



PSYCHOPEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTION PROGRAM BY GREEK POLICE OFFICERS FOR THE DETECTION OF CHILD ABUSE

Theodoros Karampas¹ⁱ,

Koutras Vasileios²,

Papadimitropoulou Panagoula³

¹Postgraduate Student,

Department of Preschool Education,

University of Ioannina,

Epirus, Greece

²Assistant Professor,

Department of Preschool Education,

University of Ioannina,

Epirus, Greece

³PhD, Science of Education,

Teaching Professor in Developmental Psychology,

School of Pedagogical and Technological Education,

Greece

Abstract:

Child abuse and neglect remain pressing issues in Greece, often underreported due to social taboos and institutional limitations. This study presents the design, theoretical justification, and the possibility of field testing of “INTOVIAN” — an early detection tool aimed at identifying high-risk families with infants and toddlers. Using a mixed-method approach, was examined whether the tool can be applied by frontline Greek police officers and assess their capacity to observe and report signs of abuse in domestic contexts. The results reveal that, despite limited training, officers are capable of recognizing complex indicators of child maltreatment when equipped with structured observation tools. These findings support the inclusion of the police as active agents in interdisciplinary child protection systems and highlight the need for tailored training and inter-agency protocols. The INTOVIAN program can represents an innovative, scalable model for integrating law enforcement into child welfare prevention strategies.

Keywords: child abuse, child protection, Greek police, INTOVIAN tool

ⁱ Correspondence: email thodoriskarabas@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Child abuse and neglect (CAN) are globally recognized as critical public health and human rights concerns with long-term consequences for the well-being and development of children (World Health Organization [WHO], 2016). Encompassing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse as well as neglect, CAN requires interdisciplinary prevention and intervention strategies (Gilbert *et al.*, 2009; Sarris, Vasilopoulos, & Katsarou, 2024). Research has consistently shown that early exposure to abuse is associated with a wide range of adverse psychological, physical, and social outcomes across the lifespan (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Norman *et al.*, 2012).

In Greece, CAN remains significantly underreported, partly due to entrenched cultural taboos, weak interagency coordination, and a lack of public awareness (Fotiadou *et al.*, 2015). Recent studies emphasize that frontline professionals often feel unprepared to detect early signs of neglect in infancy, especially in marginalized communities (Sarris, Vasilopoulos, & Katsarou, 2024). Despite legislative reforms and policy efforts in recent years, considerable challenges persist in identifying and responding to abuse cases, especially among vulnerable populations such as infants, Roma children, and refugee minors (UNICEF Greece, 2021).

As a frontline institution, the Hellenic Police has unique access to families and environments where abuse may occur. However, the potential role of police officers in detecting and preventing CAN has been largely overlooked in both national discourse and professional training (Papazisi & Spiliotopoulou, 2019). Although officers are often the first to witness signs of maltreatment during domestic visits, the lack of specialized tools and trauma-informed education limits their proactive involvement.

This study introduces and evaluates "INTOVIAN", an observational screening tool and examines whether this tool can be applied for use by police officers to identify children under the age of three who may be at risk of abuse or neglect. The paper explores how structured early detection instruments can enhance the police's role in child protection, align with international prevention frameworks, and address current gaps in the Greek child welfare system.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Child Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse and neglect are defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 1999) as *"all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity."* These acts are committed by a parent, caregiver, or another person in a position of responsibility, trust, or power over the child. The definition emphasizes both acts of commission (abuse) and acts of omission (neglect), recognizing that harm can result not only from what is done to a child but also from what is not done to protect or care for them.

Child abuse is generally categorized into four main types:

- Physical abuse,
- Sexual abuse,
- Emotional (or psychological) abuse, and
- Neglect.

It is important to recognize that these categories often overlap. A child subjected to one form of abuse is likely to experience others as well. Moreover, the severity and long-term consequences of abuse are not always proportional to how visible it is. Emotional abuse and chronic neglect can be just as harmful, if not more so, than physical abuse.

2.2 Effects of Abuse on Children

Child abuse and neglect are among the most devastating experiences a child can endure, with consequences that often extend across their entire lifespan. The impact of abuse is multidimensional, affecting a child's physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and social development. While the effects of abuse vary depending on the type, severity, frequency, and timing of the experience—as well as the presence of protective factors—extensive research has shown that all forms of abuse pose serious risks to healthy development (Sarris *et al.*, 2020; Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Norman *et al.*, 2012).

