makers as well as members of CHI's European Youth Advisor Council were also unanimous in the assessment that 24/7 availability is important for the effectiveness of child helplines. One of the interviewees from partner/referral organisations noted that some issues, such as child abuse and family conflicts, tend to arise while many other child protection system services are not available, and that is when the role of a child helpline as an entry point is crucial. Another stakeholder did not dispute the relevance of around-the-clock availability but pointed to the fact that it was a very expensive solution.

Children must know that they can call anytime, therefore I believe that a free-of-cost, 24/7 child helpline service would have a positive impact on the effectiveness of child helpline. It is important to make sure that child helplines have sufficient resources to provide this type of service.

European Policy Maker

Child Online Protection

New technologies and new ways of communication pose challenges to child helplines – not only in terms of expanding their accessibility via new modes of communication, but also due to the risks that children are exposed to through the use of new technologies. A big challenge for child helplines is to integrate child online protection³¹ into their services and to tackle it as an overarching theme that may impact all other areas in which children ask for counsel and other support.

Three of the four child helplines included in the study have set up specific programmes for child online protection. The remaining child helpline has partnered with, among others, a helpline that specialises in safer internet and the governmental body that is notified of all child online protection issues.

A big challenge for child helplines is to integrate child online protection into their services and to tackle it as an overarching theme ≡

Without having highly disaggregated data yet on many online protection issues from child helplines, many of these organisations register that a high number of registered contacts on abuse and violence nowadays contain one or more elements where the internet or social media play a role.

Programmes aimed at child online protection comprise supporting material for child helpline counsellors to be able to respond to questions and issues related to online protection, training on these issues, reaching out to schools, building and strengthening respective referral mechanisms and other measures. In addition, two of these child helplines work with other relevant organisations, such as safer internet helplines and hotlines for the sexually exploited. In the case of the Polish child helpline, a safer internet helpline is fully integrated in the overall child helpline services, and this can serve as an example of how the efficiency of child helplines can be improved.

³¹ Child online protection can be defined as “services that aim to identify, prevent and mitigate the adverse impacts of ICTs on children’s rights, and identify opportunities to support the advancement of children’s rights”. Guidelines for Industry on Child Online Protection. (2014). Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/csr/css/COP_Guidelines_Industry.PDF

The Collection and the Use of Child Helpline Data

All interviewed child helpline representatives confirm having data collection and data reporting procedures in place. However, there are substantial differences in the structure, the format and the degree to which data is collected, reported and used.

For the child helpline which is a part of public services, the applicable regulatory framework describes a structured approach to the collection and use of data on contacts made by children and young people. The data is analysed by the child helpline as well as by other actors, and it may inform research by institutions such as the national observatory for children at-risk. The interviewee assessed that child helpline data can feed into policy makers' decisions on various measures in the field of child welfare and child protection as well as help initiate actions such as training sessions for child protection system professionals.

The remaining child helplines included in this study have developed their own data collection and reporting procedures. The interviewees pointed to various ways in which child helpline data was used. These include:

- Inclusion in reports produced by child helplines, such as their annual reports and reports to donors (in which data on contacts made with child helplines can serve as evidence of the completion of activities that had been financially supported by the respective donors);
- Fine-tuning of methodologies used by child helplines;
- Supporting the policy making process as well as the work of professionals and partner organisations in the field of child protection; and
- Informing the general public on the findings of data analysis, for instance by responding to requests for information by the media or proactively supplying the information to the media to highlight the concerns that children have, children's needs and gaps in child protection system.

The use of child helpline data for advocacy purposes by child helplines themselves currently appears to be limited. Most of the ones included in this study provide the data to other organisations that are believed to have a greater direct influence on the decision making process. Only one child helpline proactively uses data as support for its own advocacy aimed at initiating legislative and policy changes.

