

Children of Prisoners Europe

Annual REPORT

2025



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10 YEARS



Network
for Social
Change

Message from the Director

The year 2025 brought both internal and external challenges for COPE. The rise in populism reshaping political priorities across Europe made working to keep the rights of children affected by parental imprisonment on policy agendas ever more crucial, while transitions within COPE required the organisation to adapt and evolve. In response, COPE doubled down on advocacy—contributing to discussion on five UN and Council of Europe standards, studies and guidelines; seeking to address gaps in child rights, justice, social inclusion and reintegration measures vis a vis children with imprisoned parents; and working more closely with young campaigners and agents of change, all helping to advance the shift from a criminal justice perspective towards a child rights and public health approach.

The year in general was an ambitious one, laying the foundations for COPE's next strategic phase through the development of its 2026–2028 Framework Partnership Agreement with the European Commission while further fortifying cross-sectoral support systems for children. COPE co-hosted a roundtable for judges and magistrates with the Portuguese Supreme Court; organised workshops in Greece for prison officers; co-organised a seminar with the Estonian Justice Ministry for stronger cooperation between justice, child protection and social services; and helped strengthen the capacity of COPE grassroots members in EU member states through an EU regranting scheme to further humanise prison settings.

The network continued to grow and mature organisationally, expanding its membership while strengthening governance and financial sustainability. We invested in understanding how the COPE headquarters can better support, connect and amplify the work of members across Europe—who are the strength of the network. New tools and resources included sentencing guidance, safeguarding training and a thematic journal on stigma. COPE's Game with Mum & Dad campaign scaled up, engaging some 2,660 children in nine countries and using a new storytelling approach to further humanise prison settings while connecting with a broader audience. We're grateful to the UEFA Foundation for Children for their support in achieving this.

Much work remains. There are, however, encouraging signs that governments, institutions and professionals are becoming more child-aware, even more child-centred. In the UK, some child impact assessments, for example, have contributed to decisions to impose non-custodial sentences, demonstrating the tangible difference that child-focused approaches can make. The 2018 Council of Europe Recommendation concerning children with imprisoned parents remains a pivotal impetus in COPE's work to help move governments, institutions and professionals closer to systems that place children's rights and well-being at their heart. The Recommendation's 10-year anniversary in 2028 will provide a key opportunity not only to celebrate progress but also to renew commitments, inspire fresh action and ensure that a greater number of children affected by parental imprisonment can flourish. Our deepest gratitude goes to everyone who generously dedicated their time and energy to our shared mission of making a meaningful difference in the lives of children across Europe.



Liz Ayre
COPE Executive Director



Who We Are & What We Do

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) is a European network of organisations and individuals working across 41 countries to protect and promote the rights of children with an imprisoned parent, ensuring that children's needs, voices and best interests are recognised at every stage — from a parent's arrest through imprisonment and reintegration.

Mission

COPE's mission is to prevent and respond to violations of the rights of children with imprisoned parents, from arrest through to reintegration after the end of a prison sentence, to ensure their individual needs are met, and their best interests are continuously assessed. We take a systems approach to improving the lives of children with imprisoned parents, namely ensuring that the systems (welfare, social, justice, education, ...) children come into contact with are able to respect their rights and meet their needs, rather than expecting children to adapt to inadequate systems and supports.

How We Work

By sharing knowledge, research and effective practices across its network, COPE strengthens services, policies and standards that support children affected by parental imprisonment. It promotes evidence-based solutions — “what works” — and helps ensure that children's rights are reflected in human rights frameworks.

Through advocacy and capacity building across sectors, COPE promotes equality, inclusion, non-discrimination, dignity and children's participation. Together, these efforts help ensure children affected by parental imprisonment are visible within policy efforts, that their rights are enshrined not only on paper but in practice, and systems are better positioned to support children's relationships with their parents.

Vision

COPE's vision is that every child should be guaranteed fair, unbiased treatment, protection of their rights and equal opportunities regardless of social, economic or cultural heritage or their parent's legal status.



© Probacja

Six ways COPE helped children affected by parental imprisonment be seen, heard and supported in 2025



© Paulina Bqbol

1

We helped put children with imprisoned parents on European policy agendas

The visibility of children affected by parental imprisonment remains low among many relevant policy frameworks, namely justice and children's rights frameworks. In 2025, COPE worked to increase recognition of their rights and needs at European levels.

