Children's Victimisation in Lithuania: Context, Forms and Prevalence

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Abstract Children's victimisation is one of the indicators of the child's rights situation in a country. This chapter focuses on recorded children's criminal victimisation and their latent victimisation in Lithuania. The authors first briefly look at the changing social context since the 1990s. On the one hand, growing economic welfare and decreasing overall crime rates seem to be laying the foundations for a safer and better life for all residents and children, too. On the other hand, an ageing society, growing divorce rates, and accelerating adolescents' involvement in cyberspace open new potential sources of insecurity. Secondly, the chapter focuses on registered criminal victimisation of Lithuanian children, noting that though general registered numbers of victimised children are decreasing, the forms of crime children are exposed to are of a dangerous nature. Most children experience physical or sexual violence, and adults from their close environment are the perpetrators in the majority of cases. Thirdly, the authors present the quantitative data from youth delinquency and victimisation surveys that revealed the high latency of children's victimisation. Victimisation survey data showed that cyberbullying, theft, and parental violence are those infringements that most commonly affect children and are often underreported or unreported.

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1 Introduction

Although in public discourse, adolescent delinquency drags much attention, children's victimisation is no less important for at least two reasons. First, children are one of the most vulnerable and fragile groups in society due to their physical and social immaturity, and the physical or sexual violence they experience in the early years of their lives can not only hurt their present but also very badly affect their future. It can lead to further physical and psychological problems or push towards delinquency and social exclusion. Secondly, children's victimisation, in comparison with adults', is a phenomenon with even higher latency. Therefore, officially registered trends can sometimes be deceiving, and this phenomenon should be scrutinised more precisely. This chapter aims to pay attention to children's victimisation in Lithuania during the last three decades. Taking into account a significantly changed social context that presumably should guarantee a safer environment for children, we note that even decreasing trends in registered victimisation give no grounds for relaxing. Much victimisation remains latent: children do not recognise or are in a powerless or subordinated position, and do not dare to report their victimisation. They are being victimised not only by their peers but by their close adults as well. The chapter also glances at two "risky" environments: family—where cases of domestic violence tend to be hidden from public eyes—and cyberspace, which is still lacking control and protection. We also analyse Lithuanian adolescents' victimisation differences among age and gender groups.

2 Contextualising and Theorising Children Victimisation in Lithuania

In evaluating the situation of children in the country, first of all, it is important to outline the context in which they are born, grow up, and socialise. This leads to a better understanding of the situation of a child's well-being, one of the indicators of which is child victimisation. In 1990, when Lithuania regained its independence from the Soviet Union, fundamental political, economic, cultural, and demographic changes began. In the long run, Lithuania followed the scenario of Western countries—the ageing processes in society started. Ageing was determined by the declining birth rate and increasing life expectancy. In the 1990s, Lithuania had 3,693,708 residents, so in 2024, this number is 2885891 inhabitants.[1] The number of children and minors under 18 decreased, as well as the share of this age group in the general population. In 2001, minors comprised 24.4% of the total population, so in 2024, this part was 17.4%. In other words, if at the beginning of the century, almost every

[1] Data presented in this and the next section is based on the data of the State Data Agency and the Official Lithuanian Criminal Register. Not all data have been collected since 1990. Some of the statistical studies were performed only once or twice.

fourth Lithuanian resident was a child or teenager, currently less than every fifth is under the age of 18. One of the reasons for the decreasing birth rate is postponed marriage to a later time: in 2000, women first married at 23.6, and men at 25.7, so in 2022, these ages were 28.3 and 30,0, respectively. Sociologists associate the lower birth rate and the decline in the number of children in the family with secularization and emancipation, equal opportunities, individual freedom of choice, and self-expression (Ariès 1980). Children are now treated not as a tribute to society but as a matter of individual choice, clearly realizing that a child requires significant emotional, financial, and other investments. In other words, in more than a quarter of a century, the situation has changed in such a way that now we are facing society ageing.

We will not say anything new, noting that the child's well-being depends greatly on the situation in the family. The last three decades in Lithuania have been characterised by a delay or decrease in marriages and a growing number of divorces. In the 1990s, Lithuania was one of Europe's leaders in divorces: 3.4 divorces per 100,000 population. After divorces, children stayed in single-parent families. For example, in 1990–45% of households raising children were single-parent families (Kanopienė et al. 2015). During the last three decades, new forms of family appeared. For example—transnational families—that emerged as a result of emigration.[2] Scholars (Juozeliūnienė et al. 2008) have noticed that such families face many challenges, including emotional consequences for children and their stigmatization.

The welfare of children is very dependent on the general economic situation in the country. A noticeable economic improvement began after 2004 when Lithuania became a member of the European Union. In 2005, 68% of the population had income less than the amount needed to meet basic needs, so in 2013, this part was less −48%, and in 2020, even less −34%. The growth of the household's average monthly disposable monetary income also shows improvement: if in 2005 it was 355 euros, in 2013–731 euros, so in 2022 it is 1491 euros. Statistical research performed in 2014 and 2021 also revealed an increase in children's well-being:

- if in 2014, there were 6.5% of households in which at least one child younger than 16 years old could not participate in paid trips and events organised by the school due to lack of funds, so in 2021, there were only 1% of such households;
- in 2014, there were 16.5% of households in which at least one younger than 16 years old child could not leave home for at least 1 week a year on vacation, including staying in a non-main residence or with friends or relatives due to lack of funds, so in 2021 m. this part was much less—4.7%;
- in 2014, there were 10.1% of households in which at least one younger than a 16-year-old child could not replace at least part of the worn-out clothes with new ones due to lack of funds, so in 2021, there were 3.2% of them.

