



VIJEĆE MLADIH
FEDERACIJE BiH

POLICY PAPER

Do We Feel Safe?

Path towards a More Peaceful and Safer
Environment for Young People
in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Youth Council of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Introduction

Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are growing up in a post-conflict society that continues to experience the consequences of long-standing institutional fragmentation and socio-economic uncertainty. Although they make up almost one quarter of the population, young people often appear in public policies and decision-making processes merely as beneficiaries of measures, and only rarely as equal partners whose voices are systematically heard and taken into account.

When young people have no meaningful influence over the policies that affect them, challenges that directly shape their everyday lives are more often addressed through fragmented and short-term responses rather than through preventive and coordinated action. This is also reflected in the fact that 75.9% of young people do not know, or are unsure, whom to contact when they identify a problem in their local community.¹

In such circumstances, risks such as peer and digital violence, discrimination, pressures within education and social polarisation can more easily become normalised parts of growing up.

Youth safety is closely linked to quality of life and to young people's ability to learn, move freely, express themselves and participate in their communities. Where support mechanisms are weak or unevenly accessible, risks are more easily normalised and trust in institutions declines, making young people less likely to report violence or seek help. Youth safety is therefore not merely the absence of incidents, but also a sense of trust, dignity and belonging at school, within the family, in public spaces and in the online environment. This requires preventive and systemic measures that go beyond responding only after a problem has occurred.

At the heart of this document is the concept of human security, which approaches security through the lens of people's everyday lives and needs. Human security encompasses physical, digital and psychological safety, as well as social stability, equality, protection from discrimination, trust in institutions and access to support services. This perspective is particularly relevant to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where youth protection is often implemented unevenly and in a fragmented manner, meaning that key support mechanisms depend on the relevant level of government or local context. For this reason, the document connects the concept of human security with the *Youth, Peace and Security Agenda (YPS, UNSCR 2250)*, which recognises young people not only as beneficiaries of protection measures, but also as key actors in preventing violence, building peace and strengthening safe communities.



This document therefore seeks to answer three fundamental questions:

- 1) How do young people in BiH perceive safety today;
- 2) What are the most common challenges and risks in their communities; and
- 3) Which measures and policies can contribute to creating a more peaceful and safer environment.

The document is based on a combination of a review of relevant documents and qualitative research conducted through focus groups. The document analysis covers international frameworks, legislation and strategic documents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with a mapping of the key institutions and mechanisms that affect youth safety. The field component, conducted through focus groups with secondary school students and an expanded focus group involving young people and representatives of youth organisations, provides insight into how safety is experienced at school, within the family, in public spaces and in the online environment. This approach connects young people's experiences with concrete recommendations for improving policies and institutional practice.

Based on the findings and analysis, the document identifies key challenges such as insufficient coordination among educational, social and security institutions, the absence of standardised protocols for protection and reporting violence, limited access to psychosocial support in schools, uneven implementation of legal frameworks, and limited youth participation in decision-making. In its final chapters, the document first summarises the key findings and policy gaps, then presents five priority recommendations with clearly identified responsible stakeholders and expected results, followed by detailed recommendations structured by stakeholder group – public institutions, schools and educational institutions, the police, the security sector and the judiciary, health care and social protection, youth structures and civil society, as well as media, digital platforms and donors.

Ultimately, this policy paper is intended as an advocacy tool and a practical resource for institutions, schools and youth structures to approach youth safety comprehensively, identify gaps in existing protection and support mechanisms, and initiate coordinated measures that will ensure that young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not merely exposed to everyday risks, but have the conditions and space to participate actively in building safer communities.



Research connecting frameworks and young people's experiences

4 qualitative focus groups

50 young people aged 15 to 30

15 local communities

10 institutional representatives

Desk analysis



Focus groups



Institutional input



Evidence-based recommendations

Focus-group findings are not statistically representative of all young people in BiH, but they provide detailed insight into the experiences, perceptions and patterns participants identified as important to youth safety.



Methodology

Methodologically, the document combines a review and analysis of relevant documents with the collection of qualitative data through focus groups, with the aim of linking normative frameworks and institutional arrangements with the lived experiences and needs of young people. The desk analysis includes a review of key international frameworks relevant to the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda, as well as an analysis of the applicable legislation, strategic documents and policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina that directly or indirectly relate to youth safety. As part of the desk component, institutional stakeholders, their respective competences, and existing protection and support mechanisms were also mapped in order to identify key gaps and inconsistencies in practice, as well as priority areas for improving coordination and ensuring a more effective institutional response.

The field component of the research was conducted through four qualitative focus groups: three focus groups with secondary school students from Kalesija and Bijeljina, Teočak and Doboј, and Žepče and Goražde, as well as one expanded focus group. In total, the consultation process involved 50 young people aged 15 to 30 from 15 local communities across Bosnia and Herzegovina. The focus groups were conducted as facilitated qualitative discussions focusing on young people's experiences and perceptions of safety, the risks to which they are exposed, the availability of support, and barriers to reporting problems. An additional institutional contribution to the process was provided by 10 representatives of Federation- and cantonal-level ministries, public institutions and other relevant institutional stakeholders. Consultations with secondary school students were conducted with the support of the Association of Secondary School Students in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ASuBiH), while project partners and experts provided additional methodological and contextual input.