▪ Physical Consequences

Physical abuse can cause immediate injuries such as bruises, burns, fractures, or even death in severe cases. In some instances, physical injuries may be misinterpreted as accidents or remain hidden due to the child's fear or loyalty toward the abuser (Gilbert *et al.*, 2009). Beyond visible harm, physical abuse can contribute to long-term health issues, including chronic pain, gastrointestinal problems, and somatic symptom disorders (Danese & Tan, 2014). Children who experience repeated physical trauma are more likely to suffer from neurobiological alterations, particularly in brain areas responsible for threat detection, emotional regulation, and executive function (Teicher & Samson, 2016).

Moreover, exposure to toxic stress—defined as strong, frequent, or prolonged adversity without adequate adult support—can disrupt early brain architecture and increase vulnerability to physical illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, autoimmune disorders, and obesity in adulthood (Shonkoff *et al.*, 2012).

▪ Psychological and Emotional Effects

The emotional and psychological toll of abuse is often more severe and enduring than physical injuries. Children who experience emotional abuse or neglect may internalize negative beliefs about themselves, leading to chronic low self-esteem, shame, guilt, and a distorted sense of identity (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Sarris, 2024; Sarris *et al.*, 2024). Common psychiatric outcomes include depression, anxiety disorders, borderline

personality traits, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and dissociative symptoms (Teicher & Samson, 2016; Spinazzola *et al.*, 2014).

Children who have experienced sexual abuse often suffer from nightmares, intrusive thoughts, dissociation, and an increased risk of self-harm or suicidal ideation. The psychological burden intensifies when abuse is perpetrated by a caregiver or trusted adult, undermining the child's sense of safety and attachment (Trickett *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, early abuse has been linked to dysfunction of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which regulates the stress response. This dysfunction contributes to emotional hypersensitivity, impulsivity, and difficulty managing frustration—traits commonly observed in children with trauma histories (Sarris *et al.*, 2024; De Bellis *et al.*, 2009).

- **Cognitive and Educational Impact**

Child abuse, particularly neglect, can significantly jeopardize cognitive and academic development. Children experiencing chronic neglect may lack adequate stimulation during critical developmental periods, resulting in language delays, poor memory, executive dysfunction, and reduced intellectual performance (Pears & Fisher, 2005). Continuous stress exposure also affects attention and concentration, limiting a child's ability to learn and perform academically (Dube *et al.*, 2003). A history of abuse is also associated with increased likelihood of grade repetition, absenteeism, school dropout, and placement in special education services. These academic challenges often exacerbate emotional distress and social exclusion, creating a cycle of disadvantage (Jonson-Reid *et al.*, 2004; Sarris *et al.*, 2020).

- **Social and Behavioral Consequences**

Abused and neglected children often display behavioral problems such as aggression, defiance, antisocial tendencies, and oppositional behavior (Sarris *et al.*, 2024). These behavior patterns may emerge as coping strategies in response to chronic threat, fear, or abandonment (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1995). During adolescence, such children may engage in substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, delinquency, or gang involvement—often as a result of emotional dysregulation and maladaptive peer associations (Widom & Maxfield, 2001).

Moreover, abuse significantly disrupts a child's capacity for healthy interpersonal relationships. Victims may struggle with trust, intimacy, empathy, and social communication, making them vulnerable to peer rejection or revictimization later in life (Hébert *et al.*, 2009). Children raised in violent households may normalize aggression and are at higher risk of perpetuating the cycle of abuse when they become parents (Berlin *et al.*, 2011).

- **Long-Term and Intergenerational Effects**

The effects of childhood abuse extend beyond childhood and adolescence. Numerous studies have confirmed that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs),

including various forms of abuse and neglect, increase the risk of mental illness, addiction, unemployment, homelessness, and premature mortality in adulthood (Felitti *et al.*, 1998; Anda *et al.*, 2006). The burden is compounded for individuals exposed to multiple or overlapping forms of abuse. Recent Greek studies highlight that long-term psychological and social dysfunction in adults who were victims of childhood abuse is often associated with self-esteem issues, psychomotor clumsiness, and emotional dysregulation (Sarris *et al.*, 2023; Sarris, 2024).

There is also compelling evidence for the intergenerational transmission of trauma, whereby unresolved trauma in abused parents increases the likelihood of abuse in their own children, especially in the absence of therapeutic support or social services (Appleyard *et al.*, 2005).

▪ **Protective Factors and Resilience**

While the outcomes of abuse can be devastating, it is important to emphasize that not all abused children experience negative trajectories. Protective factors such as secure attachment to a non-abusive caregiver, supportive peer relationships, school engagement, and access to therapeutic interventions—such as psychoeducational programs through creative play and puppetry (Sarris, 2009)—can mitigate the effects of trauma (Luthar *et al.*, 2000; Masten, 2014).