[2] The peaks of emigration in Lithuania were recorded in 2005 (57,885 emigrants), in 2010 (83,157 emigrants), and in 2016 (50,333 emigrants).

Hirschi's (1969) Social Control Theory of Crime emphasises the importance of social relations. It also states that a controlled environment leads to a lower probability of youth delinquency. It is difficult to assess how much control there is in Lithuanian children's environment, but we can presume that more involvement in formal education assures some level of control. Young people up to the age of 18 spend time in families, educational institutions, and extracurricular activities, as well as with friends or on the Internet. Statistical data show that from 2007 to 2022, the bigger part (from 71% to 85%) of teenagers continued their education in secondary schools after having already acquired compulsory general education. Also, more than every fourth child (27% in 2018 and 25.9% in 2020) had some activity after school. So, they remained in a more or less controlled environment until adulthood. Unfortunately, there is little or no control in cyberspace. Therefore, online delinquency, as well as victimisation, has a higher probability of occurring. Over the last two decades, the involvement of adults and young people in the virtual space has grown. In 2004, 59% of the population used the internet at least once in the last 3 months, and 15% used it daily, so in 2022, these shares increased to 100% and 98%, respectively. Also, internet use has increased significantly from 2004 to 2022 among 16–24-year-olds. Participation in chat sites increased from 43% to 87%; gameplay from 50% to 79%; communication in social networks from 82% to 92%; chatting in real-time (in 2019–86%, in 2022–94%).[3]

Last but not least, the contextual point that needs attention is the registered crime rate in Lithuania. The general trends can be described as follows: from 1990 to 2004, there was a steady growth in the total number of crimes: in 1990–37,056 crimes, in 2004–93,419. Since 2004 until now a steady decrease in numbers has been observed. In 2023–45,181 criminal acts were registered, more than twice less as in 2004. The same trends are observed in registered criminal acts committed by minors. In 2004, there were 4232 criminal acts, the commission of which were suspected (accused of) minors, so in 2023, this number was much less—677. A similar downward trend can be seen in the dynamics of another indicator—identified minors suspected (accused) of committing criminal acts. The highest value of this indicator—4232 minors—was reached in 2003, and in 2022 this number decreased to 631 minors (almost seven times less). Relative indicators show that the changes in registered adolescent delinquency during the analysed period are not as pronounced as the absolute numbers, but trends of decrease are also visible. In 2004, there were 2386 criminal acts per 100,000 population, the commission of which were suspected (accused) of minors, so in 2022, much less—861. The structure of criminal acts committed by minors has not changed much in the last year. Almost two-thirds of these acts consisted of various thefts, causing physical pain, minor

[3] Source: Digital Ethics Center. Statistics: Computer and Internet use at home https://e-etika.lt/statistika-kompiuteriai-ir-internetas-namuose/.

It is assumed that the greater involvement of the public and youth in the Internet in 2020–2022 was determined by the restrictions caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic when most of social life moved to virtual space.

health disorders, and violations of public order (Sakalauskas et al. 2022). It should also be noted that throughout the analysed period, the vast majority (about 90% or more) of minors suspected (accused) of committing criminal acts were boys. The highest proportion of girls (10.9%) was recorded in 2012.

Why is it important to take into account crime and delinquency when talking about child victimisation? There are two reasons for this. The first: children become the victims of crimes committed by adults. Therefore, a high number of crimes is likely to lead to a higher level of children's victimisation. Second, researchers have found that adolescent delinquency is closely correlated with their victimisation. For example, it has been found that boys who have delinquent friends, skip classes, and live in a disorganised environment are more likely to be victims of theft, extortion, and assault (Posick 2018). Children can be victimised by friends, parents, neighbours, or strangers. However, this victimisation often remains unknown because young people do not report it to the institutions. Particularly latent is the part of delinquency and victimisation that takes place online (Livingstone et al. 2018).

It is also important to emphasise that the relationship between delinquency and victimisation is mutual: not only do young people with delinquent behaviour become victims of crimes more often, but the victimisation they experience may lead to their delinquent behaviour (Posick 2013). There is research data (Steketee et al. 2021) proving that if children experience physical violence from their parents, they are much more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour. The General Strain Theory (GST) could partially explain this phenomenon. One of its authors and developers, the American criminologist Robert Agnew (2001), examined those types of strains that lead to crime. The theory distinguishes two types of strains: objective and subjective. Objective strains are events or conditions that are disliked by most members of a given group. Such events and conditions can range from physical violence to a lack of food or housing etc. Subjective strains are events or conditions that are disliked by the people who have experienced them. In other words, subjective strain is when a person experiences something that he/ she does not like. Research shows that people accept their experiences differently-subjectively. For example, acceptance of the death of a family member can differ among different people and vary according to circumstances. The acceptance depends on individual factors (e.g. irritability), personal and social resources (self-confidence, autonomy, social support from others), goals/values/identities, and a series of life circumstances. There are many types of stressors, but the stressors that lead to crime, according to Agnew (2001) must: *(1) be seen as unjust, (2) be seen as high in magnitude, (3) be associated with low social control, and (4) create some pressure or incentive to engage in criminal coping.* Reframing the General Strain Theory, it can be presumed that victimisation of children is a problem of particular importance as the victimised child, if his strain experiences meet the four conditions mentioned above, can react to it in a delinquent or even criminal way.