The focus-group findings were analysed thematically and used as a qualitative basis for identifying key challenges and formulating the recommendations presented in this document. Given the qualitative nature of the research, the focus-group findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of the views of all young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Rather, they provide a more concrete understanding of the experiences, perceptions and patterns identified by participants as relevant to youth safety.

By combining the desk analysis with field findings, the document develops an argument that draws both on the normative and institutional framework and on young people's perspectives, with the aim of identifying priorities and formulating recommendations for improving policies, protection mechanisms and support practices in line with the YPS approach.



Five pillars for action

UN Security Council Resolution 2250 recognises young people as key actors in peace and security, not merely as beneficiaries of protection measures.

Participation

01

Genuine youth influence on decisions, timely information and a visible record of their contribution.

Protection

02

Protection of young people's lives, integrity and rights, functional reporting mechanisms and youth-friendly support.

Prevention

03

Systemic measures that reduce risks before escalation: peace education, early support and digital literacy.

Partnerships

04

Coordination among education, health care, social protection, the security sector, the judiciary and youth structures.

Disengagement and Reintegration

05

Structured support enabling young people to safely leave violent and high-risk networks and achieve sustainable reintegration.



About the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda

The Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda, established by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) and subsequent resolutions, recognises youth inclusion and participation as a key dimension of building and sustaining peace and security for all.²

Resolution 2250 emphasises that today's generation of young people is the largest the world has ever known, with young women and men often constituting the majority of the population in countries affected by violence and armed conflict.

The Resolution defines five pillars for action:

1. Participation

Participation means that young people are not merely consulted, but have a genuine influence on decisions concerning peace and security. This includes their involvement in policy-making, local and CP-level strategies, violence-prevention mechanisms, and formal and informal peace processes. It is essential that participation be meaningful: young people receive information in a timely manner, have space to express their views, are heard by institutions, and can clearly see how their proposals have been taken into account and incorporated. Particular emphasis is placed on the inclusion of young women and marginalised groups, as well as on removing barriers such as language, financial costs, tokenism, inaccessible formats and digital barriers.

2. Protection

This pillar focuses on protecting the lives, integrity and rights of young people, particularly in the context of violence, discrimination, exploitation and rights violations. It entails functional prevention and reporting mechanisms at school, in the community and online, protection for victims and witnesses, and the effective prosecution of perpetrators through youth-friendly access to justice. In practice, this also means ensuring access to psychosocial support and safe spaces, protection in the digital environment, and zero-tolerance policies on violence within institutions. Human rights form the foundation of this pillar; youth safety is therefore treated as a right, not a privilege.

3. Prevention

Prevention addresses the root causes of violence and the factors that place young people at risk, including social exclusion, inequality, discrimination, lack of trust in institutions, economic insecurity, the normalisation of violence and hate speech, as well as harmful narratives in the online environment. This pillar promotes systemic measures that reduce risks before they escalate, such as peace education, media and digital literacy, early identification and support, non-violent communication programmes, strengthening protective factors at school and in the community, and building young people's resilience to manipulation, radicalisation and violent extremism. Prevention is not a social media campaign, but a continuous process carried out through institutions and communities.



4. Partnerships

Partnerships mean that youth peace and security cannot be the responsibility of a single institution or sector alone. Coordination is needed among education, social protection, health care, the security sector, the judiciary, local self-government, civil society and youth structures, with clearly defined roles and shared protocols. Particular emphasis is placed on intergenerational partnerships, in which young people and adults jointly plan, implement and monitor measures. Partnerships also involve data sharing, with appropriate safeguards for privacy, joint risk mapping, referral mechanisms and shared monitoring of results, so that support is timely, coordinated and accessible.

5. Disengagement and Reintegration

This pillar concerns support for young people who have been involved in violence, armed groups or related high-risk networks, with the aim of enabling safe disengagement and sustainable reintegration into the community. The focus is on reducing stigma and preventing the recurrence of violent or risky behaviour through a combination of psychosocial support, education, employability support, mentoring, work with families and communities, and access to services. Reintegration requires coordination between institutions and communities, individual support plans, and measures that protect both the young person and the community. The aim is to provide a second chance through structured support rather than relying solely on sanctions.

Although the YPS Agenda was initially developed in response to the needs and experiences of young people in contexts of armed conflict and the immediate post-conflict period, it is also relevant to a broader understanding of security. It recognises that youth safety is shaped by everyday factors such as educational and economic insecurity, weakened social support and limited life opportunities. Violent conflict affects young people by disrupting sources of stability and a sense of belonging, as well as by interrupting the transition to adulthood through disruptions to education, weakened social support and reduced livelihood opportunities. However, even in settings without open violence, inadequate education, insecure forms of employment and weak social services limit young people's ability to achieve the independence and agency commonly associated with adulthood. The challenges highlighted by young people therefore concern not only violence, but also economic, social and political rights, and require responses that address broader issues of inclusion, trust, equality and fairness. These issues naturally connect the dimensions of peace, development and human rights, and provide a strong foundation for integrated public-policy approaches.³



Understanding the interconnectedness of different forms of violence, injustice and exclusion enables a shift away from simplified and reactive approaches towards evidence-based approaches that place prevention at the centre and involve young people as actors rather than merely as beneficiaries of measures. The growing mobilisation of young people and their insistence on having a voice in local, CP-level and international policies and programmes has further strengthened the understanding that partnerships with young people are essential to sustainable development, the protection of human rights, and peace and security. It is therefore important to act now and use YPS as a relevant framework for implementing institutional youth policies that recognise young people as important actors in Bosnian and Herzegovinian society.