One of the interviewed European policy makers noted that data collection by child helplines can help identify a pattern in harmful behaviours, as well as the frequency of such behaviours. Another interviewee pointed out that child helpline data can be valuable in policy making not only at the national but also at the supranational level. The interviewee mentioned the example of increased numbers of contacts with child helplines regarding essential needs during economic crises, which was a clear indication of the existence of a serious problem. Another European policy maker made similar observations on the ability of child helplines to detect new risks and assessed that child helpline databases were extremely useful for governments to develop appropriate policies. The interviewee concluded that collaboration with agencies and authorities involved in the protection of children and adolescents was therefore of utmost importance.

The Role of Child Helplines

Through the previous chapters, we already touched upon a range of roles that child helplines can play within the national child protection systems, and we pointed to some challenges that they face in performing those roles. In this part of the report, we revisit the main roles of child helplines that surfaced through research interviews, summarise key challenges and conclude with what interviewees suggested that governments could do to ensure that child helplines' services can be maintained and strengthened.

Various Ways of Supporting Children in Need

The precise roles that child helplines play, or could play, within national child protection systems depend on the broader context. Accordingly, interviewees from different child helplines highlighted certain points more strongly than others, but there was broad agreement on several critical roles of child helplines, which are summarised below.

Interviewees from child helplines, as well as others, agreed that child helplines act as safe entry points to child protection systems. Child helpline counsellors actively listen to children and young people who contact child helplines. Counsellors provide information, advice and other types of support. When the nature of the problem requires specialist support or specific child protection services would have to get involved for the problem to be addressed, child helplines refer the children to other parts of child protection systems.

Interviewees from child helplines also explained that child helplines guide the children through child protection systems, which may be too complex for children to navigate on their own. The guiding role is played by child helplines prior to a referral to other services as well as in cases when children had already entered the child protection system. The ultimate goal is that children find support that is the most appropriate for their specific situation. When speaking about child helplines as guides, some interviewees also pointed out a critical role of child helplines as providers of information on child rights. Namely, according to the interviewees, a contact with a child helpline is often eye opening for children. They are surprised to learn that they have, by law, certain rights, and they are entitled to demand that they be respected.

Child helplines play a major role in child protection systems. They represent a safe place where children and young people can turn to, speak out and ask for help, in which they can be heard and treated with dignity. Child helplines also play an important role in raising awareness by reporting on children's needs to the police and other competent authorities, therefore they facilitate children's protection. Ultimately, child helplines can fill potential gaps in child protection systems.

European Policy Maker

Several interviewees reflected the observation of a European policy maker: that child helplines get to know the child protection systems in detail, and they are familiar with what works and what does not work on each level. Therefore, they can perform a monitoring function and alert policy makers and other stakeholders to the gaps they detect in child protection systems. To some extent, child helplines fill those gaps as well, for instance by: being accessible during extended hours or even 24/7; supporting children while they are on the waiting lists of certain social services; addressing every and any issue that children need help and support with; as well as by the already mentioned guidance they provide to children in their dealings with public services and other parts of child protection systems.

As discussed in “The Collection and the Use of Child Helpline Data”, child helplines systematically collect data on the contacts they receive, and this is another way in which they play an important role. Namely, by producing reports of their own, supporting research conducted by others and providing evidence on the concerns that children have to policy makers and other stakeholders, child helplines contribute to awareness raising on and the formulation of child protection policies that better address children’s needs.

One of child helplines included in the study reported that the child helpline in question also acts as a centre of expertise, for example by developing tools for professionals in child protection, such as social workers, for them to learn how to better listen to children that they encounter through their work.

In summary, research conducted for this study confirmed that child helplines:

- Are safe entry points into child protection systems;
- Act, when needed, as a referral mechanism;
- Guide children through child protection systems;
- Inform children on their rights;
- Detect, highlight and fill gaps in child protection;
- Support policy making with data on children’s needs; and
- May act as centres of expertise and advocates for children’s rights.