3 Registered Children's Victimisation

Presuming that adolescent victimisation and delinquency are phenomena that often go hand in hand, it is worth looking at Fig. 1. It shows the number of children under the age of 18 who have been victimised by criminal acts and minors suspected (accused) of committing criminal acts. Although it is not possible to talk about the exact correlations between crime and victimisation, the graph shows that adolescent delinquency is steadily decreasing, as well as children's victimisation. However, the victimisation trend has not been so steady, with a sharp rise from 2017 to 2019. From the year 2005 to 2023, the number of child victims of criminal acts decreased from 4955 to 1693. It is also clear that during the period from 2005 to 2023 (with the exceptions in 2009 and 2014), the number of victims was higher than that of those who committed a crime.

The extraordinary increase in child victimisation in 2017–2019 (respectively: 3635, 3337, and 2522 victimised children) can be explained by the reform of the child rights protection system. This reform is also known as "Matas reform".[4] The result of this was a centralisation of the child rights protection system and the setting of stricter childcare requirements for parents. Any violence against minors was prohibited, and children under the age of six could not be left alone without parental care anymore. This reform made it possible to bring out of latency several cases where children experienced domestic violence, and this is reflected in the statistics in 2017–2019. Later, the trend of decrease has settled down.

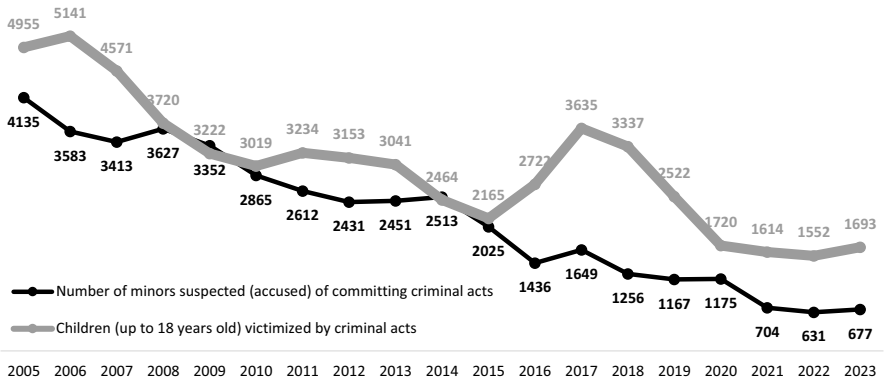

Fig. 1 Adolescents delinquency and victimisation (persons)

[4] Five-year-old Matas died in January 2017 after being brutally beaten by his parents. The child was admitted to the hospital with multiple bruises on his body. It was determined that he had been hit at least 135 times. Crime has received a great response from society and politicians. With the "Matas reform," the Lithuanian Parliament banned all forms of violence against children and the use of physical punishments.

Another important issue is children's victimisation by gender. As shown in Fig. 2, boys were victims of criminal acts more often than girls. However, if the gender gap was larger at the beginning of the period in 2005, boys were victimised twice as many times as girls (3329 and 1626, respectively); later, this difference disappeared, especially at the end of the period. In 2023, gender victimisation was almost the same: 874 boys and 819 girls. It can also be observed that the number of victimised girls throughout the period was small and constantly fluctuated within the limits: from a maximum of 1817 in 2006 to the aforementioned 819 cases in 2023. So, it can be concluded that a general decrease in children's victimisation was due to boys' victimisation drop.

Looking at age groups, it makes sense to single out two: children up to 13 years old age and 14–17 years old teenagers. The data show (Fig. 3) that from 2005–2016

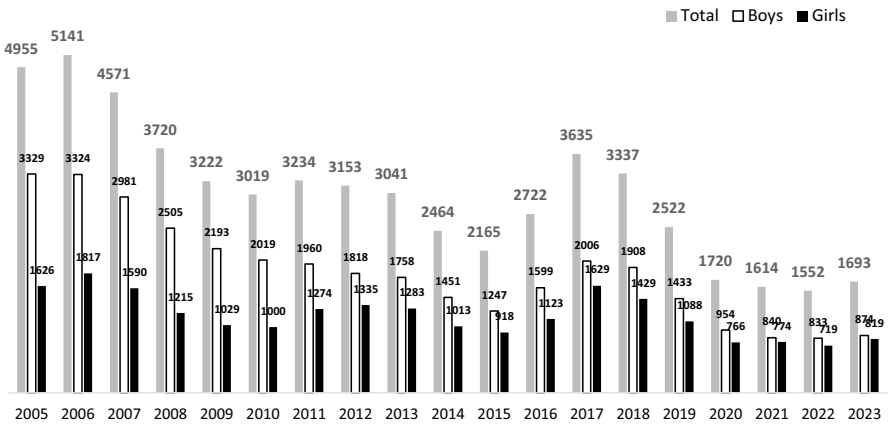

Fig. 2 Number of children victims of criminal acts by gender (persons)

