DISCUSSION PAPER

Thematic Panel 2, Meeting 5

From Vulnerability to Resilience: Addressing the risks and needs of young people in detention and community sentences

Authors: **Pedro Liberado**, **Vânia Sampaio**, **Julien Loty** and **Nadya Radkovska**

9-10 September 2026

Gżira, Malta

EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation

European Commission

Introduction

The "ProtectEU: Agenda to prevent and counter terrorism", the recently released Europol EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2026 (TE-SET report), and all EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation outcomes thus far alert to the continued trend of a sharp increase in youth radicalisation and young perpetrators' involvement in terrorism and violent extremism. Therefore, it is crucial to directly address the vulnerabilities and risks of justice-involved young people[1], namely those serving detention and community sentences.

In this sense, TP2 will dedicate its fifth meeting to the risks and needs of young people in detention and community sentences to respond to this critically overlooked context and contribute to the EU Toolbox for minors towards transforming vulnerability into resilience.

For this purpose, the meeting will navigate the EU policy and the topic's state of play, existing perspectives and approaches from various EU Member States, and reflect on the clinical and correctional insights into radicalisation risk among young people towards identifying the challenges posed to the prison systems and probation services and finding effective and stable solutions.

In sum, the fifth TP2 meeting "From Vulnerability to Resilience: Addressing the risks and needs of young people in detention and community sentences" emphasises the role of the prison, probation and community contexts in preventing, rehabilitating and reintegrating justice-involved youth towards tackling the recent trend in youth radicalisation and involvement in terrorism and violent extremism.

[1] For the purposes of this Discussion Paper, "youth" follows the UN definition (15-24 years), acknowledging that Member States may apply differing age thresholds in their justice systems. This range is further supported by Campion and Colvin (2025), who find that identity formation between ages 12-24 is especially shaped by external pressures (e.g., at school, among peers, and online) driven by a search for belonging and purpose. This vulnerability is increasingly exploited by extremist groups who adapt their narratives to these unmet needs.

Objectives

The meeting aims to provide an interdisciplinary platform to discuss key challenges and much-needed solutions faced by different EU Member States and priority third countries' stakeholders in preventing and countering radicalisation in prisons (and in the post-sentencing period).

The meeting has the following objectives:

- Deepen understanding of the profiles, vulnerabilities, risks and rehabilitation needs of justice-involved young people (minors and young adults who have committed a terror-related offence or are assessed as radical/extremist or vulnerable to radicalisation), drawing on comparative insights from prison, probation, and community settings;
- Bring together clinical, correctional and community perspectives to clarify how developmental, psychosocial and mental-health factors shape radicalisation risk among young people, and how these can be assessed and addressed proportionately and in an age-appropriate manner;
- Translate shared knowledge and practitioner experience into concrete, sector-specific recommendations and practical tools that strengthen age-appropriate prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration pathways for justice-involved youth across EU Member States and priority third countries;
- Identify operational, relational, and systemic challenges and opportunities affecting trust-building, engagement, and continuity of support with justice-involved young people across the custody-to-community continuum, and co-develop strategies to address them;
- Strengthen cross-country, cross-sector cooperation by jointly planning future EUKH prevention toolbox products, including contributions to the Toolbox for Minors, and defining next steps for sustained, evidence-informed TP2 work in 2026 (and the forthcoming Strategic Orientations 2027-2029).

Context

The context and challenges of young people in detention and community sentences

Before radicalisation can be addressed as a distinct phenomenon, it is useful to first set the wider scene of young people's presence within the EU's criminal justice systems.

Across the Council of Europe area, juveniles and minors constitute a small but persistent share of the prison population: according to the 2024 SPACE I penal statistics, the proportion of imprisoned minors ranged from 0% in countries like Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain to as high as 3.4% in Cyprus, with larger Member States reporting the highest absolute numbers (e.g., Germany with 831/1.4%, Poland with 1,031/1.4%, France 746/0.98% (Aebi & Cocco, 2025, as compiled in Children of Prisoners Europe, 2026). Although minors represent a modest share of the prison population, this still amounts to several thousand children held in detention across the EU on any given day, alongside an unknown and largely uncounted number serving community sentences.