Main Challenges Faced by Child Helplines

Different stakeholders pointed to a range of challenges faced by child helplines, which were mentioned in previous chapters. Given the variety among national child protection systems, different challenges do not apply to the same extent in all countries, but it is important to address them where the national child helpline identifies them as relevant in their national context.

The main challenges include, but are not limited to:

- The unclear positioning of child helplines within national child protection systems;
- A lack of cooperation agreements and protocols with other parts of child protection systems (which may impede the processes of referral, feedback and follow-up);
- Issues related to the norm of confidentiality and the legal requirement of professional secrecy;
- Keeping up with technological developments, both in terms of expanding the ways in which children can reach out to child helplines and in terms of ensuring child online protection;

- Ensuring that calls made to child helplines are free of cost for the children as well as for child helplines;
- Ensuring that children can reach the child helpline at any time; and
- Ensuring that child helpline knowledge and data is broadly recognised as a reflection of children’s voices and needs and used to formulate effective child protection policies.

Multiple of the above-mentioned challenges are directly related to what can be identified as the most critical issue, as it affects the very existence of child helplines: the issue of funding and sustainability.

All child helpline interviewees pointed to the financing of child helpline operations as a matter of concern

All child helpline interviewees pointed to the financing of child helpline operations as a matter of concern, and this issue was also brought up in the majority of other interviews.

Funding for the child helpline that is a part of public services may not be guaranteed in the longer term, noted the child helpline interviewee, as the funding for the whole social welfare sector is insecure due to overall state budget constraints. The situation is even bleaker for the child helplines that are independent NGOs and have to raise the funds to cover their operational costs on their own. Where there are no specific agreements with the telecommunication sector in place even the telecommunication costs have to be covered by the child helpline itself. Funding from public budgets, when available, is insufficient and typically not structural, and child helplines have to rely on ad hoc or project-based funding. That makes it virtually impossible to expand their services – for example by extending their hours of operation and/or adding additional channels of communication – in a sustainable manner. Not only can child helplines not expand their services, a lack of resources may even prevent them from answering all the contacts that they receive via the already existing means of communication and during the existing hours of operation.

What Role Should the Governments Play?

Whether or not governments have a role to play with regard to child helplines – and if so, what role – was a point specifically discussed in the interviews, and it also surfaced through discussions on some other points presented in this report.

Child helpline interviewees mostly pointed to the ability of the national government to clearly position child helplines within child protection systems as well as to facilitate protocol agreements, and similar points were made by several European policy makers. One child helpline interviewee emphasised the need for the child helpline to keep its distance from the government – so that it can act as independent watchdog over the child protection system – but nevertheless noted that the government can play a coordinating role.

There was broad consensus among the various interviewed stakeholders that the government has a critically important role to play in terms of securing structural funding for child helplines, and several interviewees related that to ensuring not only sustainability but also the quality of child helpline services. One of the interviewed European policy makers was convinced that “it is close to impossible for a child helpline to become self-sufficient in terms of financing” – so governments should ensure that child helplines can operate without having to constantly invent new projects and use their human resources on obtaining project-based funding just so they can keep providing their core services.

Opinions among child helpline interviewees differed regarding the share of total child helpline operating costs that should be covered by public budgets, but there was general agreement that being able to rely on structural funding would be helpful in child helplines' efforts not to leave any child who needs help unheard.

A few interviewees also commented on the role of the EU. One child helpline interviewee noted that policy makers at the EU level have a role to play in ensuring that the funding for the social sector as a whole is not diminished in EU Member States. A representative of a partner/referral organisation pointed out that the EU should support training and knowledge exchange among different national child helplines, to facilitate the creation of a harmonised service. Some of the interviewed European policy makers also highlighted the need for further harmonisation and common standards for child helplines, but their views on who should undertake that differed. One interviewee noted that the EU should commit Member States to ensuring that child helpline services are available nationwide, and that best interests of the child are at the centre regardless of the child's geographical location.

