

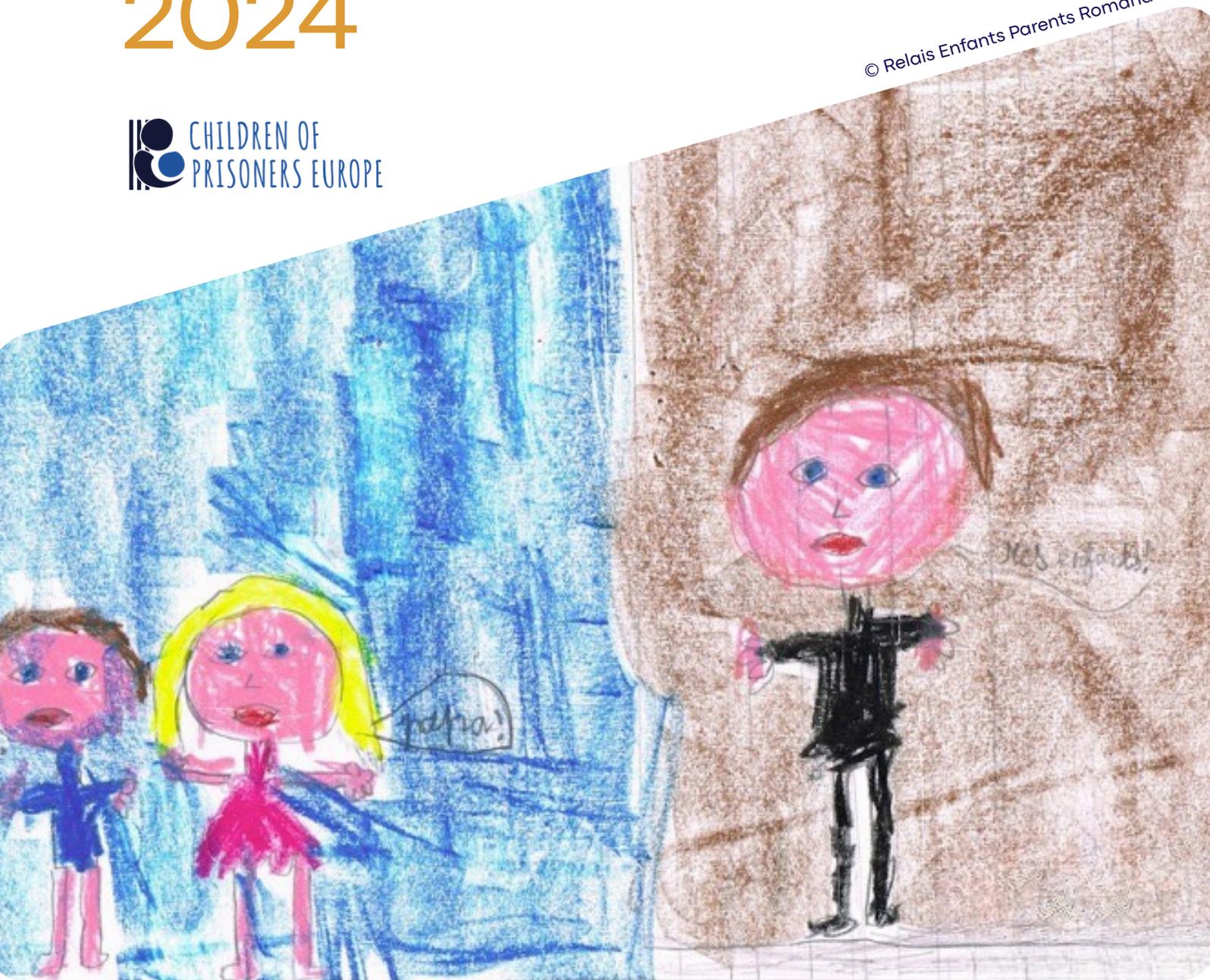
Children of Prisoners Europe

# Annual REPORT

2024



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Network  
for Social  
Change

# Executive Director's Foreword

The year 2024 was a year of consolidation and deepened impact for COPE. At the heart of COPE's work was—and continues to be—a commitment to child participation, safeguarding and the creation of child-friendly, rights-based environments, both in communities and across justice systems for children affected by parental imprisonment.