About the Concept of Human Security

The concept of human security developed in response to the limitations of traditional understandings of security, which are primarily associated with territory, the state and so-called “hard” threats. By contrast, human security places people and everyday life at its centre, understanding security as the protection of people, their life opportunities and their dignity in conditions characterised by complex and interconnected risks. In contemporary use, human security is most commonly described as an approach that helps states identify and address widespread challenges that threaten people’s survival, livelihoods and dignity.⁴

The concept gained greater prominence in the mid-1990s, particularly through the United Nations Development Programme’s 1994 Human Development Report⁵, which emphasised a shift from the security of states to the security of people and highlighted that security extends beyond the protection of borders to the conditions in which people live and develop. Within this framework, human security is often explained through two key dimensions:

1. protection from chronic threats such as poverty and disease; and
2. protection from sudden and harmful disruptions to everyday life, whether at home, in the workplace or in the community.

The subsequent development of the concept further connected it with the principles of freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom to live in dignity, making human security a bridge between peace, development and human rights.

In practice, human security is operationalised through multiple dimensions, including personal security, community security, economic security, health security, food security, environmental security and political security. This multidimensional character helps identify risks beyond the traditional framework of crime and violence, as everyday insecurity often results from a combination of socio-economic pressures, inequality, limited access to services and fragile trust in institutions. UNDP’s 2022 Special Report on Human Security warns that, despite progress in living standards, health and education, the sense of security is declining in many societies and that preventive and integrated responses are needed to strengthen solidarity and community resilience.⁶



For Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is particularly important to emphasise that the dimensions of human security can also be viewed through development indicators, as life opportunities and vulnerabilities often shape the level of exposure to different risks. The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite indicator that measures a country's average achievements in three key dimensions of people's lives: life expectancy, education and standard of living. In 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina had an HDI value of 0.779 and ranked 80th out of 193 countries and territories. According to this measurement framework, Bosnia and Herzegovina is positioned in the upper part of the global ranking, while still trailing a significant number of countries, indicating room for improvement in the conditions that directly affect the well-being and security of its citizens.⁷

The conceptual connection between human security and the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda is direct. It is based on the understanding that the YPS Agenda approaches youth safety not only through the absence of armed conflict, but also through the everyday risks and inequalities that affect young people's well-being, development and ability to participate. Human security therefore provides an analytical framework for connecting the YPS pillars, particularly prevention, protection and partnerships, with young people's actual living conditions, including mental health and access to support, safety in communities and digital spaces, economic insecurity, and experiences of exclusion and discrimination.

In this sense, human security helps meaningfully translate young people's perceptions of safety into public policy. When young people describe safety in terms of a sense of belonging and dignity, the ability to seek support, and confidence that problems will be addressed fairly and in a timely manner, they are articulating precisely what human security places at its core. The concept of human security therefore serves as a bridge between the YPS Agenda and young people's views and needs, enabling recommendations to be directed towards integrated, preventive and youth-friendly measures.



Overview of Existing Legislative and Strategic Frameworks on Security in BiH

The security framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina derives from its complex constitutional structure and shared competences. As a result, security is not regulated through a single framework, but across multiple sectors and levels of government.

At the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the predominant laws and policies regulate defence, the intelligence and security system, and transnational security challenges. They are based on the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Law on Defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Law on Service in the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Law on the Intelligence and Security Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This level is further shaped by strategic documents and legislation such as the Integrated Border Management Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Action Plan for the period 2025–2029, the Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism 2021–2026, and the Strategy for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024–2027.

Although these documents significantly affect community security and the protection of vulnerable groups, young people are rarely treated as a distinct category, except indirectly through victim protection, the prevention of victimisation and the strengthening of protection mechanisms. An additional challenge is the fact that there is no unified institutional framework at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina governing the rights and status of young people. Consequently, youth safety does not emerge as an overarching, systematically managed policy area, but remains fragmented across different sectors and levels of government.

Most of what young people recognise as everyday safety is addressed at the entity, cantonal and local levels through education, health care, social protection, public spaces and violence-prevention mechanisms.

In the Federation of BiH, the Law on Youth of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina establishes an institutional framework for youth policies and creates space for systematic planning, participation and partnerships, but does not elaborate youth safety as a distinct concept in the manner recognised by the YPS Agenda. In this respect, its contribution lies primarily in creating the conditions for meaningful youth participation and partnerships.

On the other hand, the dimensions of youth safety in the Federation of BiH are more clearly reflected in legislation that directly regulates protection and procedures in high-risk situations, particularly the Law on the Protection and Treatment of Children and Juveniles in Criminal Proceedings. This law introduces special procedures, strengthens the protection of rights and emphasises a rehabilitative approach, thereby directly corresponding to the YPS pillars of protection and reintegration.



The Strategy for the Prevention and Combating of Domestic Violence in the Federation of BiH 2024–2027 follows the same principles of prevention and protection and addresses one of the most critical risks in young people's everyday lives, particularly for young women. In addition, the Federation of BiH Law on Volunteering is important for social inclusion and the development of social ties, which are recognised as protective factors within the human-security approach.