Additional points about the role of national governments that were mentioned by one or more of the interviewed European policy makers include:

- Making the 116 111 number free of cost both for the children and the child helplines;
- Using child helpline data for policy making;
- Taking into account the views of child helplines when formulating plans, protocols, laws and prevention campaigns related to children and young people; and
- Supporting (along with the media) awareness raising about the existence of child helplines and their role in the prevention and detection of violence against children (for instance in schools, sports centres, health centres and other relevant locations).

Recommendations

Based on the information collected throughout the interview phase, recommendations have been developed addressing the main stakeholders involved in the study:

1. Child helplines in EU Member States
2. EU Member States governments, both on national and on regional level
3. EU policy makers
4. Child Helpline International

The recommendations are made on the basis of the historical experience of the consultant, data obtained from the interviews and insight from experienced member representatives and staff. Moreover, recommendations were reviewed by CHI European member helplines during the Sixth European Regional Consultation in November 2015. These recommendations are formulated in a way that allows all important stakeholders mentioned above to evaluate and test them in their particular context.

Recommendations Addressed to Child Helplines in EU Member States

- Child helplines should continue to collect **data** in order to use them as an **advocacy tool**, to be able to flag issues and flaws in child protection systems.
- Child helplines should seek for a balanced connection with relevant governmental bodies in order to **position** themselves **in the child protection system**, play a clear role in it and benefit from governmental support (such as structural financing of a relevant part of the annual budget, in kind contributions, knowledge and expertise, moderating and facilitating services, etc.)
- Child helplines should enter into **protocol agreements** with key partners and stakeholders in the child protection systems including Law Enforcement Agencies, Social and Health services, telecommunication service providers, and other child helplines/hotlines, in order to strengthen their contribution within the system.
- Child helplines should seek to clarify the element of **confidentiality and anonymity** in the protocol agreements with all relevant partners in the child protection system. Child helplines should clearly inform children regarding the possibility of breaking the confidentiality in some specific case. On the other hand, when disclosing information on referred cases, social services should protect the anonymity of child helplines in order to don't mine their credibility.
- A best practice for child helplines is to **be fully available** for children at all times, commonly referred to as **24/7 access**, using all possible channels of communications.
- Child helplines should ensure their accessibility by **operating free of cost** for their users and should seek to operate their numbers free of charge also for themselves, either by regulations adopted by the national government and/or via agreements with the telecommunication service providers for free services.
- Child helplines should optimise their accessibility and availability through **use of a wide variety of channels of communications**. Multiple entries allow children to use the communication tool that best suits the specific situation or need. Child helplines should e.g. consider chat, email, web

posting with answers from both counsellors and from peers, discussion fora, social media, and text messaging in addition to telephone counselling.

- Child helplines should further integrate **child online protection** as a theme in their day to day **operations**. Partnerships with dedicated

social media providers (Facebook etc.), other helplines and hotlines and with Law enforcement agencies are useful in this respect.

- Child helplines should undertake **specific measures** for better recognition of their channel of **information** among their target groups.

Recommendations Addressed to Governments of EU Member States

- National governments should ensure well-structured **child protection systems and recognise the important role of child helplines in strengthening child protection systems**.
- National governments should facilitate the establishment of **protocol agreements** among child helplines and all relevant partners in the CPS, fixing minimum quality standards in order to optimise the process of referral and feedback on referred cases.
- National governments should take all necessary measures to ensure a smooth implementation of the **116 111 number in cooperation with Child Helplines International**.
- National governments should provide **structural, long term funding** to allow child helplines to operate in a sustainable and fully accessible manner. This funding could include in kind contributions in addition to cash contributions.
- National governments should share knowledge and expertise to strengthen the clear position of child helplines as a **safe entry point** to the child protection systems. To the extent obstacles exist, national governments should seek to remove them by all possible means.
- National governments should be **open** and sensitive to trends and evolutions in issues affecting children pointed out by the child helplines on the basis of their **data collection**. These trends should be taken into account when **framing new policies** affecting children and young people.
- National governments should require child helplines that operate on **more specialised topics** such as suicide, safer internet, child (sexual) abuse, bullying etc. to **share** their knowledge and expertise and to promote certain minimum standards in term of competences, procedures and reliability.
- National governments should respect the **independency** of the child helplines and their role of **watchdog** of the national child protection system.
- National governments should support the establishment of **24/7 referral systems** which could support child helplines in dealing with difficult cases whenever needed.
- National governments should provide **operational grants** for child helplines to ensure they could answer to every contact from every child and to maintain their independence.