In 2024, COPE advanced its cross-sectoral "One Roof" approach, aligning with the 2024 EU Recommendation on integrated child protection. By embedding a systemic-change, cross-sectoral approach into every initiative, COPE strengthened its philosophy that sustainable change requires coordinated efforts across sectors — justice, education, institutional, social services, civil society and beyond.

Through initiatives like [Game with Mum & Dad](#), supported by regranting of funding to five COPE members, COPE strengthened awareness among the public and to key political audiences and helped provide direct support to children. COPE's Annual Network Meeting in Berlin provided a platform to spotlight innovative approaches including gender-sensitive fatherhood programmes in prison and community-led work with Irish Traveller and Roma families impacted by imprisonment.

COPE also prioritised capacity-building for law enforcement, judges and

ombudspersons, and submitted a contribution to the forthcoming UN General Comment No. 27 on children's access to justice and effective remedies.

[A webinar held in November](#) on partnerships between schools-prisons to support children reached over 115 child stakeholders, and a multilingual online child consultation gathered insights from 48 children from 10 countries across Europe on how to make prison visits more supportive and dignified. Their words fed into [this advocacy report](#).

COPE continued to mainstream child safeguarding across the network via safeguarding workshops with members, providing tailored support on developing, reviewing and revising safeguarding policies.

COPE's strength lies in its members, who both contribute to and benefit from the work of the COPE headquarters, as well as from the exchanges and collaboration that flourish within the network. Together with its members, partners and the children and families with direct experience themselves, COPE will continue to work to create lasting, systemic change and a future where every child is guaranteed the protection of his or her rights.



—Liz Ayre  
COPE Executive Director

# Who we are

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) is a network of organisations and individuals working with and on behalf of the 2.1 million children in Europe with a parent in prison.

Children affected by a parent's imprisonment are not readily recognised as a group facing particular vulnerabilities, despite their frequent exposure to discrimination, stigma, economic instability and the emotional pains of parental separation. Despite clear provisions in international policy instruments and standards, and the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by all European states, they are a low priority for most governments and their needs slip through the cracks of even the most elaborate nets of social protection.



## Mission

The mission of the COPE Network is clear: to prevent and respond to violations of the rights of children with imprisoned parents. For over two decades, COPE and its members have been working to help ensure that children's individual needs are met and their best interests are continuously assessed, from the moment a parent is arrested through to reintegration after the end of a prison sentence.

## Vision

COPE's vision is that every child be guaranteed fair, unbiased treatment, protection of his or her rights and equal opportunities regardless of social, economic or cultural heritage.





## How we work

COPE takes a systems approach to improving the lives of children with imprisoned parents, working to ensure that the systems children encounter (welfare, social, justice, education,...) can respect their rights and meet their needs, rather than expecting children to adapt to inadequate systems and supports.

Children's rights are front and centre in all COPE work, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

COPE remains committed to helping ensure that every child affected by parental imprisonment enjoys all their rights, without discrimination of any kind.

## What we do

- Build capacity of duty-bearers (e.g., police, prison staff, judges and schools)
- Advocacy at national, international levels — collectively with our members
- Raise awareness among key duty-bearers and wider society
- Consult children on what needs to change
- Share good practices across Europe
- Embed these practices in international standards
- Foster a network of practitioners and organisations to exchange cross-border knowledge and generate international momentum

# Seven ways COPE created positive impacts for children affected by a parent's imprisonment in 2024



# 1

## PROMOTING MEANINGFUL CHILD PARTICIPATION TO ENSURE CHILDREN'S VOICES SHAPE POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Children with an imprisoned parent are too often excluded from the conversations and decisions that affect them. As established by Article 12 of the UNCRC, children have the right to be heard and to have their views taken seriously. Meaningful child participation is a vital tool for designing effective and rights-based policies and practices.

In 2024, COPE continued to prioritise direct engagement with children affected by parental imprisonment. One key initiative was an online child consultation, developed by COPE and disseminated by members and affiliates during the first half of the year. COPE gathered the views of 48 children from 10 countries, inviting them to share their experiences and needs when visiting a parent in prison. Their responses, published in a dedicated [report](#), offered clear, actionable recommendations for improving the prison visiting experience.