It is particularly significant that, within the strategic youth-policy process in the Federation of BiH, the Proposal for the Youth Strategy of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025–2034, which has not yet been formally adopted, explicitly identifies youth safety as one of its priority areas and introduces a human-security approach to young people. This represents a rare example in BiH where youth safety is recognised within a strategic youth-policy document rather than solely through sectoral policies.

In practice, the cantons in the Federation of BiH are particularly important because they hold key competences that shape the everyday sense of safety, primarily through cantonal laws on internal affairs and policing, cantonal laws on public order and peace, and cantonal responsibilities in education, health care and social protection. These regulations most directly govern the safety of public spaces, procedures for responding to incidents, and aspects of preventive action.

This is particularly important because young people largely assess safety through practical experience: whether institutions respond consistently and in a timely manner, whether reporting channels are accessible, and whether risks are identified and addressed in advance or intervention takes place only after a problem has escalated.

At the local level, youth safety is further addressed through local youth policies, violence-prevention programmes and cooperation among schools, social-work centres, health services and the police, as well as through public-space management policies and the establishment of spaces for young people.

In Republika Srpska, in addition to youth-policy frameworks, everyday safety is predominantly shaped by legislation regulating police work, public order and responses to crisis situations. The Law on Youth Organisation of Republika Srpska primarily regulates youth organising and institutional mechanisms for participation, but does not establish youth safety as a separate area or analyse it in depth. Its connection to the YPS framework is therefore also visible through the pillars of participation and partnerships. The Youth Policy of Republika Srpska 2023–2027 does not treat youth safety as a separate chapter, while security-related dimensions are generally addressed indirectly through health, social care and the prevention of risky behaviour.



With regard to the broader concept of public safety in Republika Srpska, the Law on Police and Internal Affairs of Republika Srpska and the Law on Public Order and Peace of Republika Srpska are particularly relevant, as they regulate conduct in public spaces and the prevention of and response to various forms of threats to safety, including increasingly prominent dimensions emerging in the digital environment. The Law on Protection from Domestic Violence in Republika Srpska is also significant for youth safety in particularly sensitive situations, while safety in emergencies relies on the framework for protection and rescue in emergency situations. The most direct connection to the understanding of safety recognised by the YPS Agenda in Republika Srpska remains the Law on the Protection and Treatment of Children and Juveniles in Criminal Proceedings of Republika Srpska, which introduces specific standards for the protection and reintegration of children and juveniles within the justice system and therefore clearly corresponds to the pillars of protection and reintegration.

In Brčko District, the Law on Youth of Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina regulates youth rights, institutional support, youth organising and youth participation in decision-making. As with entity-level youth legislation, youth safety is not identified as a separate area, but the law strengthens the conditions for the YPS pillars of participation and partnerships by institutionalising participation and responsibilities towards young people. In addition, the Youth Strategy of Brčko District of BiH 2022–2026 covers multisectoral issues relevant to young people's quality of life, while safety is generally addressed through related areas such as health, violence prevention, social protection and safe spaces rather than as a separate security chapter.

When the overall legislative framework is considered alongside the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda and the views of young respondents discussed later in this document, it becomes clear that youth safety in BiH is not consistently recognised institutionally as an integrated area of public policy. Although numerous laws and strategies indirectly regulate dimensions of youth safety, particularly through the protection of children and juveniles in the justice system, the prevention of domestic violence, efforts to combat trafficking in human beings, and police and public-order frameworks at lower levels of government, youth laws and most youth strategies primarily regulate organisation, participation and institutional support without systematically analysing youth safety through the lens of everyday risks, prevention, support and protection.

In this sense, the fragmentation of the existing framework often results in partial and reactive measures in practice, rather than a preventive, cross-sectoral and coordinated approach grounded in the actual needs of young people.

For this reason, the Youth, Peace and Security framework has practical value for Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it enables existing normative and strategic mechanisms to be connected within an integrated approach in which prevention, protection, partnerships and meaningful youth participation are equally important, and in which youth safety is recognised as an everyday matter of dignity, belonging and access to support rather than merely the absence of incidents.



Young People's Perceptions of Safety in BiH

Young people's perceptions of safety in Bosnia and Herzegovina are rarely limited to physical protection or the absence of violence. Rather, they are shaped by a combination of life opportunities, trust in institutions, social cohesion and a sense of certainty about the future. In this broader sense, safety is experienced as a matter of stability and dignity in everyday life, rather than as an issue that becomes relevant only in times of crisis. Young people's pronounced frustration and deep distrust in institutions, together with widespread intentions to emigrate, further contribute to a sense of uncertainty and weaken confidence in the possibility of change within their own communities.⁸

Young people also identify the departure of qualified workers (73.2%), corruption (72%) and unemployment (67.7%) among the most significant problems for the coming decade. This positions safety as both an economic and political issue, closely linked to perceptions of fairness and the functioning of the system.⁹

On the other hand, the Analysis of the Position and Needs of Youth in BiH suggests that the picture is not uniform. While 51.5% of young people are satisfied with the security situation in their place of residence, 10.1% are completely dissatisfied. Young people identify trust in the judiciary and its effectiveness, stronger enforcement of laws and more objective media as key conditions for strengthening their sense of safety.¹⁰

Finally, contemporary perceptions of safety increasingly include the digital environment, where risks and pressures are experienced as part of everyday life. Research by the Communications Regulatory Agency on the safety of children and young people on the internet reports that more than 50% of respondents have experienced unpleasant situations online, while more than one-third of secondary school students use the internet for more than five hours per day. This confirms that young people's sense of safety is increasingly shaped by their online experiences.¹¹

Within such a multidimensional framework, it is clear that youth safety cannot be understood through a single sector or one type of risk. Rather, it is shaped by interconnected social, economic, institutional and digital factors that collectively influence young people's everyday decisions and sense of belonging. The following section therefore presents insights collected from young people through focus groups, providing a more concrete understanding of how they experience safety at school, within the family, in public spaces and in the digital environment, as well as where they identify the most significant risks and systems of support.