Recommendations Addressed to European Policy Makers

- European policy makers should stimulate European Member States' **governments to take a proactive supporting role** towards child helplines and to secure their position as entry point in the Member State's child protection systems.
- The European Commission should provide **project grants** open to child helplines supporting them in targeting their activities.
- European policy makers should provide funding for Child Helpline International (CHI) in order to allow CHI to work on further **harmonisation** and develop European wide **common standards and best practices** for the national child helplines.
- European policy makers should continue promoting the use of the **number 116 111** across Europe and support child helplines that are running the service.
- European policy makers should support the exchange of information among child helplines, hotlines and social services at European level.
- European policy makers can stimulate **knowledge sharing and interaction** between child helplines and the EU funded helplines and hotlines (safer internet and missing children).
- The European Commission should take into consideration the **role child helplines** could play during **humanitarian crisis**, such as the refugee crisis affecting Europe.

Key Actions for Integration of CHI Regional Strategy

- CHI should strive for more **standardisation** in operating **best practices**, should strengthen its Principle and Standard Tool and should define **minimum quality standards**.
- CHI should advocate on the basis of research and studies for **European funding** opportunities via grants dedicated to child helplines.
- CHI should maximise the sharing of expertise and knowledge between child helplines to support them in their promotional tasks (e.g. share best practices of promotion campaigns for **116 111** like workshops and commercials, etc.). CHI should continue to support the implementation of the number 116 111 by removing obstacles through the sharing of knowledge between the member child helplines.
- CHI should continue to reach out to **EU funded networks** of hotlines and helplines.
- CHI should harmonise, coordinate and centralise the **collection of data** by member child helplines and use data as evidence-base for advocacy activities.

Annex 1: List of Interviewees

CHI would like to thank all the interviewees for having taken the time of participating in our study and for showing continued support to child helplines in Europe.

Child Helplines and Partner/Referral Organisations

These interviewees are referred to as 'child helpline interviewees' and 'referral organisation interviewees' in the text.

- Violaine Blain, Director of the ALLO119, SNATED child helpline (France)
- Marie-Paule Martin-Blanchais, Director of GIP, Enfance en Danger (France)
- Hana Hrpka, Executive Director of the Hrabri telefon child helpline (Croatia)
- Sanja Oreškovic Vrbanc, Executive Director of the Association Children First (Croatia)
- Trine Natasja Sindhal, Expert/Consultant for the Børns Vilkår child helpline (Denmark)
- Kuno Sørensen, Save the Children (Denmark)
- Lucyna Kicinska, Coordinator of the Telefon zaufania dla dzieci i młodzieży / Nobody's Children Foundation child helpline (Poland)
- Magdalena Witecka, Expert at Telefon zaufania dla dzieci i młodzieży / Nobody's Children Foundation child helpline (Poland)

Members of CHI's European Youth Advisory Council

These interviewees were 18-22 years old at the time of the group interview.