At the Council of Europe, COPE engaged with the Child Rights Division, contributing to the work of the Committee of Experts on Access to Child-Friendly Justice and the 12th Plenary Meeting of the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF). Through these platforms, COPE advocated for the inclusion of children affected by parental imprisonment in key policy developments, including the revision of the Council of Europe Child-Friendly Justice Guidelines and the drafting of a new Recommendation on access to child-friendly justice through multidisciplinary and interagency services.

Within the justice world of the Council of Europe, COPE engaged with the Council for Penological Cooperation (PC-CP), speaking at its 30th Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services in September. Here, COPE shone a light on children's needs, promoting concrete ways prison and probation services can better meet them. Two examples of this: improved child friendly visiting environments on prison grounds and strong school-prison collaborations which bring school teachers into prisons to keep parents involved in their children's education.

At the European Commission, COPE helped bring children affected by parental imprisonment into sharper focus in EU justice and child rights discussions, spotlighting how Member States can better recognise and support this often-overlooked group.

COPE championed the European Child Guarantee, an EU policy framework to combat child poverty and social exclusion. Through engagement with the European Competence Centre for Social Innovation's Community of Practice on Social Inclusion, COPE highlighted a common gap in many national action plans, very few of which explicitly recognise parental imprisonment as an adverse childhood experience requiring a coordinated support response from various actors around the child.

At the UN, COPE supported the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights in its study on human rights and the social reintegration of persons released from detention and persons subjected to non-custodial measures.

COPE urged a child-rights lens: protecting child-parent bonds, where in the child's best interests, and ensuring support for children and families during imprisonment and after release, strengthening children's well-being while also supporting reintegration.

2 We amplified voices grounded in lived experience, research and practice to challenge stigma surrounding parental imprisonment

“You cannot speak about children with a parent in prison without them being in the room... People can tell stories if they see them from the outside. [...] You can see a system and how it works, but you have to feel for yourself to understand how it is working, you know, on individuals, on human beings.”

— Mireille Farrugia, COPE International Conference, Malta, 12 June 2025

Children affected by parental imprisonment are often spoken about rather than listened to, and their experiences can be overlooked in both policy and public debate. COPE worked to bring together voices grounded in lived experience, research and practice to challenge stigma and reshape how parental imprisonment is understood.

A key milestone in this work was the publication of the 11th volume of the [*European Journal of Parental Imprisonment*](#), focused on stigma and parental imprisonment from a children’s rights perspective. Bringing together contributions from international experts, the Journal highlighted the experiences and voices of young people affected by parental imprisonment, while exploring the role of inclusive media narratives, child-friendly justice and community-based support in reducing stigma and strengthening child-parent relationships.

Building on this, COPE contributed an article to an upcoming child rights publication by the New Perspectives on Childhood team at the Centre for Education Research and Innovation of the OECD. The article highlights children’s right to participate in decisions affecting their lives and showcases good practice of involving children in systemic change.

COPE also raised awareness through a feature in [*Open Access Government*](#), outlining the building blocks of coordinated, cross-sectoral support, promoting stronger safety nets around children, so their needs do not slip through the gap.



3

We brought together key cross-sectoral stakeholders to listen, learn and build lasting change for children with imprisoned parents

Children affected by parental imprisonment navigate challenges across multiple sectors, including home, education and justice systems. Meeting their needs effectively requires coordination, a shared vision and shared responsibility across sectors and professionals involved in their lives. In 2025, COPE continued to work to strengthen this cross-sectoral collaboration by bringing together diverse actors to build more comprehensive, child-centred approaches.

On 12 June 2025, COPE convened international and national actors in Malta for its **17th International Conference**, “Stigma dismantled, dignity upheld — child rights standards for children affected by parental imprisonment,” co-hosted with member NGO Mid-Dlam Ghad-Awl. This conference centred on understanding and dismantling the stigma faced by children affected by parental imprisonment, exploring how it permeates communities, institutions and systems. Individuals with lived experience of parental imprisonment, NGOs, child-rights professionals, academics and high-level speakers, convened in support of generating rights-based change to help destigmatise parental imprisonment for children.



On 28 November 2025, COPE co-hosted a **“One Roof” multi-sectoral meeting** in Estonia, with the Ministry of Justice and Digital Affairs, the Social Affairs Ministry / Social Insurance Board, representatives from Estonia’s three prisons, the Children’s Ombudsman and the Office of the Chancellor of Justice.