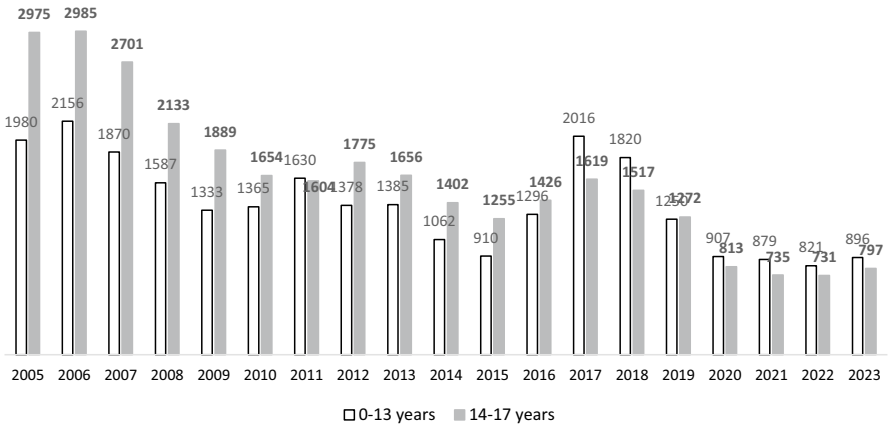

Fig. 3 Number of children victims of criminal acts by age group (persons)

(except 2011), older teenagers were more often victimised than younger children. Since 2017, the situation has changed. Children up to 13 years were victimised more often or almost as often as older teenagers. Again, this can be explained in light of the aforementioned reform of the child rights protection system. Presumably, more public and institutional attention to violence against children in a close environment increased registered numbers. The positive news is that for the last four years, the number of victims of both: children up to 13 years old and 14–17 years old teenagers has not increased and is less than a thousand per year.

When examining by place of residence, cities, and rural areas, the situation is no doubt determined by the territorial distribution of the population: more crime victims are from cities and towns than from rural areas (Fig. 4).

Analysing what crimes Lithuanian children suffer from and what damage they experience, it is worth focusing on the present situation: the year 2022–2023. Table 1 shows that children suffer from physical and sexual violence mostly. Causing physical pain, traffic violations (resulting in children victimisation), molestation, minor health impairment, sexual assault, and rape are the main crimes against children that are counted in hundreds or tens.

The above-mentioned trends are supported and replicated by the data in Table 2. It clearly shows that in 2022–2023 children experience physical violence most often, sexual abuse in second place, and property damage in third place. Neglect was rarely experienced, with a sharp decrease in 2023.

As noted, the well-being of the child is strongly determined by the situation in the family. Analysing the family composition of victimised children, one can see that victimised children mostly lived in families with both or one parent. Many fewer of them lived with relatives or were under the custody of another person or legal entity (Table 3). This consistently explains the data in Table 4, which shows who the perpetrators were. Children were mostly victimised by people from their close environment: parents, step-parents, or adoptive parents. Also, they became victims of close relatives or guardians. Only some suffered from teachers. Every third child was victimised by a stranger. In other words, two out of three victimised children in Lithuania are victimised by adults from a close or familiar environment.

There is also data showing that in 2022–2023, from 21 to 22 children were victimised while being in a helpless state, from 21 to 17 were intoxicated by alcohol, and

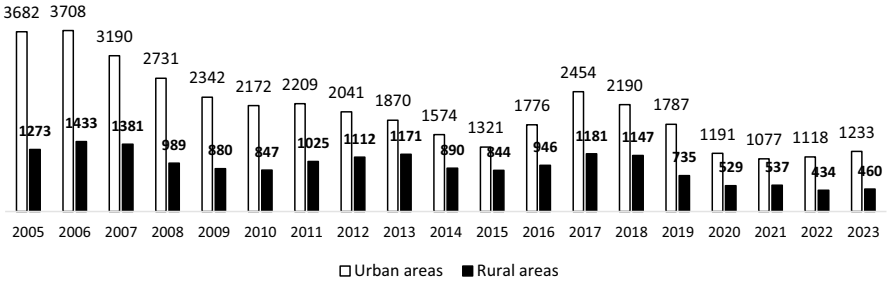

Fig. 4 Number of children victims of criminal acts by area of residence (persons)

Table 1 The number of children victimised by different criminal acts

	Criminal act	Year	
		2022	2023
1	Causing physical pain	796	842
2	Violation of traffic safety rules	178	159
3	Molestation of a minor	108	157
4	Minor health impairment	61	49
5	Sexual assault	27	43
6	Rape	33	40
7	Avoiding child support	14	33
8	Abuse of the rights and duties of a parent or guardian	25	10
9	Extortion of property	6	10
10	Exploitation of a child for pornography	4	7
11	Severe health impairment	2	5
12	Involvement of a child in drinking	4	5
13	The murder	2	4
14	Unlawful deprivation of liberty	3	2
15	Involvement of a child in a criminal act	0	2
16	Human trafficking	0	1
17	Coercion to have sex	0	1
18	Child abduction or exchange	0	1
19	Inclination to use narcotic or psychotropic substances	1	1
20	Buying or selling a child	1	0

Table 2 Harm suffered by the victimised child

	Year	
	2022	2023
Physical violence	509	524
Sexual abuse	73	102
Property damage	50	73
Psychological abuse	37	31
Neglect	29	4

in 2023, there were two children who were intoxicated by narcotics or psychotropic drugs during victimisation. Some victimisations had very serious outcomes. In 2023 83 children experienced a minor health disorder, ten children's health was seriously impaired, and 15 children died.

