Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: 
the Role of the Justice System

A UNODC Handbook

Developed under the Global Programme on Violence against 
Children in the Field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice

The justice system is not only essential for ending impunity and ensuring accountability mechanisms, but also instrumental in protecting children and preventing violence against them.
Children recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups are often victims of extreme violence, including ferocious recruitment methods, enslavement, sexual exploitation, exposure to constant fear, indoctrination and psychological pressure. While not all children recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups are in contact with the justice system, often actors working within that system are the first ones to have contact with them. For this reason, they have an undeniable responsibility to protect, respect and fulfill children’s rights, to prevent re-victimization and to take actions to ensure that other systems provide suitable responses.

UNODC is most grateful to the Governments of Austria, Canada, Denmark and Switzerland for the financial support for the development and translation of the Handbook.

**GOALS**

Based on its longstanding expertise in the areas of violence against children and counter-terrorism, and prompted by an increasing number of technical assistance requests, UNODC has been providing specialized technical assistance to support Member States in dealing with the phenomenon of child recruitment and exploitation by terrorist and violent extremist groups. The complexity of the subject matter and the multilayered challenges it presents highlights the need for international guidance to promote a coherent and comprehensive approach to the treatment of these children.

The elaboration of the Handbook was informed by three key sets of objectives:

- Preventing the recruitment of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups
- Identifying effective justice responses to children recruited and exploited by such groups, whether they are in contact with the justice system as victims, witnesses, or as alleged offenders
- Promoting the rehabilitation and reintegration of those children

**TARGET AUDIENCE**

The publication is addressed to law and policymakers and to practitioners dealing directly with children recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups.

The Handbook offers guidance on the multiple legal frameworks related to this issue and their applicability, and on measures aimed at preventing and responding to the recruitment and exploitation of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups.

The publication also provides directions for the identification of promising practices and for promoting interoperability between the justice system and other systems.

**METHODOLOGY**

The development of the Handbook required multidisciplinary expertise to tackle issues from different fields, including counter-terrorism, justice for children and violence against children.

The analysis and case studies presented are based on the following sources:

- International legal instruments that are relevant to the issue of children recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups
- National legislation of selected countries relevant to child rights, including the juvenile justice framework, as well as to counter-terrorism, and their interaction
- Promising policies and practices related to prevention, justice measures for children who are victims and/or alleged offenders, reintegration programmes, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms
CHAPTER 1: PREVENTION

How can child recruitment by terrorist and violent extremist groups be prevented?

Child recruitment is taking place in countries all over the world. Children provide various advantages to the groups: they are cheaper, more easily indoctrinated and loyal, guarantee more visibility for propaganda reasons, and can be more effectively exploited.

By addressing child recruitment and exploitation as forms of serious violence against children, this chapter indicates the components of effective and child-sensitive violence prevention programmes, and touches upon examples of initiatives aimed at countering the recruitment of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups.

CHAPTER 2: JUSTICE FOR CHILD VICTIMS AND WITNESSES

How can the justice system ensure safety and protection of child victims and witnesses?

Groups such as Boko Haram, Al Shabaab or ISIL have perpetrated serious forms of violence against children: killing and maiming children during terror attacks and in conflict, recruiting and using them in hostilities, perpetrating sexual violence and abuse, carrying out abductions, denying access to humanitarian support, and attacking schools and hospitals.

When children are recognized as victims and witnesses of crime, they may take part in criminal proceedings or seek redress or reparation. This can expose them to lengthy and sometimes hostile questioning, repeated interviewing, direct confrontation with the alleged perpetrators, or other practices that contribute to secondary victimization. The vulnerability of child victims of violence may be exacerbated by the nature of terrorist crimes:

- Acts of terrorism may occur on a large scale, involving multiple perpetrators and victims, and may result in mass physical and psychological injury.
- There is a risk that authorities may perceive primarily the political dimension of acts of terrorism and neglect the impact on and needs of the individual victims.
- Victims and survivors of terrorist acts may be particularly exposed to intimidation and retaliation.

For children to take part and benefit from justice proceedings, a delicate balance between their right to be protected and the right to participation must be achieved. This chapter presents a number of strategies to support justice actors in achieving such balance.
CHAPTER 3: JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN ACCUSED OF TERRORISM RELATED OFFENCES

How can the justice system promote accountability and at the same time fulfil child rights?

A growing number of children are arrested, detained and brought to trial on the basis of terrorism-related charges. When children are involved with terrorist and violent extremist groups, public attention frequently focuses on indoctrination and the so-called “radicalization” processes and the dangers they entail in terms of future violence. Such children are often regarded as belonging to a special category of offenders, and specialized procedures and measures are adopted to recognize the particular seriousness of terrorist acts. This often leads to the adoption of a punitive approach that ignores child rights. This, in turn, results in lasting consequences for the development of the child and has a negative impact on his or her opportunities for social reintegration.

In order to respond to challenges related to the treatment of children who may have committed terrorism-related offences, practitioners require a good understanding of juvenile justice. This chapter provides legal and operational guidance on how the justice process can be conducted with a view to effectively preserving public safety, while respecting the rights of children alleged to be offenders who were recruited by a terrorist or violent extremist group.

CHAPTER 4: REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION

What measures and programmes can effectively support the rehabilitation and reintegration of children recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups?

In line with international law, the Handbook emphasizes that social reintegration is the primary purpose of any action taken by public authorities affecting children recruited by terrorist and violent extremist groups, and necessary for the child to assume a constructive role in society.

These children often face the consequences of extreme violence on their mental and physical well-being, the rejection of their families and communities, and lack of access to educational and vocational activities. Taking into account the diversity of the phenomenon, the chapter outlines the key features of reintegration programmes with special consideration for gender, and focuses on issues regarding demobilization and the release of children, cross-border situations and reintegration of children in contact with the justice system.