Longer-term trends point to a gradual, reform-driven decline in the use of detention for children. Between 2006 and 2012, the number of children held in pre- and post-trial detention across eleven countries in Europe and Central Asia fell by close to 60%, a shift attributed to legislative reforms expanding diversion, mediation, community service and socioeducational alternatives to custody (UNICEF, 2018). Yet, this progress remains uneven and incomplete, given that monitoring by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child continues to find that detention is not consistently applied as a measure of last resort, and that several EU Member States still lack sufficient community-based alternatives to imprisonment for justice-involved children (UNICEF, 2018).

Justice-involved youth present particularities that significantly distinguish them from the adult prison population. Comparative research conducted across ten Member States (i.e., Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden) under the EU-funded ARISA Child initiative found that sentenced children are still undergoing physical, emotional and cognitive development, requiring tailored access to education, mental health support and family engagement to support their rehabilitation (Kasapi & Doichinova, 2024). The same research documented a lowering average age of children in custody or under supervision, alongside a shift in the typology of offences committed by minors from predominantly property crime toward more frequent and varied violent offending, as well as an over-representation of children from migrant backgrounds in several national systems (Kasapi & Doichinova, 2024). Limited infrastructure in countries such as Cyprus, Greece and Bulgaria also means convicted children are, in practice, still

held alongside adult populations, despite Council of Europe guidelines requiring their separation into dedicated, age-appropriate facilities (Kasapi & Doichinova, 2024).

These particularities are compounded by two structural challenges that must be addressed. First, prison and probation staff working with children remain, in the ARISA Child research's own words, "among the least trained justice professionals in the EU". In fact, 43% of surveyed correctional and supervisory staff reported never having received training on children's rights or child-friendly justice principles (Kasapi & Doichinova, 2024, p. 5). Second, the evidence base itself is fragmented. For example, the Council of Europe's SPACE II survey of community sanctions and measures, the main EU-wide source on non-custodial sentencing, explicitly excludes sanctions and measures imposed under juvenile criminal law (Aebi et al., 2025), leaving policymakers with only a partial, custody-focused picture of how young people actually experience the criminal justice system.

In sum, closing this data gap, alongside addressing the staffing, infrastructural and rehabilitative needs identified, is a necessary foundation for any discussion of radicalisation prevention within detention and community-sentence settings.

Radicalisation of minors and young adults as an EU priority

Continuing the trend verified in recent years, the ProtectEU: Agenda to Prevent and Counter Terrorism states plainly that "the number of minors involved in terrorism and violent extremism has increased sharply across Europe" (European Commission, 2026, p. 2). While most of these minors remain linked to jihadist terrorism, the document highlights the growing pull of violent right-wing extremism among youth, which coerces vulnerable minors into acts of self-harm and violence mostly through accelerationist networks, "active clubs", and online ecosystems such as the "764"/"Com" networks (European Commission, 2026, pp. 2-3).

Europol's EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2026 corroborates this trajectory with recent and concrete data. In 2025, of the 486 individuals arrested for terrorism-related offences across the EU, 130 (~27%) were 18 years old or younger, and the youngest arrestee was only 12 years old (case linked to right-wing terrorism). Europol (2026, p. 10) attributes part of this trend to the accelerating role of the online environment, observing that "young radicalised individuals often displayed only a superficial understanding of established ideologies, making them susceptible to a fluid mix of unstable, fragmented and ambiguous ideas", with personal grievances or mental health issues further increasing their vulnerability. The report documents the deliberate exploitation of gaming platforms, gamified propaganda, and decentralised "Com" ecosystems to groom, extort, and recruit underage users into online and offline violence.

This increasing concern has been translated into concrete EU policy. Preventing the radicalisation of minors is among the flagship initiatives of the ProtectEU Agenda, alongside legislative and operational action. In this sense, the Commission in cooperation with the EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation will be developing a Prevention Toolbox for Minors, encompassing a Parents' Guide to Protecting Young Minds from Radicalisation, hotlines and call centres for reporting early signs of radicalisation, and closer cooperation between prevention actors and mental health and child-protection services, in line with Commission Recommendation (EU) 2024/1238 on integrated child protection systems. A forthcoming Action Plan on the Protection of Children against Crime will further address online and offline radicalisation and recruitment into crime (European Commission, 2026).

Taken together, EU policy, empirical evidence, and practitioner-oriented knowledge converge on the same conclusions: minors and young adults will remain a critical focus of the EU's radicalisation prevention priorities, and the response to this problem warrants early, coordinated, and rights-based responses across education, online safety, mental health, and criminal justice.