So, these registered numbers partially reveal the situation of children's victimisation in Lithuania. Thus, the victimisation of children is of high latency. The inability to recognise the situation, the inability or fear to report to the responsible authorities, especially when harm is experienced in the close environment—all these factors taken together lead to the fact that we do not know everything about the victimisation of children and adolescents. Therefore, criminological studies of victimisation are used to help.

Table 3 Family status of the victimised child

	Year	
	2022	2023
Lives with both parents	701	728
Lives with one of the parents	655	727
Lives with a relative when the child has not been assigned custody	20	22
In a custody of a person	56	68
In a custody of a legal entity	57	78

Table 4 Perpetrators children have been victimised by

	Year	
	2022	2023
Parents	440	478
Strangers	279	358
Stepparents or adoptive parents	132	145
Close relatives	56	69
Guardians	18	13
Teachers	11	6

4 Latent Children Victimisation

One of the most significant scientific studies providing data on child victimisation is the International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD). This study, which is currently being conducted in numerous countries across Europe and the world, was initiated and implemented in the 1990s. Lithuanian researchers have been participating in this study since 2006. The ISRD is an ongoing international, collaborative effort designed as a standardised school-based survey to describe and explain adolescents' experiences with crime and victimisation, test criminological theories, and develop recommendations for prevention and interventions.[5]

In Lithuania, three waves of this study have been carried out: in 2006 (ISRD2), 2013 (ISRD3), and 2022 (ISRD4). Due to the comparative nature of the study, city-based sampling was preferred over national samples, as this approach facilitates the expectation that the sample structure would be similar across different countries. The primary sampling unit for the study was school classes. Due to differences in

[5] More information about the ISRD study, its methodology, and participating countries, as well as datasets from previous waves of the study, can be found on the project's website https://isrd-study.org/.

the questionnaire structure used in various waves of the ISRD studies, changes in some question formulations, and differences in the composition of the study sample, direct comparison becomes challenging. Therefore, the analysis will primarily rely on the data from the most recent survey conducted in 2022.

In the selected cities (Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, and Šiauliai in the northern part of the country), 1914 students from grades 7 to 11 were surveyed using a standardised questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into thematic sections, covering adolescents' experiences with delinquency and victimisation, as well as various theoretical correlates of these experiences. ISRD4 includes six types of victimisation from the previous wave: robbery, assault, personal theft, cyberbullying, hate crime, and two items assessing parental physical violence. To address the increasing concerns about online victimisation, two additional items—posting intimate images and online hate speech—have been incorporated into this section of the questionnaire. The prevalence of these victimisations was measured over the respondents' lifetime and within the past twelve months. The phrasing for the types of victimisation used in the survey is presented in Table 5 (Marshall et al. 2022).

Figure 5 illustrates the prevalence of victimisation experiences, both over the respondents' lifetimes and within the last year, highlighting nine distinct types of victimisation.

The findings indicate that the three most prevalent forms of victimisation can be identified (Pocienė et al. 2023). The most commonly reported type of victimisation, based on lifetime prevalence, is minor parental violence, with a lifetime prevalence of 28.5% and a last-year prevalence of 9.9%. This is followed closely by personal theft, which has a lifetime prevalence of 28% and a reported prevalence of 9.3% last

Table 5 The wording for the types of victimisation

Robbery	Has anyone ever used a weapon, force, or threat of force to get money or things from you?
Assault	Has anyone ever beaten you up or hurt you with a stick, knife, or gun so badly that you were injured?
Personal theft	Has something ever been stolen from you (such as a book, money, mobile phone, sports gear, bicycle)
Hate crime	Has anyone ever threatened you with violence or committed physical violence against you because of your race, ethnicity or nationality, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or for similar reasons?
Cyberbullying	Has anyone ever threatened you on social media?
Intimate posting	Has anyone ever posted, re-posted, or texted an intimate photo or video of you that you did not want others to see?
Online hate speech	Has anyone ever sent you hurtful messages or comments on social media about your race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or for similar reasons?
Parental violence—minor	Has your mother or father (or your stepmother or stepfather) ever hit, slapped, or shoved you (including as a punishment)?
Parental violence—serious	Has your mother or father (or your stepmother or stepfather) ever hit you with an object, punched or kicked you forcefully, or beaten you up (including as a punishment)?