Another powerful example of child participation came during [COPE's webinar on school-prison collaboration](#), held on 25 November. Co-facilitated by COPE members Polly Wright and Sarah Beresford, the session brought together over 100 professionals to explore how

schools and prison services can better work together to support children.

The discussion was enriched by a young person with lived experience of parental imprisonment, who shared a set of calls to action. Their testimony highlighted key systemic failures: that families often don't know where to turn for support, that children feel unable to speak up due to shame or fear, that schools lack the tools to recognise and respond to these needs and that prisons frequently fail to support imprisoned parents in fulfilling their parental roles. By centring the voice of someone directly impacted, the webinar helped professionals rethink assumptions and identify opportunities for change grounded in real-life experience.



# PROMOTING CHILD-FRIENDLY PRISON VISIT ALTERNATIVES TO SUPPORT CHILD-PARENT BONDS ACROSS EUROPE

# 2

Maintaining a strong bond between children and their imprisoned parents is essential for children's emotional well-being. Yet traditional prison visits are often intimidating and stressful experiences for children. To address this, COPE has championed child-friendly visit alternatives that offer safe spaces for connection, via initiatives such as the [Game with Mum & Dad](#) (GWMD) project. In its second year as an international project, GWMD in 2024 used sport and play-based activities inside prisons to foster meaningful contact between children and their parents in settings that respect the child's needs.

First developed by COPE member Bambinisenzabarre in 2015, the initiative gained further momentum in 2024 with new support from the UEFA Foundation for Children. GWMD is not simply a one-off fun event for children and parents within prison walls — it is a systemic, rights-based initiative that aims to embed long-term, structural change across European prison systems. It aims to humanise prison environments, challenge stigma and embed the perspective of children with imprisoned parents in penitentiary systems.

By promoting awareness among prison staff and encouraging a more inclusive view of prisons, GWMD seeks to influence national and international policymakers

to adopt systemic changes that uphold children's rights and to foster collaboration between COPE members, prison services and justice ministries.

In 2024, over 2,000 children took part across 7 countries: Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, the Netherlands and the UK (Scotland). COPE regranted part of its budget— from its Operating Grant with the European Commission via the CERV funding scheme—to some grassroots member organisations in these countries to support local implementation and ensure national-level impact.

[Feedback from children](#) has been overwhelmingly positive— demonstrating the importance of supportive, playful environments focused on preserving the child-parent bond.





"Thank you so much for the organisation this event, I really appreciated the chance to share such a special and different moment with my son."

— an imprisoned father

◀ GWMD at Novara prison (Italy), 18 September 2024

"I really enjoyed today, I'm glad I could be with my dad. It was good that there were refreshments, finally dad had some good food. I'm glad I could be here today."

— Child

GWMD at Jiřice prison (Czechia), 21 September 2024 ▶



"We haven't been able to talk so well or so much for a long time. This wasn't like the usual visits: this day was much nicer and more fun!"

- Child, 14 years old

◀ GWMD at Krakow prison (Poland), 25 August 2024



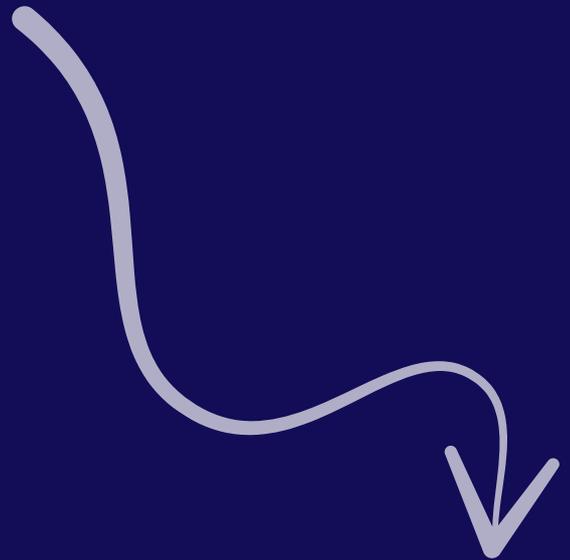
# 3

## WORKING WITH THE JUDICIARY TO UPHOLD CHILDREN’S RIGHTS DURING A PARENT’S CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