Early identification and trauma-informed intervention strategies—particularly within educational, health, and law enforcement systems—can significantly alter developmental outcomes and promote resilience.

3. The Role of the Hellenic Police in Preventing and Addressing Child Abuse

The Hellenic Police plays a critical role in identifying, investigating, and preventing child abuse and neglect in Greece. As one of the first points of contact for at-risk children and families, the police are legally and operationally involved in the country's broader child protection system. Their involvement is governed by criminal law, child welfare legislation, and interagency protocols. However, the effectiveness of this role is influenced by various factors, including specialized training, interdepartmental coordination, public trust, and institutional capacity (Papazisi & Spiliotopoulou, 2019).

Despite the efforts, there are ongoing concerns regarding the police's institutional capacity to manage child protection cases:

- **Inadequate specialized training:** Many officers, particularly those not assigned to Juvenile Protection Units, lack comprehensive training in recognizing subtle signs of abuse, conducting child-sensitive interviews, or applying trauma-informed approaches (Papazisi & Spiliotopoulou, 2019).
- **Lack of standardized operating procedures (SOPs)** across departments leads to inconsistent handling of cases.

- **Bureaucratic delays** in communication between services, especially among police, prosecutors, and social services, may result in children remaining in abusive environments.
- **Staff shortages and professional burnout**, especially in high-demand urban areas, limit officers' ability to engage proactively and continuously with children and families.
- **Public mistrust**: In some cases, especially within marginalized communities (e.g., Roma, refugee populations), families may hesitate to report abuse or cooperate with the police due to fears of discrimination or criminalization.

Through its widespread community presence, the Hellenic Police plays a vital role in child protection in Greece. Its dual role in investigation and prevention provides a unique opportunity for the early detection of abuse and prompt intervention. However, the full potential of the Hellenic Police remains underutilized due to structural, procedural, and training gaps. Ensuring comprehensive training, institutional support, and standardized protocols—alongside fostering a child-centered policing culture—will be essential for enhancing the police's role in protecting vulnerable children across Greece.

International standards emphasize the critical role of multi-disciplinary training in child protection, wherein police officers, prosecutors, social workers, educators, and mental health professionals engage in joint educational programs to foster shared knowledge and interagency accountability (Council of Europe, 2017). Although Greece has initiated steps in this direction, the systemic adoption of trauma-informed principles remains limited. Scaling these practices to the national level and embedding them within the official police training curriculum is essential.

In sum, the existing training infrastructure for Greek law enforcement is insufficient to address the complex realities of child abuse prevention and response. Enhancing police specialization through structured, continuous, and experiential education is imperative for safeguarding children and supporting a cohesive national strategy. Absent such investment, legal reforms and protective mandates risk remaining ineffective in practice.

In this context, the role of the Hellenic Police in prevention is both underutilized and critically important. Police officers are often the first institutional actors to enter homes where abuse may be occurring and may be the only professionals in a position to observe early warning signs in the course of their duties. However, without adequate training, standardized procedures, and interdepartmental collaboration, their ability to intervene effectively is significantly constrained (Papazisi & Spiliotopoulou, 2019).

The prevention program examined in this study addresses these limitations by aiming to formalize and strengthen the preventive capacity of the police. Whether through community-based approaches, school-based education, or interdisciplinary cooperation, such initiatives represent a shift toward early identification, public awareness, and trauma-informed policing.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1 Study Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to explore the capacity of frontline police officers to detect child abuse and neglect (CAN) using a specially developed screening tool. The study aimed to assess the relevance, clarity, and utility of the "INTOVIAN" questionnaire in real-world policing contexts.

4.2 Development of the INTOVIAN Tool

The aim of the INTOVIAN tool is to identify any family with an infant or toddler that: (i) is at risk of potential child maltreatment, or (ii) is already facing issues of violence in the relationship between the parent/caregiver and the child. The ultimate goal of this tool is to contribute to the prevention and early detection of cases involving abused or neglected infants and toddlers.

In essence, it is a brief screening tool for families with infants and toddlers from the general population, with the objective of distinguishing between two categories: (1) those for whom there are indicators supporting the suspicion of abuse/neglect or abusive patterns in the caregiver-child relationship and who therefore require further assessment or intervention; and (2) those in which the possibility of abuse or neglect can be ruled out. The tool includes sections on physical condition, emotional signals, household environment, and caregiver behavior. INTOVIAN tool contains 5 items. Example of item: Q1. *In the case of noticing a physical trauma/mark or being informed about an accident: (a) is the caregiver's story consistent?*

INTOVIAN Guideline contains an explanation of the items and scoring procedures, recommendations on the next steps of the assessment process, a list of risk and protective indicators for infant/toddler abuse and neglect, relevant national laws and guidelines, and a list of organizations working with child abuse and neglect.