The tri-partite representation from justice, child protection and civil society actors helped identify key gaps in support for children, including limited data, insufficient parenting support in prisons and a need for clearer safeguarding responsibilities. The meeting helped align stakeholders around shared priorities and identify concrete next steps towards more integrated, child-centred responses in Estonia.

*Above: One-Roof meeting in Estonia, 28 November 2025
Left: COPE 17th International Conference, 12 June 2025*

4

We supported members to strengthen child-parent contact in prisons

“I haven’t laughed with him like this in a long time. I realised how much I’ve missed it.”

— imprisoned father, Vaslui Prison, Romania

“Dad, I haven’t had this much fun in ages. It was amazing here.”

— A little girl, Bollate Prison, Italy

Maintaining meaningful contact between children and their imprisoned parents is essential to protecting children’s rights and strengthening family relationships. Through the **Game with Mum & Dad (GWMD)** project, COPE continued to support members in creating opportunities that strengthen the relationship between children and parents in prison through sport and play.

In 2025, COPE launched the third edition of GWMD, expanding the project to France, Portugal, Argentina and India. By creating opportunities for connection beyond traditional prison visits, this project helps children maintain relationships with their parents, reduces stigma and promotes a more child-centred approach within prison systems.



GWMD event in Botoşani, Romania, 20 October 2025
(© Alternative Sociale)

To support the implementation of GWMD, COPE provided grants to six member organisations through its annual regranting scheme, made possible by COPE’s CERV Operating Grant with the European Commission under the Citizens, Rights, Equality and Values funding stream. In 2025, GWMD activities reached around 2,660 children across Germany, Spain, France, India, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Argentina and the UK (Scotland).

Feedback from children, parents, caregivers and prison staff continued to highlight the positive impact of GWMD, showing how play-based interactions can support and strengthen the bond between children and their parents. Play can help bolster relationships that have been disrupted by imprisonment and create opportunities to reconnect.



GWMD event in Barcelona, Spain, 16 October 2025
(© Projecte Nius)



5 We supported prison services to better understand and respond to the needs of children and their parents in prison

Children's experiences of parental imprisonment are closely shaped by the environments in which they maintain contact with their parents, namely detention facilities. Supporting prison services to adopt child-centred approaches is crucial to ensuring that visits uphold children's rights and meet their needs.

In 2025, COPE worked with prison staff in Greece to strengthen understanding of children's needs and promote more child-sensitive practices. Through the **Creative Connections webinar**, co-organised with the Special Health Center for Prisoners of Korydallos, EPANODOS and the General Secretariat for Crime Prevention Policy, COPE shared some European practices supporting child-friendly prison visits and children's rights.



© Prison Fellowship Czech Republic



Future Proofing workshop in Athens, December 2025

Building on this exchange, COPE delivered two **Future Proofing workshops** in Athens and Thessaloniki, bringing together 36 prison officers from 12 prisons across Greece. The workshops explored children's and parents' perspectives, trauma-informed communication and practical ways to embed child-centred approaches into daily prison practice.

COPE also began developing an e-learning course to strengthen child safeguarding in prison settings. Designed as an adaptable resource for EU Member States, the course is aimed at supporting prison staff in understanding children's rights, emotional safety and well-being, and in recognising their needs during the prison visit.

6 We worked alongside justice professionals to promote children’s active, authentic voice in a parent’s court proceeding

“If the best interests of the child are to be fully respected, then their active participation in decisions which concern them is the one of the best ways of realising that principle.”

— Judge Paulo Guerra

Continuing its work with judicial professionals, COPE collaborated with the Portuguese Supreme Court of Justice co-hosting a **Judicial Roundtable at their premises** for 41 judges, prosecutors, lawyers, academics and civil society representatives to explore children’s right to participate in a parent’s criminal court proceedings — to ensure their voices are heard and meaningfully considered in safe, child-friendly ways.

The discussion highlighted the importance of child-friendly court environments, specialised training for judicial professionals and the need for greater recognition that children’s participation is not an “extra” granted by judges but should be

integral to judicial proceedings. Consideration of children and their rights remains starkly different among criminal courts and family courts, where there tends to be more protective measures in place and greater awareness of children’s rights.

The event helped spark high-level discussions between the prison service and the Portuguese judiciary, offering a space to examine system gaps and explore solutions to better protect children affected by parental imprisonment.

Following this work, COPE was invited to contribute as a trainer within the EU’s **European Judicial Training Platform**.