Radicalisation risks and needs of justice-involved youth

Vulnerabilities of the young people serving detention and community settings

Beyond the general profile of children and youth in custody outlined in the sections above, radicalisation draws on a more specific set of developmental and psychological vulnerabilities. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are defined by an intense search for identity, meaning and significance, and it is precisely these unresolved needs that extremist narratives are designed to exploit (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Clinical work with radicalised young people points to identity confusion, a loss of meaning, experiences of humiliation and a foreshortened or distorted sense of the future as recurring features of how they see themselves and their place in the world (Desmarais & Rousseau, 2024). Rather than stemming from any single cause, these vulnerabilities are best understood through an integrated, developmental lens: adverse life-course experiences, such as trauma, victimisation and disrupted attachment, interact with situational and environmental conditions to move some young people towards violent extremism (Barracosa & Cherney, 2025).

What ultimately tips vulnerability into radicalisation is often relational rather than ideological. Recent evidence reframes youth radicalisation as a function of disconnection and unmet need, such as social marginalisation, grievance, discrimination and, above all, the search for community and belonging, with ideological conviction frequently arriving late and only loosely understood (Campion & Colvin, 2025). For justice-involved young people this matters doubly, as contact with

the justice system can itself deepen the very disconnection, stigma and grievance that make extremist groups' offers of belonging, status and purpose attractive in the first place.

The setting also shapes how these vulnerabilities are expressed. In detention, young people are exposed to concentrated relational risks, such as proximity to charismatic or influential individuals, informal hierarchies and peer dynamics that can normalise extremist narratives, and the isolation and grievance that sharpen identity needs at exactly the developmental moment when belonging matters most (Silke, 2014). In community settings, the dominant vulnerabilities vary, centred on stigmatisation, discontinuous supervision, difficulty re-engaging with education and employment, and the weakening of the family and pro-social ties that international evidence identifies as central protective factors (Cherney et al., 2023; Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2024).

Taken together, these vulnerabilities call for responses that are explicitly youth-specific rather than adapted from adult models. Promising practice points towards multidisciplinary, practitioner-based frameworks for the early identification, diversion and disengagement of at-risk and radicalised young people (Barracosa & March, 2022), built around developing protective factors, sustaining family and community connection, and ensuring continuity of support across the custody-to-community transition (Cherney, De Rooy & Williams, 2023). Treating young people's developmental stage as an opportunity for change, rather than solely as a source of risk, is the thread that links effective prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration.

Clinical insights of radicalisation risk among justice-involved youth

The clinical literature is consistent on one point above all: there is no single *mental illness-terrorist* profile, and mental ill-health is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of radicalisation (e.g., Andrade et al., 2026; Bhui & Bhugra, 2021). While some studies correlate poor mental health with radicalisation, it operates as one contributing factor among many rather than as an explanation in itself, and a range of conditions (from depression, trauma and personality vulnerabilities to autism spectrum conditions and, in a minority of cases, psychotic disorders) have been implicated without any one being diagnostic (Trimbur et al., 2021). A key practical consequence, especially relevant to prison and probation clinicians, is that practitioners are not always able to distinguish behaviour driven by psychopathology from behaviour inspired by extremist ideology, which has direct implications for both assessment and intervention (Bhui & Bhugra, 2021).

At the same time, justice-involved young people carry a markedly elevated psychiatric burden that cannot be ignored. Population-based cohort research on justice-involved adolescents finds that clinically distinct phenotypes of psychosis, in particular schizophrenia-related and substance-induced psychosis, are significantly associated with increased hazards of both general and violent reoffending, underlining the value of differentiated clinical assessment rather than blanket assumptions (Akpanekpo & Butler, 2025). Among a relevant target group for our TP, a clinical study

of adolescents and young adults detained for ISIS-related offences documented very high rates of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, and the wider evidence suggests that trauma-exposed, justice-involved youth constitute a particularly vulnerable subgroup (Andrade et al., 2026). Robust epidemiological data on psychiatric disorders among radicalised youth, especially those managed in community rather than custodial settings, nonetheless remain largely absent (which constrains both individual clinical assessment and wider service planning).