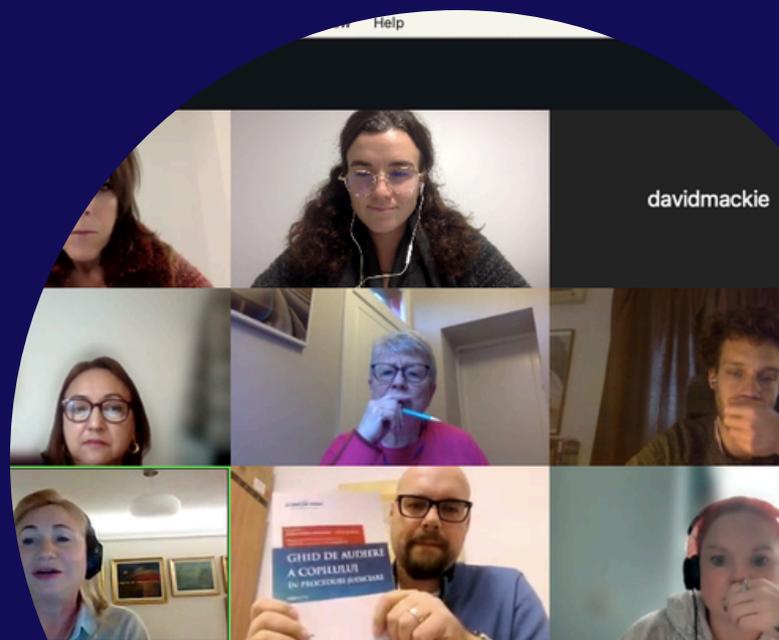
Children whose parents are on trial, or facing judicial orders, are rarely considered in courtrooms and legal procedures, despite the fact that decisions made during these proceedings can have a lasting impact on their well-being. COPE began working in the judicial realm in 2022, with the first “Judicial Roundtable” held in Krakow, Poland, convening legal scholars, judges, lawyer and civil society representatives to exchange perspectives on how to promote proper respect of children’s rights during a parent’s criminal proceedings. This was replicated in Romania in 2023 and in 2024, COPE continued this work with the **third COPE Judicial Roundtable**, held online on 14 November.

This event brought together 18 participants — judges, legal professionals, child rights experts and academics to discuss how to close the gap between children’s rights as enshrined in law and the practical realities of judicial and legal procedures. Participants noted the discrepancies in awareness and motivation surrounding children’s rights among family court judges and criminal court judges – and the tremendous potential for mutual learning and exchange of good practices between them.

Topics included Child Impact Assessments (a tool which can be used to assess the potential impact of a parent’s sentence on a child), the need for training among the judiciary and better recognition of children’s voices during a parent’s trial.



Online Judicial Roundtable ▶



# STRENGTHENING CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION TO BETTER SUPPORT CHILDREN WITH IMPRISONED PARENTS: “ONE-ROOF” APPROACH

# 4

The challenges children with imprisoned parents cope with are multifaceted — as such, the required responses must involve a coordinated constellation of partners. Too often responses remain siloed: justice systems focus on the imprisonment of the parent, schools might be unaware of a child’s family situation and social services may not be systematically alerted. A cross-sectoral approach is therefore essential. It ensures that all actors—prison staff, probation, educators, social worker, child protection workers, police and healthcare providers—collaborate to offer coordinated, child-sensitive support.



COPE made significant strides in promoting this holistic model by bringing together professionals, institutions and decision-makers from across Europe to work together toward systemic, sustainable change.

A cornerstone of this effort was **COPE’s 2024 International Conference**, “Let’s Talk to One Another: A Cross-Sectoral Approach for Children with a Parent in Prison,” held in Berlin on 13 June and hosted by Treffpunkt e.V.

The event brought together over 200 participants from 20 countries, including civil society organisations, children and adults with direct experience of parental imprisonment; representatives from Children’s Ombudsperson Offices, child protection agencies, prison administrations, academia and law enforcement.