- Jos van Gijzen, volunteer at the De Kindertelefoon child helpline (The Netherlands)
- Eleftherios Dafermos, volunteer at The Smile of the Child helpline (Greece)
- Lucija Fusic, volunteer at the Hrabri telefon child helpline (Croatia)
- Sara Brari, volunteer at the Alo 116 child helpline (Albania)

European Policy Makers

- Margaret Tuite, Children's Rights Coordinator, European Commission
- Georgia Dimitropoulou, Seconded National Expert, Equality and Citizens Rights Department of the European Union Agency of Fundamental Rights (FRA)
- Agnes von Maravic, Programme Officer, Children Rights Department, Council of Europe
- Annamaria Corazza Blidt, Member of the European Parliament and Co-Chair of the European Parliament Intergroup on Child Rights
- Antonio Lopez-Isturiz White, Member of the European Parliament

Annex 2: CHI's Membership in the EU³²

Country	Name of Child Helpline Organisation	Founded in	Telephone Number(s) ⁽¹⁾	Nature of Org.	Contacts Answered in 2014 ⁽²⁾	Contacts Means of Comm. Used in 2014 ⁽³⁾	Operating Hours	Toll Free ⁽⁴⁾ Child Helpline	
								LL/MP ⁽⁵⁾	LL/MP
AT	147 Rat auf Draht Österreichischer Rundfunk	1987	147	NGO	50,733	Phone, email	24/7	Y/Y	Y/Y
BE	Awel	1981	102	NGO	32,019	Phone, email, chat, web posts	16-22 (every day)	Y/Y	Y/Y
BG	Animus	2009	116111	NGO	n.d. ⁽⁶⁾	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
HR	Hrabri telefon	1997	116111	NGO	11,904	Phone, email, chat, web posts	9-20 (Mon-Fri)	Y/Y	N/N
CZ	Linka bezpečí Sdružení Linka bezpečí	1994	116111	NGO	191,471	Phone, email, chat, outreach	24/7	Y/N	Y/Y
DK	Børns Telefonen Børns Vilkår	1987	116111	NGO	51,022	Phone, SMS, chat, web posts	11-23 (Mon-Sat)	Y/Y	N/N
EE	Lapsemure Estonia Mental Health Society NGO	1997	6460770	NGO	4,540	Phone, email, chat	24/7	N/N	N/N
FI	Lasten ja nuorten puhelin Mannerheimin Lastensuojeluliitto - MLL	1980	116111	NGO	30,243	Phone, email, chat, web posts	14-20 (Mon-Fri), 17-20 (Sat-Sun)	Y/Y	N/N
FR	119 Allô Enfance en Danger Service National d'Accueil Téléphonique pour l'Enfance en Danger - SNATED	1989	119	Gov.	546,142	Phone	24/7	Y/Y	Y/Y
DE	Kinder und Jugendtelefon Nummer gegen Kummer e.V	1980	116111	NGO	592,219	Phone, email	14-20 (Mon-Sat)	Y/Y	Y/Y
EL	SOS 1056 The Smile of the Child	1997	1056	NGO	277,396	Phone, outreach, walk-in/in person	24/7	Y/Y	Y/Y
HU	Kék Vonal	1993	116111	NGO	118,409	Phone, email, chat	24/7	Y/Y	N/N
IE	ISPCC Childline Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children	1988	1800666666	NGO	462,505	Phone	24/7	Y/Y	N/N
IT	S.O.S. Il Telefono Azzurro Onlus	1987	19696/116111	NGO	76,053	Phone, chat	24/7	n.d.	Y/Y
LV	Children Youth Trust Phone	2002	n.d.	NGO	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.