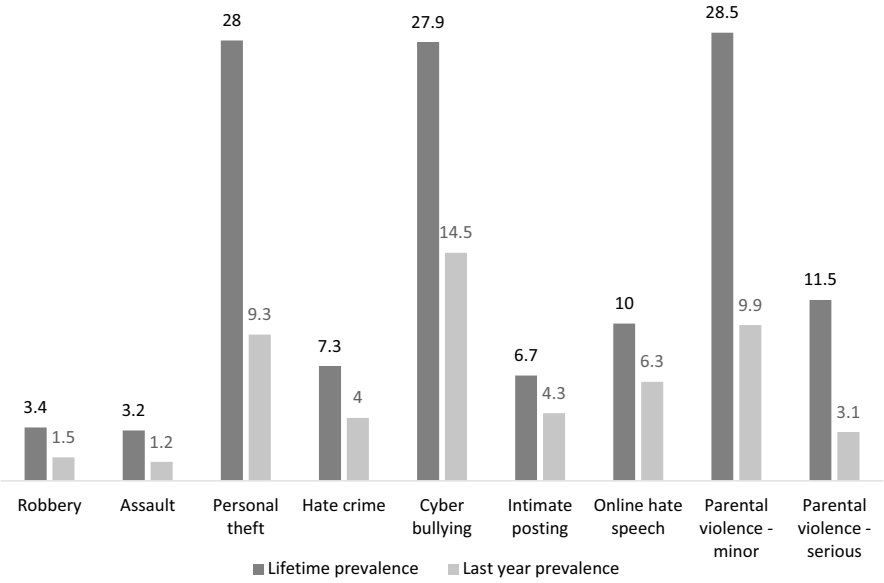

Fig. 5 Lifetime and last year's prevalence of various victimisation types (percent)

year. Cyberbullying is the third most reported type, with 27.9% of respondents indicating they had experienced it at some point in their lives and 14.5% reporting incidents within the last year.

Next, 11.5% of respondents reported victimisation from serious parental violence in their lifetime and 3.1% within the last 12 months. The fifth most frequent category is online hate speech victimisation, which includes various forms of emotional abuse mediated by online platforms, showing a lifetime prevalence of 10% and a last year prevalence of 6.3%.

The sixth category reveals that 7.3% of respondents reported having been victims of hate crime offline in their lifetime, and 4% reported experiencing this type of crime within the last year. This is followed by victimisation of intimate posting, also known as the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, with a lifetime prevalence of 6.7% and 4.3% indicating occurrences within the last year.

The eighth category addresses victimisation from robbery that occurred offline, with 3.4% of respondents reporting lifetime experiences and 1.5% indicating such incidents within the last year. Finally, victimisation from assault is the least frequently reported type, with a lifetime prevalence of 3.2% and a last-year prevalence of 1.2%.

Thus, the data indicate that a significant part of Lithuanian adolescents participating in the study have experienced some form of victimisation. Aggregating the available data, we find that as many as 56.5% of children have been victimised at least once in their lifetime by at least one of the mentioned victimisation types, while 29.8% have experienced victimisation in the last 12 months. These are

substantial figures, considering that official statistics indicate that only about 1600 children in Lithuania become victims of crime annually. It is also important to note that the three most frequently mentioned types of victimisation in the ISRD study reflect three different spheres of children's lives: thefts occurring in everyday life, cyberbullying in the online environment, and parental violent behaviour in the close environment or at home.

The analysis of victimisation distribution by gender, as presented in Table 6, reveals some noteworthy differences between boys and girls, both over their lifetime and in the past year.

In terms of offline crimes, the data highlights distinct gender disparities in personal theft and hate crime victimisation. Girls exhibit a higher lifetime prevalence of theft victimisation at 30.9%, compared to boys, who report a prevalence of 25.6%. This substantial difference is indicated by a significant Chi-Square value ($p < 0.05$). However, the difference disappears when looking at the victimisation of personal theft in the last year. Moreover, girls report higher victimisation rates in hate crime, with a lifetime prevalence of 9.3%, significantly surpassing the 5.5% reported by boys ($p < 0.01$). This difference is also evident when examining the data for the past 12 months.

Regarding online crimes, the gender disparities are equally pronounced. For intimate posting victimisation, girls are more affected, with a reported lifetime prevalence of 8%, compared to boys at 5.3%. The Chi-Square analysis confirms the significance of this difference ($p < 0.05$). Online hate speech victimisation follows a similar pattern, with 13.9% of girls experiencing such incidents in their lifetime and 8.6% within the last year, compared to 6.3% of boys in their lifetime and 4.5 within the last year ($p < 0.01$). This indicates a gendered trend in online victimisation, where both intimate posting and online hate speech more frequently target girls.

Differences in the victimisation of boys and girls are also evident in cases of parental violence. Serious parental violence has been reported by 7.6% of boys and 15.8% of girls over their lifetime, with the difference being statistically significant

Table 6 Lifetime and last year victimisation prevalence by gender (percent)

	Lifetime		Last year	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Robbery	3.8	3.1	1.5	1.5
Assault	3.3 mn,	3.2	1.5	1
Personal theft	*25.6*	*30.9**	9.5	9.9
Hate crime	*5.5*	*9.3***	*2.7*	*5.4***
Cyberbullying	27	29.3	15.7	14.9
Intimate posting	*5.3*	*8**	3.5	5
Online hate speech	*6.3*	*13.9***	*4.5*	*8.6***
Parental violence -minor	*23.2*	*34.1***	*7.5*	*13.4***
Parental violence -serious	*7.6*	*15.8***	*2*	*4.4***

Note: *Chi-Square, $p < 0.05$; **Chi-Square, $p < 0.01$

($p < 0.01$). In the last year, these figures were 2% for boys and 4.4% for girls. Minor parental violence also shows a higher lifetime prevalence among girls (34.1%) compared to boys (23.2%), and in the past year, 13.4% of girls reported experiencing it compared to 7.5% of boys. In both cases, the difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). These findings highlight a concerning trend of higher exposure to both serious and minor parental violence among girls.