COPE Conference in Berlin

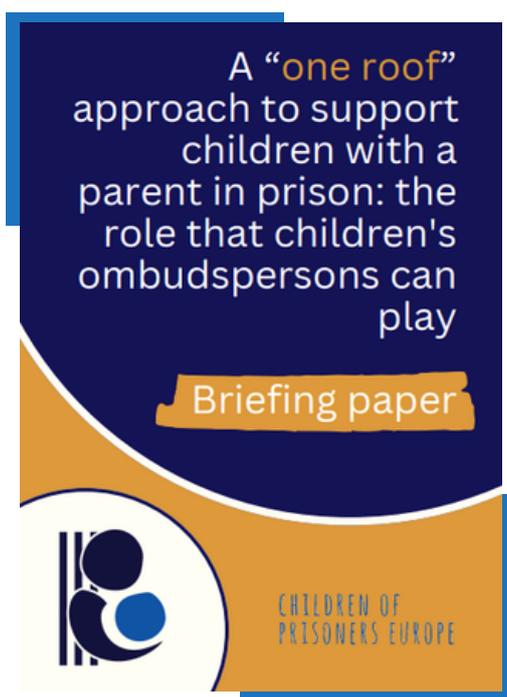


COPE also deepened collaboration with Independent Children's Rights Institutions (or Children's Ombudspersons), whose role in national child rights implementation is central to systemic reform. At the **ENOC 2024 Spring Seminar** in Tallinn, COPE was represented by Board member Ewelina Startek and Wise Persons Group member Kate Philbrick, who spotlighted how cross-sectoral work led by ombudspersons in countries such as Croatia, Estonia, Greece and Iceland can bring children with imprisoned parents at the center of policy discussions and expedite structural improvements. They discussed the role of language and framing in promoting non-stigmatising approaches to this topic.



COPE presentation at ENOC Spring Seminar ▲

To further support this agenda, COPE published the [One Roof Approach briefing paper](#) in early 2024, outlining how ombudspersons can act as cross-sector connectors, promoting integrated systems of support where all relevant stakeholders unite together under one coordinated framework.



# 5

## BUILDING CAPACITY AMONG LAW ENFORCEMENT AND PRISON STAFF TO PROTECT CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The arrest of a parent can be a highly traumatic event for children — whether they are present during the event or learn of what happened later on. For those whose parents go on to spend time in prison, the arrest may be the child's first encounter with "the system".

Promoting child-sensitive arrest procedures among law enforcement is therefore essential to upholding the rights and well-being of children with imprisoned parents.

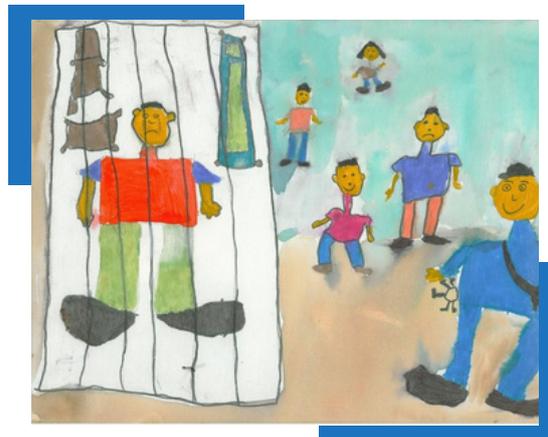
On 22 January, COPE delivered an introductory [training session with CEPOL](#) (the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training) for 68 law enforcement professionals from 10 EU Member States. The session focused on child-sensitive arrest procedures, grounded in the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)5 and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Participants described the training as "eye-opening," especially the insights into children's emotional experiences of a parent's arrest. Professionals highlighted their desire to learn more about explaining events to children when they are in distress. The session laid the groundwork for more in-depth follow-up training to be delivered in the future.

In the prison context, COPE hosted its **"Papa Plus" interactive workshop** in Korydallos Prison, the largest correctional facility in Greece, on 27 November.

Held in collaboration with Epanodos, the Korydallos Special Health Center for Prisoners and the Greek General Secretariat for Anticrime Policy, the interactive workshop brought together 20 prison officers to co-develop strategies that support imprisoned parents and their children. Led by psychologist Christine Maerkl, the session focused on creating child-friendly visiting spaces, encouraging parent-teacher engagement from inside prison and promoting video calls and other communication tools which maintain connections but never replace physical contact.