The tool's content validity was already established through a panel of experts in child psychology, health, and social work. Adjustments can be made to align with the operational realities of the police force.

4.3 Participants and Sampling

The present study focuses on identifying recurring characteristics in incidents of domestic violence involving minors as witnesses or victims. The aim of the research was to examine whether the conclusions drawn from police officers' responses align with findings from the international literature, as well as with official national statistical data concerning similar cases of domestic violence. Such alignment would indicate both the observational acuity of police officers and their in-depth engagement with the phenomenon, especially given that the questionnaire they were asked to complete included questions extending beyond the narrow scope of their formal duties. Our aim is to use the present research to support the proposal for the adoption of the program

entitled "INTOVIAN" by frontline police officers who, in the course of their duties, come into contact with children.

The sample consisted of 60 Greek police officers serving in urban and rural districts who were likely to encounter domestic situations involving minors. A purposive sampling technique was used to select officers with prior experience handling domestic violence cases or who were assigned to community policing roles.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. All participants received a short briefing on the study's objectives and ethical safeguards before completing the questionnaire.

4.4 Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered in printed form. Officers were asked to review and respond to 16 items based on their previous experiences and hypothetical cases. The questionnaire included questions aimed at assessing the understanding of child abuse and neglect by non-health professionals and ensuring context-appropriate application of "INTOVIAN". Responses were rated on a Likert scale to capture the comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of child abuse and neglect (CAN). Additionally, open-ended feedback was solicited to refine the questionnaire's structure and implementation guidelines.

Data collection occurred over a three-week period in the police departments of Arta's city. Ethical approval was obtained from my supervisor, Professor D. Sarris of the University of Ioannina, prior to data collection.

4.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS v.26 to summarize officers' responses. Measures included frequency distributions, mean scores, and standard deviations to evaluate the understanding of the phenomenon of CAN. Open-ended responses were analyzed thematically to extract qualitative insights to confirm the accurate understanding and in-depth handling of CAN by the police officers, the implementation challenges and training needs.

5. Findings / Results

5.1 Demographics

The study involved a total of 60 police officers (54 men and 6 women), aged between 32 and 55 years. The low number of female participants is attributed to their limited deployment in field operations, as most serve in office-based roles and have less direct exposure to domestic violence cases.

The vast majority of participants (76.7%) had between 21 and 30 years of service, indicating significant professional experience. Furthermore, 91.7% had served for 11 to 30 years in frontline roles rather than administrative posts, suggesting that their responses are grounded in practical, on-the-ground knowledge.

5.2 Context of Reported Incidents

Most incidents (80%) occurred in urban areas ($n = 48$), with fewer cases reported in villages ($n = 11$) and only one case in a suburban setting. This distribution reflects the geography of the city of Arta, where suburban boundaries are minimal due to natural constraints.

In terms of household composition, 51.7% of the reported incidents involved families of four members, while a total of 63.4% of cases involved households with four or more individuals. This suggests that larger family units may present a higher frequency of domestic conflict.

5.3 Forms of Domestic Violence Encountered

Participants were asked to identify the types of violence encountered in each case, with multiple selections permitted. The most commonly reported forms of violence were physical abuse (49.4%) and verbal abuse (33.7%). Psychological/emotional and sexual abuse were reported less frequently, likely due to the difficulty of externally identifying such forms of harm when victims are reluctant or afraid to disclose them (Sarris *et al.*, 2024).

5.4 Victim and Perpetrator Profiles

Women were identified as the victims in 75.4% of the cases, followed by children (15.4%), men (7.7%), and other individuals such as cohabitants or relatives (1.5%). Inversely, the perpetrators were predominantly men (76.7%), followed by women (16.7%) and other individuals (6.7%). Notably, no incident involved a minor as the perpetrator.

5.5 Children's Emotional Responses to Police Presence

When asked about children's emotional reactions to the arrival of police officers, 41.7% of the participants reported that the children expressed a sense of safety, whereas 31.7% observed signs of fear. These responses highlight the ambivalent emotional impact that law enforcement presence can have on minors during high-stress family conflicts.