Judicial Roundtable in Portugal, 27 June 2025

Spotlight on some COPE member activities

Exodus and Expertisecentrum K I N D (the Netherlands)

Exodus, Expertisecentrum K I N D and The Netherlands Helsinki Committee implemented the **Our Stories Matter** project, with participation from Zaanstad Prison, the Dutch Custodial Institutions Agency, COPE and EuroPris. The initiative aimed at embedding meaningful, inclusive and safe child participation in the design and implementation of prison policies and practices across the Netherlands. Activities concluded in early 2026.

Projecte Nius (Spain)

Projecte Nius launched **Art with Mum & Dad** in Catalonia (Spain), a play- and art-based visiting experience designed to strengthen relationships between children and parents in prison. In a context where words may be difficult to find, the project helps children and parents connect in creative ways in a safe and child-friendly space.



Art with Mum & Dad project (© Projecte Nius)

BambiniSenzaSbarre, Probacja, RODA, REP IDF (Italy, Poland, Croatia, France)

Four COPE members are rolling out **Child Trust**, a training programme for prison officers on the needs of children with imprisoned parents. Piloted by BambiniSenzaSbarre, the project's overall goal is to promote a cultural shift in prisons: from a purely security-driven model to a more relational, rehabilitative and child-centred approach. Through training sessions held in the four countries involved, prison officers are invited to become agents of positive change, better equipped to support children when visiting a parent in prison.



Child Trust meeting in Poland (© Probacja)

Irish Penal Reform Trust (Ireland)

The IPRT released **new research** examining the economic and social challenges faced by families affected by imprisonment in Ireland. The study highlights the significant financial burdens families endure, including loss of income, increased expenses, housing instability, childcare difficulties and the costs of maintaining family connections through prison visits.

COPE's impact in 2025: three levels

1

Systems level



COPE raised awareness on the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment in EU, Council of Europe and UN policy discussions, promoting coordinated, child-rights-based approaches that bring together justice, welfare, education and law enforcement actors.



Stakeholder level

2

COPE strengthened the capacity of professionals and decision-makers through training, shared learning and key publications, supporting more child-sensitive and coordinated practices.

3

Network level



COPE connected members, institutions, public authorities, children and families to raise awareness, challenge stigma and support grassroots initiatives. Through collaboration and shared action, COPE helped drive more coordinated, rights-based responses for children affected by parental imprisonment across Europe and beyond.

COPE In Numbers

COPE Members & Affiliates

Total as per December 2025

Full member organisations	37
Applicant member organisations	4
Full member individuals	37
Affiliate organisations	27
Affiliate individuals	44

149
members in
41
countries

In 2025 COPE welcomed to the network:

2 full member organisations

Kirkens Bymisjon (Norway)

Ormiston Families (UK)

1 applicant member organisation

Projecte Nius (Spain)

3 individual members

Chandra Gracias (Portugal)

Christine Maerkl (Greece)

Ewelina Startek (Poland)

Raising Awareness



1,931

Followers on LinkedIn



1,592

Followers on Facebook



42

Subscribers on Youtube



1,025

Newsletter subscribers

Number of children directly impacted by the COPE Network's work in 2025:

22,940*

** This figure remains a very conservative estimate. It is based on data gathered within the Game with Mum & Dad project and an internal member survey where 25 out of 149 members and affiliates responded.*