This workshop marked the beginning of a wider initiative, with future webinars and in-person trainings planned across the Greek prison estate in 2025. The goal is to embed child-rights awareness in everyday prison operations and to systematise improvements that foster stronger, healthier family relationships.



# EXPLORING INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION AND INCLUSIVE RESPONSES TO REDUCE STIGMA

# 6

Children affected by parental imprisonment are not a homogenous group. Their experiences are shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status and family structure. Addressing these overlapping dimensions of identity is crucial to ensuring inclusive, equitable support and reducing the stigma they face.

COPE supported a **groundbreaking initiative** led by a Czechia-based member ROMODROM, o.p.s., targeting Roma children and families—a group often subject to entrenched discrimination that is further compounded when a parent is imprisoned. The project promoted inclusion through sports, music and creative workshops, while celebrating Romani culture and strengthening child–parent contact in alternative, community-based settings. By involving prison staff in these events, the initiative also aimed to challenge stereotypes and humanise Roma families in the eyes of justice professionals.

To further explore intersectionality and systemic discrimination, COPE organised the **Equality Forum** during its 2024 Annual Networking Meeting. Themed around equality and non-discrimination, the forum spotlighted the experiences of Roma and Traveller families, including a pioneering Participatory Action Research project from Ireland, in which Traveller

peer researchers examined how schools can better support Traveller children.

Discussions also highlighted the gendered dimensions of imprisonment and how children are affected differently depending on whether their mother or father is incarcerated.

In parallel, COPE convened a **Gender Working Group** composed of members from 5 EU Member States, the UK and India, who met three times over the year. During three sessions, the group examined how gender norms, notably with regards to caregiving roles and family dynamics, influence the experience of parental imprisonment for children. Namely, motherhood and fatherhood are regarded differently within prison systems and society at large; the group discussed the general under-recognition of fatherhood in prison and the gender-specific challenges mothers face in prison (eg., physical and mental health). Specific challenges faced by same-sex and transgender parents in prison were also raised.



Event organised by Romodrom in Czechia



# 7

## ADVANCING A CULTURE OF CHILD SAFEGUARDING ACROSS THE COPE NETWORK

COPE deepened its commitment to child safeguarding by embedding child protection based practices across its activities and strengthening the capacity of its members to develop, revise or update child safeguarding policies.

In 2024, COPE disseminated its new [Child Safeguarding Toolkit](#) to members, providing them with practical tools for drafting or reviewing policies. Following the adoption of the COPE Principles in 2023, all member organisations are now required to have a child safeguarding policy. Individual members also signed a Code of Conduct, affirming personal responsibility for upholding safeguarding standards.

A central initiative was the introduction of [Financial Support to Third Parties](#), under COPE's EU Operating Grant. Five member organisations received regrants to implement Game with Mum & Dad activities, with strong safeguarding measures integrated from the start. Applicants submitted their child safeguarding policies, completed COPE's checklist to ensure a robust standard of child safeguarding policies (based on the Keeping Children Safe standards) and designated a Child Safeguarding Focal Point. All staff involved in the projects carried out—38 professionals, including four from prison services—completed the "Safer Play" safeguarding training developed by Common Goal, a mandatory aspect of the initiative.



# Spotlight on COPE Member Activities from 2024

COPE's strength lies in the diversity of its members, who are principally civil society organisations and individual experts in the field, and increasingly individuals from the judiciary, police services, prison systems, education and policy-makers from varying backgrounds. This cross-sectoral composition enables the kind of collaboration that is essential for reflecting on and co-creating creative supports for children, advocating with and on their behalf and ensuring all relevant sectors are involved in these processes. Across different countries and professional contexts, COPE members engage in varied and complementary roles, such as raising public awareness and advocating for children's rights, academic research, developing policy frameworks or implementing innovative practices to improve outcomes for children with imprisoned parents. The activities of COPE members reflect this broad and dynamic engagement. Below are some highlights of some members' work in 2024:

## Cross-sectoral recommendations to support children with a parent in prison (Croatia)

Croatia's Office of the Ombudsman for Children responded to complaints from families facing challenges related to parental imprisonment, issuing cross-sectoral recommendations aimed at improving support for children who are affected. Recognising that addressing these issues requires collaboration across multiple systems, the office called for coordinated involvement from education, social welfare and justice sectors, always prioritising the child's best interests. Key concerns included informing children about their parent's imprisonment, overcoming barriers to visits such as distance and financial constraints, and ensuring accessible visit spaces.