Understanding safety from young people's perspective is essential for the meaningful development of a Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) approach in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The focus-group findings show that young people do not perceive safety as an abstract concept or solely as the absence of violence. Rather, they experience it as an everyday reality that encompasses physical protection, psychological stability, a sense of belonging and dignity, and the ability to express their opinions and identity without fear.

In other words, safety for young people is not only about whether something harmful might happen to them, but also about feeling free to be who they are, knowing that they have someone they can trust with a problem and turn to for support, and being confident that institutions will respond fairly, consistently and in a timely manner.

Young people's perceptions also reflect the principles of the YPS Agenda: safety is not built solely through responses after an incident, but through prevention, support, trust and the meaningful involvement of young people in decision-making processes. Safety and insecurity are experienced across several interconnected spaces – at school, within the family, in public spaces and online – and often operate subtly, as they do not necessarily take the form of a specific incident, yet can have long-term effects on young people's mental health, interpersonal relationships and sense of value within society.

Young people therefore distinguish physical safety from the sense of safety associated with freely expressing their opinions and identity. In this sense, youth safety can be understood as directly connected to trust in other people and institutions, as well as to young people's confidence in their own ability to influence matters that affect them.

"Peace, to me, is being able to walk freely... without thinking that someone will attack, insult or gossip about me..." (secondary school student, Kalesija-Bijeljina)

"I feel physically safe, but I do not feel safe when it comes to expressing my opinion." (female secondary school student, Teočak-Doboj)



The Role of Educational Institutions in Young People's Sense of Safety

In the discussions, school emerges as a central space in which young people learn what safety means in practice. It is not only a place of learning, but also an environment in which a sense of self-worth, belonging and social justice is shaped. Young people rarely describe school as a setting of constant physical violence; rather, they more often experience it as a space in which psychological safety can easily be undermined. Ridicule, peer pressure, “labelling” and unfair treatment are all cited by secondary school students as experiences that generate discomfort and instability rather than a sense of safety.

When an unfair situation occurs at school, young people interpret the response of adults as an indication of whether rules are applied consistently, whether victims are protected, and whether violence is minimised or responsibility is shifted onto students. Particular frustration is expressed over the perception that the school system often focuses on form rather than substance, devoting more attention to controlling behaviour through formal rules than to building a healthy classroom environment and preventing peer violence.

In such an environment, students are more likely to remain silent, withdraw or adapt to the situation rather than seek help, due to a lack of trust that the institution will consistently protect their safety and dignity.

“More attention should be paid to bullying and violence than to dress codes or mobile phones.” (female secondary school student, Kalesija-Bijeljina)

“I would like teachers to pay more attention to peer violence... it happens right in front of them.” (female secondary school student, Teočak-Doboj)



Youth Mental Health and Limited Access to Support

The focus groups showed that youth mental health is not a secondary issue, but one of the key foundations of a sense of safety and well-being. Young people associate mental health with everyday life and a sense of stability: continuous pressure, comparison with others, expectations from their surroundings, fear of failure, as well as deeper uncertainty about the future and life opportunities, all affect motivation, relationships, self-confidence and the way young people respond to stressful situations. When psychological stability is weakened, young people become more vulnerable to withdrawal, feelings of hopelessness, risky behaviour, as well as different forms of violence and manipulation, which over time reduces their willingness to seek help, become involved and take initiative in their communities and immediate surroundings.

Although awareness of the importance of mental health among young people is increasing, the focus groups show that support remains insufficiently accessible, uneven and often lacking clear and functional channels for assistance. Young people identify strong stigma and fear of judgement as key barriers, as well as concern that information about their problems may spread beyond a safe and confidential setting, discouraging them from approaching professional services. This pattern is particularly pronounced in smaller communities, where it is difficult to ensure discreet access to services and young people therefore often give up on seeking help, precisely because of fear of labelling and possible consequences within their families and communities.

On the other hand, the economic dimension stands out as one of the greatest challenges: psychological and psychotherapeutic services are often financially inaccessible, while public services are limited or overburdened. From the institutional perspective, it was confirmed that the capacities of the system are insufficient to provide continuous and accessible psychological support to young people. Participants also highlighted a shortage of qualified professionals, particularly in smaller communities, the heavy workload of existing psychologists and mental health centres, and the uneven availability of services in relation to actual needs. It was also emphasised that existing institutional arrangements often lack clear cross-sectoral coordination among education, health care and social protection, making referral, follow-up and the provision of integrated support to young people more difficult.