Finances

Key Indicators for 2025

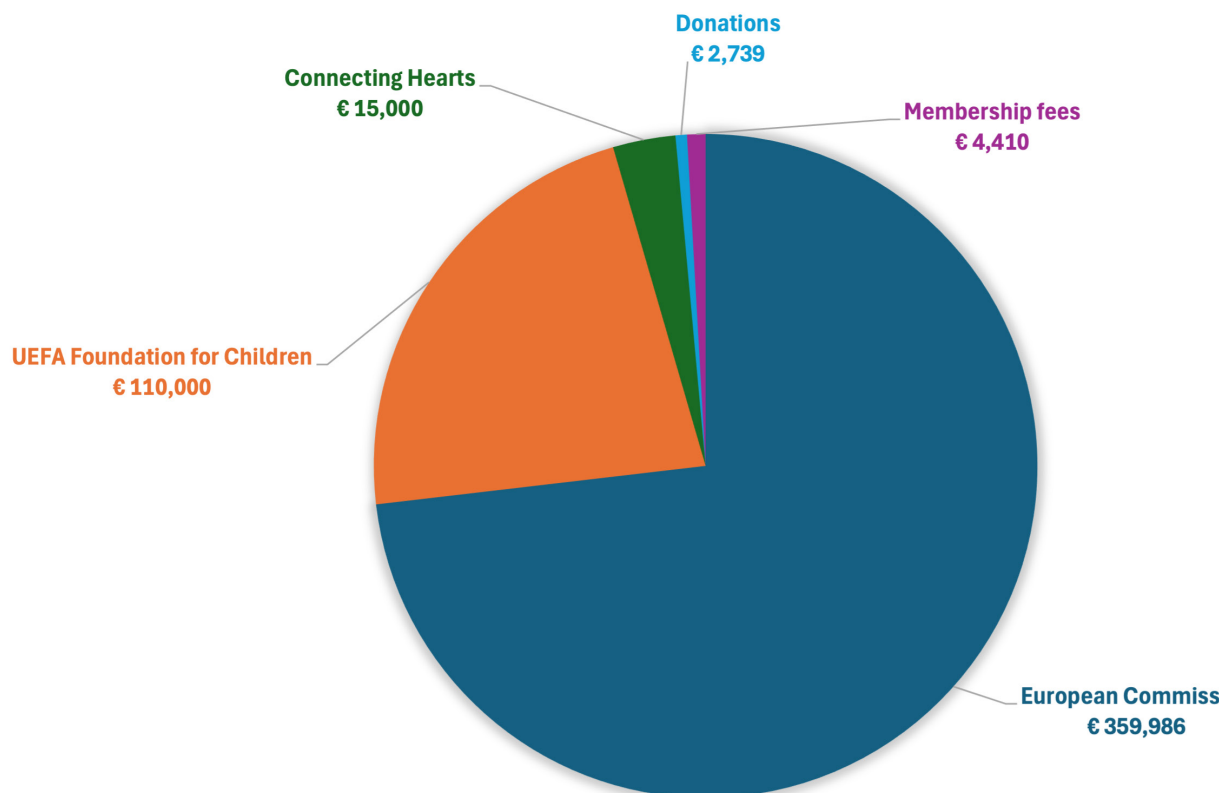
Income: € 493 720

Expenditure: € 469 992

Number of staff: 4

Number of members and affiliates: 149

COPE Funding Sources 2025



Behind the Scenes

The Board in 2025

Operating on a voluntary basis, the Board supports COPE to carry out its work for children effectively and strategically. In 2025, six Board meetings were held, focusing on oversight and strategic direction, statutes, strengthening organisational operations and COPE's capacity to advance children's rights across Europe. Thank you to the following individuals for their commitment to COPE:

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| • Alain Bouregba | Board Member (until June 2025) |
| • Rachel Brett | Board Member (until June 2025) |
| • Edoardo Fleischner | Board Member |
| • Maja Gabelica | co-Vice-President (from June 2025) |
| • Alexandru Gulei | Vice-President (until March 2025);
Acting President (April 2025–June 2025);
Treasurer (from June 2025) |
| • Nancy Loucks | Secretary General (from June 2025) |
| • Kate Philbrick | President (from June 2025) |
| • Ewelina Startek | Secretary General (until May 2025);
co-Vice-President (from June 2025) |
| • Margaret Tuite | President (until March 2025) |

In addition, Martin du Bois was co-opted onto the Board (until April 2025).

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 and macro perspective, providing recommendations to help ensure it is aligned with ethical and deontological imperatives and is child-sensitive to the fullest extent. In 2025, two experts stepped down (Adele Jones and Kate Philbrick). Reappointments were explored during 2025 in line with COPE efforts to maintain diversity in expertise, background, gender and geographic spread.

Staff

- Liz Ayre, Executive Director
- Carole Sautier, Finance and 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 Arete Tsoukalas and Nitz-fa Dimanche.

Support COPE Work

COPE relies on the generosity of donations to continue its work to support the rights and well-being of children with imprisoned parents across Europe. If you are interested in donating to COPE, please find more information on how to do so [at this link](#).

You can also donate your skills in:



Web Development
& Management



Data Analysis



Legal
Support



Fundraising



More information
on how to donate here!

European Journal of Parental Imprisonment
www.childrenofprisoners.eu

Children of Prisoners Europe is a non-profit organisation registered in France
under French Association law 1901.

SIRET : 437 527 013 00027

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This document has been produced with the financial support of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme of the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.