## Memorandum of Understanding with the Court of Milan (Italy)

In March 2024, COPE member Bambinisenzabarre signed a landmark Memorandum of Understanding with the Court of Milan—the first agreement of its kind in Italy. [This protocol](#) promotes free access to support services for children with an imprisoned parent and reinforces the implementation of the Charter of Rights of Children of Detained Parents, now marking its 10th anniversary. As part of the agreement, the Court of Milan commits to informing families about available support at the point of issuing prison visit permits, enabling timely access to specialised counselling and resources.

## Child Impact Assessments (UK)

In 2024, the Prison Reform Trust launched the [Child Impact Assessment](#) framework—an innovative, child-centered tool designed to ensure children with a parent in the justice system are listened to, supported and meaningfully included in decisions affecting them. Drafted by COPE member Sarah Beresford, the Child Impact Assessment is unlike formal assessments: it is a non-statutory and voluntary initiative, aimed at opening up guided conversations that do not assess the child, but rather assess their emotions and needs.

They can be used flexibly by a wide range of practitioners, including teachers, social workers, family support workers and families themselves — it is the child who designates their trusted adult. Originally developed for children with a parent in the justice system, the framework now includes resources tailored to those with a sibling in prison.

*“If I’d had set questions like these to ask me how I was feeling and how I was doing, it would’ve been a lot better for me... It would’ve really helped me.”*

— Girl, aged 14 when her father went to prison

## New guidelines for maintaining child-parent contact during imprisonment (Czechia)

In 2024, Prison Fellowship Czech Republic was instrumental in driving systemic change following an inquiry by the Ombudsman, which revealed that Child Protection Services (OSPOD) often discouraged prison visits without assessing the child’s best interests. In response, cooperation protocols between OSPOD and the Prison Service were established, as well as new guidelines on prison visits for children, with support from the Ministry of Justice. To further advocate for children with a parent in prison, PF Czech Republic organised a Roundtable at the Czech Parliament in November, under the Game with Mum & Dad initiative, with support from MP Eva Decroix. Children, caregivers and imprisoned parents shared their experiences, helping to bring national attention to the issue.



# COPE In Numbers

## COPE Members & Affiliates

Total as per December 2024

Full member organisations	35
Individual members	35
Applicant members	4
Affiliate organisations	28
Affiliate individuals	43



In 2024 COPE welcomed to the network:

### 2 new member organisations

- Aproximar (Portugal)
- CASPAE (Portugal)

### 4 new individual members

- David Mackie (UK)
- Katherine Mackie (UK)
- Núria Pujol (Spain)
- Russ Massie (UK)

## Raising Awareness

 **950**  
Followers on LinkedIn

 **1,551**  
Followers on Facebook

 **40**  
Subscribers on Youtube

 **945**  
Newsletter subscribers

# Number of children directly impacted by COPE's work

## 130,789

Here is a breakdown:

- Children impacted by COPE members' work: 126,417\*
- Game with Mum & Dad project: 4324
- COPE driven initiatives with children: 48

\* Source: internal member survey, including 12 responses out of 144 members and affiliates. As such, this figure remains a very conservative estimate.