Despite these weaknesses, the focus groups also identified models with the potential to serve as a foundation for a systemic response. School psychologists were recognised as one of the most effective channels of psychosocial support, provided that they have adequate capacities, are clearly positioned as a source of support for young people rather than solely as a disciplinary mechanism, and are connected with other services through functional referral protocols. Telephone and online support lines were recognised as an important additional channel, particularly because of the anonymity, accessibility and possibility they offer young people to receive immediate support and information about further steps.

“At school, there is more discussion about grades than about how we actually feel and what we deal with every day.” (secondary school student, Kalesija-Bijeljina)

“When you have a problem, everyone tells you to see a psychologist, but no one talks about how expensive it is and how difficult it is to access help.” (young person, expanded focus group)

Public and Digital Spaces as a Test of Youth Safety

Young people experience public spaces and the online environment as interconnected spheres in which safety is continuously shaped through experiences of belonging, acceptance and protection. In public spaces, safety for young people is not only a matter of physical risk, but also of social signals – whether they feel welcome, whether they are judged or stigmatised because of their appearance, background, social status or identity, whether they have someone to whom they can report a problem, and whether they can expect a meaningful response. When such signals are repeated, public space ceases to be a neutral environment and becomes a space of caution, avoidance and self-censorship.

The online environment further intensifies this dynamic because young people do not perceive it as a separate world, but as an extension of everyday relationships and issues arising at school and within the community, where pressures, conflict and negative narratives can spread rapidly and carry over into everyday life. In this sense, youth safety in public and digital spaces also depends on whether clear rules of communication exist, whether supportive communities and accessible protection channels are available, and whether education and youth work systematically strengthen dialogue skills, as well as media and digital literacy.

Insights from participants in the Kalesija-Bijeljina focus group indicate that safer, facilitated spaces for discussion encourage higher-quality communication and greater trust compared with everyday environments in which communication often remains under the pressure of judgement and condemnation.



Prevention as a Continuous Safety Practice

One of the strongest insights expressed by young people is that safety is often treated reactively, with discussions, educational activities and institutional attention intensifying only after an incident has occurred. As a result, young people perceive prevention as something that formally exists but does not influence their everyday lives. They describe preventive activities as one-off, non-interactive and poorly adapted in terms of content, as they are often reduced to lectures that do not start from the real situations and risks young people encounter. They particularly emphasise that such activities rarely develop practical skills or provide clear steps, such as how to recognise risky situations, whom to contact, how to report a problem, what to expect after making a report, and where to obtain support. As a consequence, prevention remains outside everyday practice, while trust in protection mechanisms fails to develop.

By contrast, young people are seeking prevention that is continuous, practical and understandable to them, and that is developed together with them and within their own environments. This implies interactive content based on real-life scenarios and focused on strengthening resilience, non-violent communication and a culture of safety at school and in the community, as well as in the digital environment. Consistency is also essential: prevention must be continuous and systemic, rather than implemented only in the short term through individual campaigns, because trust and behavioural change develop gradually. When young people feel that programmes have been designed without their participation, prevention is reduced to formally fulfilling an obligation without measurable effect. Within the YPS approach, prevention is therefore understood as a standard of practice and relationships that connects education, communities and institutions, rather than as a one-off activity.

“Safety is discussed only after something happens, and by then it is already too late for prevention.” (young person, expanded focus group)

“Educational sessions are not interesting to young people... we often feel that trainers do not make an effort to adapt the knowledge to us.” (young person, expanded focus group)



Participation: Decisions Are Made About Young People, Not With Them

Young people do not view participation as a luxury or a formal procedure, but as an important condition for safety and trust. When they have genuine opportunities to influence decisions, they feel respected and protected because institutions send a clear message that young people matter and are treated as partners. However, the dominant experience is often the opposite. Participation is reduced to a formality, without genuine authority, timely feedback or clear evidence that young people's contributions have led to change. In practice, mechanisms such as student councils, consultations and public discussions often remain limited to listening to young people, while key decisions and priorities are defined outside the spaces in which young people have real influence, further weakening their motivation to engage.

Over time, such experiences create a pattern of withdrawal. Young people become less likely to initiate action, avoid public engagement and increasingly doubt whether participation is worthwhile, particularly when there is no clear procedure for how proposals are considered or what happens after they are submitted. In smaller communities, this feeling is further intensified by fear of negative reactions, making young people more likely to withdraw than to insist on change. At the same time, the focus groups confirm that trust can be built quickly when participation processes have clear rules, when institutions provide concrete responses, and when proposals can be followed from the initial idea through to a decision. Under such circumstances, participation becomes a practical mechanism for jointly addressing problems and contributes to a stronger sense of responsibility, belonging and safety among young people.

"Sometimes a student council exists only on paper and does nothing..." (secondary school student, Žepče-Goražde)

"We feel that decisions about young people are made without young people because we are not involved..." (young person, expanded focus group)



Young people's perceptions of safety in BiH confirm that safety must be understood as an interconnected system: school, family, public spaces and the online environment overlap, while safety and insecurity in one setting spill over into another. The most prominent challenges described by young people are not limited to individual incidents, but reflect persistent patterns: psychological insecurity in schools, limited access to and trust in mental health support, reactive prevention, and participation without genuine influence. These patterns directly affect young people's trust in institutions and their willingness to engage in their communities.