It can be observed that these survey findings differ from the official statistics, which indicate that boys are more frequently victims of crimes compared to girls, although this disparity has significantly decreased in recent years (Fig. 2). In contrast, the ISRD4 study consistently shows that girls are more often victims in all cases where there is a significant gender difference in victimisation.

It is also noteworthy that in the previous ISRD3 study conducted in 2013, the gender differences in the prevalence of victimisation were different (Justickaja et al. 2015). At that time, girls reported experiencing more cyberbullying, with a 22.3% lifetime prevalence compared to 12.9% for boys. However, in cases of robbery, assault, and hate crime, boys were more frequently the victims.

Of course, it is impossible to compare official crime statistics directly with data from victimology studies for numerous reasons. One of the most evident points is that official crime statistics encompass all registered offences under criminal law where children are the victims. In contrast, the study provides data only on a few specific crimes included in the survey questionnaire and reported by the children of selected age groups to the researchers. It is also reasonable to assume that even if all these incidents were reported to the police, some would not be recognised as crimes and thus would not be included in crime statistics. However, previous ISRD studies have revealed that even in cases of serious crimes such as robbery or assault, only a small proportion of these incidents are reported to the police (Enzmann et al. 2017).

In the ISRD4 survey, respondents were also asked whether they had reported the crimes they experienced to the police (excluding two items of parental violence). Based on the children's responses, the prevalence of police reports was calculated, indicating the proportion of respondents who had reported at least one of their incidents to the police, regardless of how many incidents of the same type they had experienced. The distribution of responses is presented in Fig. 6.

As indicated by prior studies, the findings suggest that only a small fraction of experienced incidents are reported to law enforcement authorities. Survey participants who encountered crimes were more likely to report serious offences occurring in physical settings (offline) to the police. For example, 16.1% of respondents who had experienced assault reported the incident to the police at least once, 11% reported personal theft, and 9.7% reported robbery. These crimes, often referred to as "hard crimes," generally imply that victims recognise these incidents as criminal offences warranting police notification.

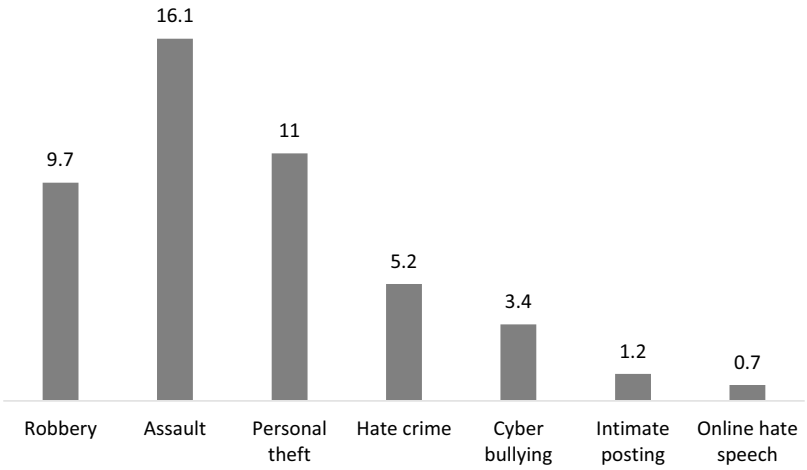

Fig. 6 Prevalence of incidents reported to the police (percent)

Conversely, less apparent incidents, particularly those occurring online, were reported to the police far less frequently: 5.2% of respondents who experienced hate crime reported it, intimate posting was reported by only 1.2%, and online hate speech was reported by merely 0.7% of affected children. This discrepancy suggests that children might not fully comprehend whether these actions constitute crimes or if they should be reported.

However, 31% of children who experienced intimate posting and 21.6% who experienced online hate speech disclosed these incidents to another adult. This suggests several important points that require further examination. Firstly, the low reporting rates to law enforcement may indicate a lack of awareness and education about what constitutes a crime, particularly in the digital domain. Children may not fully comprehend the seriousness of online victimisation or know the appropriate channels for reporting such incidents. Secondly, the higher rates of disclosure to other adults suggest a reliance on immediate social support systems rather than formal authorities. This trend implies that children might feel more at ease or find it more convenient to confide in trusted adults rather than deal with the bureaucratic complexities associated with police reporting. This behavioural pattern underscores the importance of educating both children and their guardians about the necessity of reporting all forms of victimisation and understanding the resources available to assist them through these processes.

Finally, it could be speculated that differences in reporting incidents to the police might vary based on the gender of the children. However, the study's data do not support this hypothesis. In all cases, irrespective of the type of victimisation experienced, no significant gender differences were found in the likelihood of reporting to the police.