These insights point towards a clear clinical orientation for prison and probation services. Assessment should integrate needs and protective factors (or individual strengths) rather than focusing on risk (or vulnerabilities) alone, be trauma-informed, and be delivered by multidisciplinary teams that bring clinical, correctional, educational and community expertise together, treating religion (only) where relevant as a resource rather than a vulnerability or risk factor (Kasinathan & Parsons, 2025). Systematic review evidence on non-criminal-justice interventions for children and adolescents supports psychosocial and community-based approaches while cautioning that the effectiveness base remains limited and implementation-dependent (Lewis et al., 2025). Two cautions follow: clinicians must avoid over-medicalising what are often social (incl. relational) and ideological problems, while ensuring that genuine mental-health needs are identified and treated (Ho et al., 2019); and given the acknowledged difficulty of distinguishing psychopathology from ideology, clinical judgements about radicalisation risk should be made collaboratively and revisited over time rather than fixed at a single point (e.g., Bhui & Bhugra, 2021; Corner & Gill, 2015)

Conclusion

The sharp increase in the involvement of minors and young adults in terrorism and violent extremism, combined with the distinct challenges of working with young people across detention and community sentences, underscores the need for coordinated, adaptive, and evidence-informed approaches that are tailored to the developmental stage of this population. As highlighted throughout this Discussion Paper, justice-involved youth present heightened vulnerabilities (e.g., developmental immaturity, trauma and adverse childhood experiences, marginalisation, and pervasive exposure to online extremist ecosystems) but also a greater malleability and openness to change that make timely, protective-factor-oriented intervention especially worthwhile.

Detention and community settings pose specific challenges. Custodial environments concentrate risk through association, informal hierarchies and intensifying grievance, while community settings raise the risks of stigmatisation, discontinuous supervision and the severing of protective family and community ties. These challenges are compounded by a fragmented evidence base, particularly for young people serving community sentences, and by the fact that staff working with children remain among the least trained justice professionals in the EU. Clinical insights add a further layer of nuance, cautioning against conflating mental ill-health with radicalisation while recognising the elevated psychiatric burden and unmet needs that this population carries.

Against this backdrop, the 5th meeting of Thematic Panel 2 on "Prisons, Rehabilitation and Reintegration" provides a critical platform for reflection and joint action. By convening practitioners, policymakers, and researchers from EU Member States and priority third countries, the meeting will foster a shared understanding of the operational, relational and systemic challenges identified here. It will also support the co-creation of practical and sector-specific recommendations that strengthen age-appropriate rehabilitation and reintegration pathways, embed trauma-informed, multidisciplinary and protective-factor approaches, and ensure continuity of support from custody to community.

Building on the Strategic Orientations 2024-2026, the ProtectEU: Agenda to Prevent and Counter Terrorism, and the EUKH Toolbox for Minors, the meeting aims to translate collective insights into forward-looking proposals that reinforce multi-level, rights-based prevention strategies and ensure continuity across education, online safety, mental health and criminal justice. These outcomes will guide future TP2 work, the Strategic Orientations 2027-2029, and contribute to a more resilient, ethically grounded, and coordinated European response that transforms the vulnerability of justice-involved young people into resilience.

References

Aebi, M. F., & Cocco, E. (2025). *SPACE I – 2024 – Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics: Prison populations*. Council of Europe / University of Lausanne. https://wp.unil.ch/space/files/2025/09/250924_rapport-space-i-2024.pdf

Aebi, M. F., Cocco, E., et al. (2025). *SPACE II – 2024 – Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics: Persons under the supervision of probation agencies*. Council of Europe. https://wp.unil.ch/space/files/2025/11/space-ii_report-2024_251105.pdf

Akpanekpo, E. I., & Butler, T. (2025). Clinical phenotypes of psychosis and reoffending risk among justice-involved adolescents: A population-based cohort study. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *16*, 1663025. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2025.1663025

Andrade, G., Benlahcene, A., & Bedewy, D. (2026). Youth mental health and religiously framed radicalization in the Middle East and North Africa region: A review of evidence and gaps. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *17*, 1782072. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2026.1782072

Barracosa, S., & Cherney, A. (2025). An integrated model for youth radicalisation: Examining the impact of life-course and situational factors. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2025.2554777

Barracosa, S., & March, J. (2022). Dealing with radicalised youth offenders: The development and implementation of a youth-specific framework. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *12*, 773545. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.773545

Bhui, K., & Bhugra, D. (2021). *Terrorism, violent radicalisation and mental health*. Oxford University Press.