## Finances

### Key Indicators for 2024

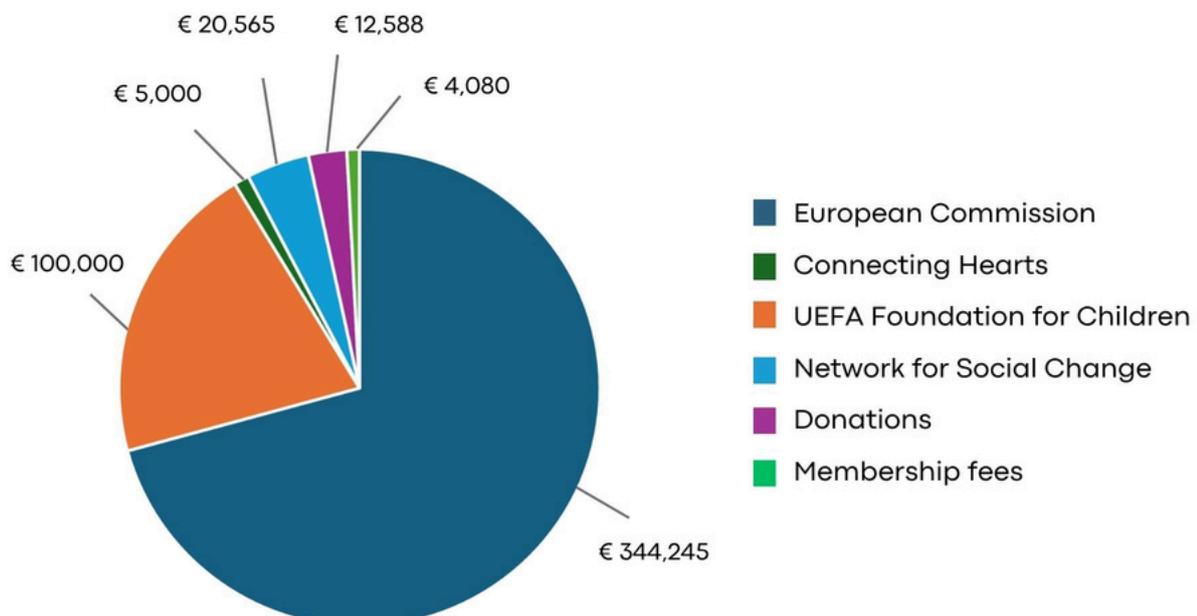
Income: € 486,478

Expenditure: € 423,625

Number of staff: 4

Number of members and affiliates: 144

### COPE Funding Sources 2024



# Behind the scenes

## The Board in 2024

Operating on a voluntary basis, the Board ensures that the COPE Association maintains a relevant, strategic and effective approach. It provides financial oversight and policy direction and supports management of the staff team. Thank you to the following individuals for their commitment to COPE:

Margaret Tuite, President  
Alexandru Gulei, Vice-President  
Ewelina Startek, Secretary General  
Winie Hanekamp, Treasurer  
Rachel Brett, Board Member  
Edoardo Fleischner, Board Member  
Nancy Loucks, Board Member  
Martin du Bois (co-opted October 2024)

## The Wise Persons Group

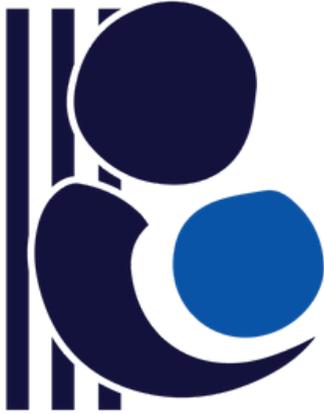
Made up of three experts in the field and long-term members or partners of COPE, the Wise Persons Group reviews all COPE action from a holistic, macro perspective, providing recommendations to help ensure it is aligned with ethical and deontological imperatives and is child-sensitive to the fullest extent. In 2024, the group consisted of former COPE President Kate Philbrick; former project leader of Bedford Row Family Project Ireland, Larry de Cleir and former Professor of Social Work at the University of Huddersfield, Adele Jones.

## Staff

Liz Ayre, Executive Director  
Carole Sautier, Finance & Administration Manager  
Paula Akyol, Project Director  
Naike Rosini, Communications Officer

## Interns

COPE is grateful to its interns, whose hard work played a critical role in the smooth functioning of COPE's daily operations, key projects and initiatives. Thank you to Bana Conde and Ashlyn Davini.



Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) is a pan-European network of non-profit organisations working with and on behalf of children separated from an imprisoned parent. The network encourages innovative perspectives and practices to ensure that children with an imprisoned parent fully enjoy their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and that action is taken to enable their well-being and development.

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE)

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<http://childrenofprisoners.eu/>

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SIRET: 437 527 013 00027



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