5 Concluding Remarks

Children's victimisation is a significant indicator of children's rights and protection, highlighting the challenges and threats faced by children. While Lithuania's overall economic and social conditions are improving, children's quality of life remains affected by structural shifts, such as an ageing population, rising divorce rates, and changing family dynamics. In recent years, both the nature of child victimisation and the demographic profile of victimised children have shifted. For instance, victimisation has become more evenly distributed across genders, with younger children (under 13 years) now experiencing victimisation as frequently as older adolescents. These trends illustrate the scope of the issue and indicate heightened insecurity among children across age groups and genders.

Official statistics show that Lithuanian children most often experience physical and sexual abuse, with two-thirds of children suffering harm from adults within their close environment. This raises significant concern, as children may struggle to identify or report abuse due to fear or close ties with the abuser. With the growing engagement of children in virtual reality, new sources of insecurity have emerged, particularly involving cyberbullying and other forms of online violence, which often remain unreported.

Although the number of recorded cases of child victimisation is declining, the extent of latent victimisation remains substantial. The ISRD4 study results reveal that three forms of victimisation are most prevalent among Lithuanian adolescents: minor parental violence, personal property theft, and cyberbullying. In the second place are severe, serious parental violence and online hate speech. Data indicate that more than half of Lithuanian children have experienced some form of victimisation at least once in their lifetime, with nearly a third affected in the last year. While official statistics report lower numbers of child victims, this ISRD4 study reveals a broad scope of unreported or unrecognised violence. The analysis also highlighted significant gender differences. Girls are more likely to experience parental violence, personal property theft, and online hate speech. Furthermore, girls are more affected by emotional abuse online, emphasizing the impact of gender on the prevalence of various forms of victimisation. The low rate of crime reporting to police indicates a pronounced lack of awareness about reportable crimes, particularly on the internet. Children are more likely to disclose experiences of violence to trusted adults rather than to law enforcement.

What does the Lithuanian case of children's victimisation look like in an international context? Unfortunately, statistical data is very limited or almost non-existent for international comparisons. At best, we can rely on the data of the Eurobarometer for children's victims of intentional homicide and sexual exploitation.[6] Data is inconsistent: not all countries and years are included.

[6] Statistics | Eurostat (n.d). *Victims of intentional homicide and sexual exploitation by age and sex*. Retrieved February 12, 2025, from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/crim_hom_vage$dv_2603/default/table?lang=en&category=chldyth.chld.chld_viol

However, some relative comparisons could be made. Let us take data for intentional homicide. The period 2016–2022 and the number of intentionally murdered children (under 18 years old) per 100,000 population. Numbers fluctuate. If in 2016 Lithuania had an indicator of 1.19, and neighbouring Latvia 0.28, so in 2022, the situation will be the opposite: Latvia is on the top with 1.68, and Lithuania somewhere in the middle among such countries as (the Netherlands, Hungary, and Switzerland) with 0.40. In this context, the extreme indicator was registered for Montenegro in 2018–2.92 murdered children under 18 per 100,000 population. In comparison, Iceland, Slovenia, and Malta always had indicators that were zero throughout the entire period.

Another characteristic indicator is the sexual exploitation of children under 18 years old—victim cases per 100,000 population. There is no clear trend for each country, but the numbers are not decreasing: they are either fluctuating or increasing (Croatia, Germany, Norway). Lithuanian numbers fluctuate: 2016–18,33, increase in 2018 to 55,66, then drop in 2019 to 34,83, and a slight increase in 2021 up to 41,14. We should note that in 2018, Lithuania was in first place (55,66) for victimisation, even slightly exceeding France (55, 50). In 2021, the top countries for children's sexual victimisation were Croatia −82,24, France—65,93, Norway—43,72, and Lithuania—41,14. Neighbouring Latvia also demonstrates a slight increase in this indicator. Though it is not as high as in our country: in 2021–23,43 cases of victimisation were registered per 100,000 population of Latvia. Slovakia, Denmark, and Austria are countries where indicators of children's sexual victimisation are the lowest during the whole period.

Thus, recorded statistics show only a small part of young people's reality. In scientific studies, the problem of children's victimisation is usually analysed in association with delinquency (Posick 2012; Marshall et al. 2019). Though not so many, there are some papers focused precisely on victimisation or polyvictimisation as a specific issue. The risk of victimisation is analysed through sociodemographic factors (Aho et al. 2016). Other scholars (Bills 2017) explore the association between the level of self-control and lifestyles and victimisation. We can also find studies analysing how parental abuse may lead to further victimisation (Jiang and Shi 2024). So, all this shows that children's victimisation is becoming no less important issue than delinquency in an international context.

So, summarising, we can conclude that children's victimisation in Lithuania reflects the deeper changes occurring within society. It is evident that latent victimisation is significantly more prevalent than reported cases and that threats in online environments are on the rise. Domestic violence remains notably high. The low rate of crime reporting to law enforcement underscores a lack of information among children regarding the need and means to report violence. Children's reliance on trusted adults instead of law enforcement highlights the importance of involving communities in ensuring children's safety. The study's findings underscore the need to enhance preventive measures that meet children's needs and address various forms of victimisation, including cyber violence. Finally, integrating official statistics with criminological research data is important to understand child victimisation comprehensively and to develop evidence-based recommendations to address these challenges.

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