Campion, K., & Colvin, E. (2025). Community, more than conviction: Understanding radicalisation factors for young people in Australia. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2478957

Cherney, A., De Rooy, K., & Williams, R. (2023). *A systematic evidence review of rehabilitation strategies for young people who have radicalised to violent extremism*. NSW Government. https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/UQ-youth-CVE.pdf

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) (2026). *Juveniles / minors*. https://childrenofprisoners.eu/facts_and_figures/juveniles-minors/

Corner, E., & Gill, P. (2015). A false dichotomy? Mental illness and lone-actor terrorism. *Law and Human Behavior*, *39*(1), 23-34. https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000102

Desmarais, C., & Rousseau, C. (2024). Self-representation and future perception of youth followed by a specialized intervention team in violent radicalization. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, *21*(1), e1837. https://doi.org/10.1002/aps.1837

European Commission (2024). *Commission Recommendation (EU) 2024/1238 of 23 April 2024 on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child*. Official Journal of the European Union. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202401238

European Commission (2026). *ProtectEU: Agenda to prevent and counter terrorism*. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/d8cee954-5df6-4566-a520-6d59cfef347e_en?filename=ProtectEU%20-%20Agenda%20to%20prevent%20and%20counter%20terrorism.pdf

Europol (2026). *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2026*. https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/EU-TE-SAT-2026.pdf

Ho, C. S. H., Quek, T. C., Ho, R. C. M., & Choo, C. C. (2019). Terrorism and mental illness: A pragmatic approach for the clinician. *BJPsych Advances*, *25*(2), 101-109. https://doi.org/10.1192/bja.2018.49

Kasapi, Z. A., & Doichinova, M. (2024). *Reforming Youth Corrections* [Policy Paper]. ARISA Child – Assessing the Risk of Isolation of Sentenced and Accused: Enhancing the Capacity of Correctional Services to Work with Convicted Children. https://arisa-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ARISA-Child-policy-paper-EN.pdf

Kasinathan, J., & Parsons, A. (2025). Radicalisation in adolescents: Mental health considerations for violent extremism. *Australasian Psychiatry*, *33*(1), 57-63. https://doi.org/10.1177/10398562241292209

Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Bélanger, J. J., Sheveland, A., Hetiarachchi, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2014). The psychology of radicalization and deradicalization: How significance quest impacts violent extremism. *Political Psychology*, *35*(S1), 69-93. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12163

Lewis, J., Marsden, S., Stefaniak, A., & Hewitt, J. (2025). Non-criminal justice interventions for countering cognitive and behavioural radicalisation amongst children and adolescents: A systematic review of effectiveness and implementation. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, *21*(3), e70079. https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.70079

Royal Canadian Mounted Police. (2024). Five-Eyes insights – Young people and violent extremism: A call for collective action. https://rcmp.ca/en/corporate-information/publications-and-manuals/five-eyes-insights-young-people-and-violent-extremism-call-collective-action

Silke, A. (2014). *Prisons, terrorism and extremism: Critical issues in management, radicalisation and reform*. Routledge.

Trimbur, M., Amad, A., Horn, M., Thomas, P., & Fovet, T. (2021). Are radicalization and terrorism associated with psychiatric disorders? A systematic review. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, *141*, 214-222. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2021.07.002

UNICEF (2018). *15 Years of Juvenile Justice Reforms in Europe and Central Asia: Key results*. UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia. https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org.eca/files/2018-11/Key%20Results%20in%20Juvenile%20Justice%20in%20Europe%20and%20Central%20Asia_0.pdf

Further Readings

Barracosa, S., & March, J. (2022). Dealing with radicalised youth offenders: The development and implementation of a youth-specific framework. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *12*, 773545. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.773545

Cherney, A., De Rooy, K., & Williams, R. (2023). *A systematic evidence review of rehabilitation strategies for young people who have radicalised to violent extremism*. NSW Government. https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/UQ-youth-CVE.pdf

European Commission (2026). *ProtectEU: Agenda to prevent and counter terrorism*. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/d8cee954-5df6-4566-a520-6d59cfef347e_en?filename=ProtectEU%20-%20Agenda%20to%20prevent%20and%20counter%20terrorism.pdf

Europol (2026). *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2026*. https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/EU-TE-SAT-2026.pdf

Kasapi, Z. A., & Doichinova, M. (2024). *Reforming Youth Corrections [Policy Paper]*. ARISA Child – Assessing the Risk of Isolation of Sentenced and Accused: Enhancing the Capacity of Correctional Services to Work with Convicted Children. https://arisa-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ARISA-Child-policy-paper-EN.pdf

Lewis, J., Marsden, S., Stefaniak, A., & Hewitt, J. (2025). Non-criminal justice interventions for countering cognitive and behavioural radicalisation amongst children and adolescents: A systematic review of effectiveness and implementation. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, *21*(3), e70079. https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.70079