³² Information based on the 2014 data collection

Country	Name of Child Helpline Organisation	Founded in	Telephone Number(s) (1)	Nature of Org.	Contacts Answered in 2014 (2)	Contacts Means of Comm. Used in 2014 (3)	Operating Hours	Toll Free (4) Child Helpline	
								LL/MP (5)	LL/MP
LV	Uzticibas talrunis The State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights	2006	116111	Gov.	63,999	Phone, email, walk-in/in person	8-23 (Mon-Fri), 8-22 (Sat), 10-22 (Sun)	Y/Y	N/N
LT	Vaikų linija	1997	116111	NGO	124,360	Phone, email	9-21 (every day)	Y/Y	N/N
LU	Kanner Jugendtelefon KaJugTel	1992	116111	NGO	972	Phone, email	17-22 (Mon, Wed, Fri), 14-22 (Tue, Thu), 14-20 (Sat)	Y/Y	N/N
MT	Support Line 179	n.d.	n.d.	Gov.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
MT	SOS Malta	n.d.	n.d.	NGO	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
NL	De Kindertelefoon	1979	08000432	NGO	593,132	Phone, chat, outreach, web posts	14-20 (every day)	Y/Y	N/N
PL	Telefon zaufania dla dzieci i młodzieży Nobody's Children Foundation	2008	116111	NGO	132,974	Phone, email	12-20 (every day)	Y/Y	Y/Y
PT	SOS Criança Instituto de Apoio à Criança	1988	116111	NGO	2,934	Phone, email	9-17 (Mon-Fri)	Y/Y	Y/Y
RO	Telefonul Copilului Asociata Telefonul Copilului	2001	116111	NGO	108,855	Phone, email	8-24 (every day)	Y/Y	Y/Y
SK	Linka detskej istoty – LDI Linka detskej istoty pri SV UNICEF	1996	116111	NGO	10,920	Phone, chat	24/7	Y/Y	N/Y
SI	Telefon za otroke in mladostnike – TOM Zveza prijateljev mladine Slovenije	1990	116111	NGO	29,446	Phone, email, chat	12-20 (Tue-Sun)	Y/Y	Y/Y
ES	Teléfono Anar Fundación Anar	1994	116111 900202010	NGO	365,447	Phone, email	24/7	Y/Y	Y/Y
SE	Barnens Rätt i Samhället BRIS	1971	116111	NGO	60,279	Phone, email, chat, web post	Variable hours (every day)	Y/Y	Y/Y
UK	ChildLine NSPCC	1986	08001111	NGO	288,817	Phone, email, chat	24/7	Y/Y	N/N
UK	The Mix (formerly Get Connected)	1999	08088084994	NGO	24,112	Phone, email, SMS, chat	13-23 (every day)	Y/Y	Y/Y
UK	Muslim Youth	2001	08088082008	NGO	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Y/Y	N/N
UK	Missing People	1993	116000	NGO	17,055	Phone, SMS, outreach, email	24/7	n.d.	n.d.

Notes:

- ⁽¹⁾ A few additional child helplines have been assigned the regionally harmonised number 116 111 and were in the process of making it operational at the time of writing.
- ⁽²⁾ Information is based on information provided in CHI's data questionnaire for 2014. This total refers to answered telephone calls and contacts via other communication methods. Answered telephone calls include those which lead to the child helpline providing direct assistance or active listening, as well as silent, test, abusive and other no counselling calls.
- ⁽³⁾ This column indicates those means of communication that were reported in CHI's data questionnaire for 2014 via the concrete numbers of contacts per mean of communication.
- ⁽⁴⁾ Toll free status indicated on the basis of CHI's data questionnaire for 2014.
- ⁽⁵⁾ The first column refers to costs for children, while the second column refers to costs for child helplines. LL: costs when calling from Landline; MP: costs when calling from Mobile Phone.
- ⁽⁶⁾ n.d.: information not available

Colophon

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CHI's work is firmly grounded in the principles and values enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including children's right to privacy and protection from harm. To preserve the trust and confidence children and young people place in child helplines every day, the names cited in case summaries have been changed.



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We are Child Helpline International. **We voice children's needs to drive policy change**

Child Helpline International (CHI) is one of the world's largest collective impact organisations, a network of 183 organisations in 142 countries (as of December 2015), which receive over 14 million contacts a year from children and young people in need of care and protection. Since its founding in 2003, CHI has supported the creation and strengthening of child helplines, and has enhanced their recognition as an essential part of child protection systems globally. CHI uses child helpline data and knowledge to highlight gaps in child protection, to advocate for the rights of children and young people around the world, and to fight for the eradication of violence against children.

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