5.6 Neglect and Living Conditions

Evidence of neglect was observed both in the individuals and in the home environment. Children were perceived as neglected in 28.3% of cases, women in 30%, and men in only 6.7%. The home itself was reported as neglected in 50% of the cases. Moreover, only 23.3% of households were assessed as having good living conditions, underscoring a strong correlation between domestic violence and poor socioeconomic status (Dubowitz, 2013; Sarris *et al.*, 2024).

5.7 Recurring Incidents and Family Background

It is particularly noteworthy that in 58.3% of the cases, the involved individuals had previously come to the attention of the police for similar incidents. This indicates a high rate of recurrence and potential systemic gaps in effective intervention and prevention.

5.8 Educational and Employment Status

Educational data were not available for all individuals, but among the known cases, most perpetrators and victims had only completed basic education (i.e., high school). Employment data revealed that 78.3% of the perpetrators were employed (mostly in manual labor), whereas only 34.9% of the victims held a job at the time of the incident. These findings point to potential power imbalances in economic independence within households affected by domestic violence.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insight into the lived experiences and professional observations of frontline police officers responding to incidents of domestic violence involving minors. The data reveal a complex landscape of recurring abuse, gendered victimization patterns, and systemic socioeconomic disadvantage.

A key observation is the high percentage of experienced officers in the sample, many with over two decades of active-duty service. This lends credibility to their assessments and suggests that their perceptions are grounded in long-term exposure to real-life cases (Sarris *et al.*, 2024). The predominance of incidents in urban settings is consistent with demographic trends in regional Greek cities, where population density and socioeconomic stressors may heighten domestic tensions (Kourti, 2022).

One of the most striking patterns is the overwhelming identification of women as primary victims (75.4%) and men as perpetrators (76.7%). These results support previous research highlighting the gendered nature of domestic abuse (Tsirigotis, 2021). The high prevalence of child victims (15.4%) and their ambivalent emotional reactions to police presence—ranging from fear to relief—underscores the psychological toll of such incidents on minors and reinforces the need for trauma-informed policing approaches (Baird, 2020).

Neglect indicators—both personal and environmental—were found in a significant number of cases, further substantiating the link between domestic violence and poverty or social exclusion (Dubowitz, 2013). Notably, in over half of the cases (58.3%), the same families had been involved in prior reports, emphasizing the cyclical nature of domestic violence and the insufficiency of current intervention measures. The limited educational background and employment inequality among victims and perpetrators echo existing studies on vulnerability and dependency in abusive relationships (Sarris *et al.*, 2023). The victim's restricted access to employment (only 34.9% were employed) further points to economic factors that constrain their ability to exit abusive situations (Kourti, 2022).

Based on the above, we can state with certainty that the present study fully met its primary initial objective, as all the findings are substantiated by their alignment with the aforementioned official national statistics and the conclusions of the studies presented. The frequency of the forms of violence reported in the responses—primarily verbal and physical—the predominance of men as perpetrators and women as victims of domestic

violence, the consistency of conclusions regarding demographic characteristics, particularly the educational level of the perpetrator, as well as the socioeconomic profile of those involved, confirmed by the rates of unemployment especially among victims, all indicate a correct understanding and in-depth handling of domestic violence incidents by the police officers.

7. Conclusions

Police officers, due to the nature of their profession and the services they provide, are in a position to identify characteristics of children who are victims of violence and to contribute to reducing this phenomenon and its harmful consequences on them. A necessary condition for achieving these goals is equipping police officers with the appropriate knowledge and skills to understand all the factors that cause, promote, and intensify such behaviors, as well as raising awareness of the complexity of the phenomenon, thereby facilitating its effective handling. Beyond enforcing the law, the police officer must also be concerned with ensuring the protection of victims and referring them to the appropriate structures and services. Therefore, raising awareness and providing ongoing training for police officers is essential. Equally necessary is the establishment of a framework that ensures the capacity to detect and respond to child victims of domestic violence through the "INTOVIAN" program by Greek police officers. The prevention program currently under investigation by the Hellenic Police is not an isolated initiative but rather a reflection of broader international trends and theoretical developments in child protection. By integrating principles from public health, trauma-informed, and rights-based frameworks, the program has the potential to become a cornerstone of the Hellenic Police's evolving child protection strategy. Its success, however, will depend on the extent to which theory is matched by implementation, institutional commitment, and social support.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest related to the design, implementation, or publication of this study.

About the Author(s)

Theodoros Karampas is a Police Deputy Director at the Hellenic Police. Holder of a Master's degree from the Department of Preschool Education, University of Ioannina. His research interests include prevention and intervention in cases of child abuse, as well as police training to improve responses to domestic violence. He collaborates actively with academic and research networks related to child protection and law enforcement practices.

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