From a YPS perspective, the findings suggest that youth-safety policy must be developed simultaneously in several directions – by strengthening psychological safety and protection mechanisms, ensuring accessible mental health support, providing continuous violence-prevention measures, and creating genuine participatory processes that lead to visible change. Without this, the system may remain formally in place but insufficiently accessible, reliable and relevant to young people. Trust is precisely what determines whether young people will report a problem, seek help and participate in finding solutions.



Five Key Policy Gaps

Five interconnected gaps limit a systemic response to youth-safety issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

01**Disconnected public policy**

Youth safety is not institutionally recognised as an integrated area connecting education, health care, social protection, policing, the judiciary and youth policies.

02**Fragmented and reactive response**

Cross-sectoral coordination is insufficient, response and referral protocols are uneven, and action is often initiated only after a problem occurs.

03**Unequal psychosocial support**

Shortages of qualified professionals, costs, stigma, confidentiality concerns and limited availability in smaller communities restrict access to support.

04**Participation without genuine influence**

Participation mechanisms exist, but feedback and the visible influence of young people's proposals on decisions are often lacking.

05**Digital risks outside the system**

Reporting channels, preventive activities, digital literacy and institutional referral are not yet sufficiently standardised and interconnected.

An interconnected system of measures is needed to strengthen coordination, prevention, access to support, protection and meaningful youth participation at the same time.



Five Priority Recommendations

Five systemic priorities connect each recommended measure with the responsible stakeholders and the change to be achieved.

PRIORITY / MEASURE		LEADS AND PARTNERS	RESULT
01	Establish a coordinated institutional framework for YPS and youth safety in BiH.	WHO IMPLEMENTS Institutions at the level of BiH, the entities and Brčko District; umbrella youth structures; relevant sectoral institutions.	EXPECTED RESULT Youth safety is planned and monitored as an interconnected area of public policy, with cross-sectoral coordination, a YPS action framework and regular monitoring.
02	Standardise cross-sectoral protocols for the prevention, reporting, protection and referral of young people at risk.	WHO IMPLEMENTS Relevant ministries and services in education, health care, social protection and internal affairs; schools, police, social-work centres and health-care institutions.	EXPECTED RESULT A young person receives a clear and comparable minimum level of protection and support regardless of their place of residence or the institution they first approach.
03	Ensure accessible, confidential and youth-friendly psychosocial support.	WHO IMPLEMENTS Relevant education and health-care institutions; schools; mental-health centres; local communities.	EXPECTED RESULT Young people access support earlier and more easily, have clear information about services, and benefit from functional referral pathways among schools, health care and social protection.
04	Integrate the prevention of violence and digital risks into continuous educational and preventive programmes.	WHO IMPLEMENTS Educational institutions and relevant ministries; police; youth organisations; media; professional support services.	EXPECTED RESULT Young people continuously receive information, support and practical tools for preventing violence, seeking help, non-violent communication and responsible behaviour.
05	Consistently implement existing mechanisms for youth participation in decision-making.	WHO IMPLEMENTS Institutions at all levels of government; youth councils; youth organisations and other representative youth structures.	EXPECTED RESULT Statutory youth-participation mechanisms are implemented in a timely and meaningful way; young people can influence decisions and receive feedback on their proposals.



Public Institutions in BiH

01

Establish the Commission for the Coordination of Youth Issues at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina as the only permanent, intersectoral body at this level that works for and with young people. The Commission should bring together relevant institutions responsible for youth issues at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the entities and Brčko District, as well as representatives of umbrella youth structures, with a clearly defined mandate, work plan and annual reporting obligations.

02

Recognise the YPS Agenda as a relevant framework for BiH through the development and adoption of a YPS action plan at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina, modelled on the WPS approach. The action plan should cover a defined period, for example three to five years, and include objectives under each YPS pillar, responsible implementing bodies, deadlines, indicators and minimum budgetary allocations.

03

Integrate the YPS approach into existing strategic documents and sectoral policies, particularly those concerning protection from violence, digital safety, mental health, education and youth participation. This means that each relevant strategy and action plan should include provisions recognising the specific risks and needs of young people, prevention and protection measures, as well as mechanisms for youth participation in processes that affect them.

04

Introduce a mandatory annual assessment of the state of youth safety in BiH, in the form of a joint report by the Commission, consolidating data from the education, health care, social protection, police and justice sectors and providing recommendations for the following year.



05 Establish or strengthen institutional mechanisms so that existing commissions and committees within legislative bodies responsible for security in the Federation of BiH, Republika Srpska and Brčko District, as well as at the cantonal level in the Federation of BiH, systematically involve young people and youth structures in their work and develop programmes and plans aligned with the YPS approach. In parallel, relevant departments and services within executive authorities should assume an operational role through cross-sectoral coordination, the establishment and implementation of referral and protection protocols, and regular monitoring and reporting on results, so that youth-safety measures are planned, implemented and evaluated as part of regular institutional work.

06 Standardise minimum response protocols for cases of violence and other risks across all sectors, with clearly defined steps, deadlines and responsibilities. The aim is to ensure that every young person receives the same minimum level of protection and support regardless of their place of residence.

07 Establish a unified regulatory framework that recognises the online environment as an integral part of the safety of children and young people, through standardised protocols for the prevention of and response to digital violence and harassment, clear reporting and referral channels, and the mandatory integration of digital literacy as an essential component of recognising online violence.



Schools and Educational Institutions

01

Ensure access to a school psychologist in all schools in BiH as continuously available professional support for students, with clearly defined standards of confidentiality and privacy protection. In schools where this is difficult to achieve due to staffing constraints, establish shared psychological-support teams at the municipal or cantonal level, with regular presence in schools and a clear schedule of availability.

02

Introduce a mandatory, visible and youth-friendly school support system that includes clear channels for reporting violence and harassment, protection for those who report, procedures for responding to reports, and referral to additional services.

03

Recognise and plan continuous preventive programmes within school curricula. Programmes should be interactive, based on real-life situations and developed together with young people, and should cover non-violent communication, mental health, digital safety, hate speech and a culture of safety in schools.

04

Establish psychological safety as a mandatory standard of school practice and accountability, ensuring that teaching and other school staff have clearly defined responsibilities and response standards in cases of humiliation, discrimination and violence. This entails regular training, consistent application of rules, and accountability mechanisms for adults in schools to create an environment in which students feel respected and protected and are able to report problems without fear of consequences.



Police, the Security Sector and the Judiciary

01 Establish a youth-friendly approach in interactions between young people and the police and judiciary, particularly when young people are victims, witnesses or at risk. This includes clear communication, protection, referral to support services, and case follow-up through coordination with social protection services and schools.

02 Develop standardised preventive police programmes in cooperation with schools and youth organisations that are practical and adapted to young people, with clear information on whom to contact, how to report a problem and what to expect after making a report.

03 Establish clear channels for reporting digital forms of violence and harassment, with rapid response procedures and connections to support services, as online safety directly affects young people's overall sense of safety.



Health Care and Social Protection

01 Expand access to psychological support for young people by strengthening the capacities of mental health centres and services, particularly in smaller communities, and ensure that young people have accessible and understandable information on where and how they can obtain psychological support.

02 Establish functional cooperation and coordination protocols among health care, social protection and education, with clearly defined steps, responsibilities and contact points, so that support for young people is continuous rather than sporadic and so that high-risk situations can be followed from the initial report through to the final outcome.

03 Develop and promote anonymous telephone and online support lines as supplementary channels, with clear information on confidentiality and further steps.



Youth Structures, Civil Society and Young People, with Institutional Support

- 01** Strengthen the role of youth councils/advisory councils, youth organisations and organisations working with young people as partners in YPS implementation through formal participation in commissions and working groups, as well as through their role as a link between young people and institutions, particularly in smaller communities.
- 02** Develop peer-support, media- and digital-literacy, and structured-dialogue programmes, with clear links to institutional protection channels and clearly defined procedures for cooperation with the relevant services.
- 03** Establish a standard for meaningful youth participation in all consultation processes, including timely information, opportunities to influence decisions, feedback, and a publicly visible record of contributions.

Media and Digital Platforms

- 01** Develop standards for responsible reporting on young people, violence and mental health, while promoting available support resources and avoiding sensationalism.



Donor Community and Partners

- 01** Donor policies should focus on investing in the strengthening of existing mechanisms and long-term capacities for youth safety by supporting youth structures as partners in the implementation of YPS measures, financing accessible school-based and local psychosocial support, developing and applying cross-sectoral response protocols, and establishing systems for monitoring and reporting on results at community and institutional levels.



Youth Safety Is a Shared Responsibility

In conclusion, this policy paper is based on the understanding that youth safety in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be viewed narrowly as a matter of public order or a response to individual incidents, but rather as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by life opportunities, relationships, trust, access to support and a sense of belonging. The review of the legislative and strategic framework shows that security in BiH is largely regulated through sectoral and territorially fragmented policies, while youth safety is rarely recognised as an integrated area of public policy and instead appears indirectly through individual laws and strategies. In this context, the YPS Agenda and the concept of human security provide a framework that allows existing protection, prevention and support mechanisms to be viewed as an interconnected system rather than as a series of short-term and often insufficiently coordinated measures.

The analysis of available research confirms that young people associate safety with socio-economic stability, fairness, institutional reliability and the digital environment, further reinforcing the need for an approach that goes beyond the boundaries of a single sector. Insights from the focus groups build on this evidence and provide a more concrete understanding of how safety and insecurity are experienced at school, within the family, in public spaces and online, as well as where young people identify the greatest risks and potential support mechanisms. Particularly prominent are patterns of reactive responses rather than prevention, insufficiently accessible and confidential psychosocial support, uneven institutional responses, and participation that often remains formal. These factors directly affect young people's trust and their willingness to seek help, report problems and participate in social processes within their communities.

Based on these findings, the five priority recommendations direct action towards a coordinated institutional framework, standardised protection and referral mechanisms, more accessible psychosocial support, continuous prevention and meaningful youth participation.

Finally, this document offers more than a normative overview or description of the current situation. It draws attention to practical points of change and to the mechanisms through which youth safety can be improved systematically. The proposed framework of recommendations has been developed to be applicable across multiple levels of government and sectors, with an emphasis on coordination, response standards, accessible support services and meaningful youth participation.



The document's central message is that youth safety is built not only through protection from risks, but also through the creation of an environment in which young people have the space, support and confidence to participate actively in building safer and more peaceful communities.

Youth safety is built not only through protection from risks, but also through an environment in which young people have the space, support and confidence to actively create safer and more peaceful communities.



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