

Recruitment of minors into organised crime

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Summary

The recruitment of minors into serious and organised crime has increasingly become a tactic used by criminal networks to avoid detection, capture and prosecution. By using minors, the criminal networks increase the distance between the criminal activity and the network's core members or leaders, hampering identification. Even though there is a lack of reliable and comparable data on this phenomenon, several EU Member States have reported an increase in the involvement of minors in serious and organised crime.

While the rising demand for recreational drugs seems to be the main driver behind the increase, minors are involved in other markets too, including property crime and online fraud. Criminal networks exploit children as young as 12 years for low-skilled roles such as local street dealers, cash couriers, warehouse operators and extractors of drugs from shipping containers. Easier access to firearms has led to a shift from minor crime to more serious, especially violent, crime, such as extortion and killings.

Many minors are lured into organised crime by the promise of financial gain, social status, or sense of belonging, whilst others may be coerced or forced into this lifestyle due to their circumstances or environment. The consequences of such involvement are far-reaching, affecting not only the minors involved, but also the communities and society as a whole. The processes for recruiting minors into organised crime are still poorly understood, but there is a clear trend of increased use of digital tools for recruitment and communication, such as encrypted messaging services, apps and video games that are popular with young people.

The EU recognises the severity of the problem and the need for closer cooperation between the affected Member States and for an integrated preventive response. By facilitating the exchange of best practices amongst Member States, integrating the local dimension into efforts to counter the infiltration of criminal networks into the economy and society, and by adopting a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach, the EU contributes to preventing the recruitment of minors into organised crime and to mitigating the devastating consequences.

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Introduction

There are currently 821 [high-risk criminal networks](#) active in the EU, posing a significant threat to the region's internal security. The combined membership of these networks alone is substantial, with over 25 000 individuals involved. In 2019, the EU's nine primary illicit markets generated an estimated €92-188 billion in [revenue](#), accounting for approximately 0.7-1.4 % of the EU's total GDP. Accumulating this level of illicit revenues requires the existence of intricate criminal frameworks, which consequently comes with high risks. To manage these risks, criminal networks have adopted different approaches and the exploitation of young people has been increasingly used as a tactic.

Drug trafficking is the dominant activity among the most threatening criminal networks, with over 50 % involved in this crime area, either exclusively (36 %) or as part of a broader range of activities. The EU is an important market for [illicit drugs](#), both in terms of consumption and production. According to Europol, the EU's Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, and the EU Drugs Agency (EUDA), the EU drug market can be valued at [€31 billion](#) a year. Both [Europol](#) and [EUCPN](#), the EU Crime Prevention Network, believe that the increased demand for illicit drugs is the main driver behind the increased incidence of youth recruitment in some EU Member States, as there is a higher need for criminal personnel to manage the drug trade and related increased competition between rival criminal networks, which in turn has led to more violence. Many organised crime groups ([OCGs](#)) have moved from traditionally very hierarchical organisations to looser cell-based networks. Whereas they previously avoided recruiting young people because they were considered unreliable and untrustworthy, in looser cell-based networks there is less reluctance to hiring the services of young people, even minors, as they pose less of a danger to the group.

There are numerous motivations behind the recruitment of minors by OCGs. From the perspective of criminal networks, young people are often viewed as low-risk and disposable commodities. Minors tend to be easier to influence or exploit in various forms of crime, they receive less attention from law enforcement and are also protected by juvenile justice systems that impose different penalties than those applied to adults. So, on the one hand there is more distance between the criminal activity and the network's core members or leaders, which complicates their identification, detection and prosecution, and on the other hand minors face less severe sanctions and can be more easily replaced or reintegrated into the criminal circuit again than adult criminals. The fact that the recruitment process and any subsequent communication with the minors happens almost exclusively online is an additional safeguard for those higher in the hierarchy of the group. Digitalisation has become a crucial instrument for OCGs to expand their reach, particularly in the recruitment of minors, who are often vulnerable to online exploitation and manipulation.

The phenomenon of recruitment of minors into organised crime – with minors being, willingly or forcibly, drawn into illegal activities – is concerning. Recruited minors are reportedly involved in more than 70 % of illegal market activities and engage in [a wide range of illicit activities](#) – from drug production and trafficking to cybercrime, migrant smuggling, trafficking in human beings, and various forms of financial fraud. It often begins with small tasks, such as keeping watch or being money mules, but can escalate quickly into more violent crimes, including murder. As a result, the exploitation and recruitment of minors by OCGs has profound and lasting consequences, not only inflicting harm on the children themselves, but also perpetuating a vicious cycle of violence with far-reaching effects. The financial burden is substantial, including costs of law enforcement, lost revenue through tax evasion, and healthcare costs associated with drug use, ultimately affecting not only the local community but also society as a whole. Moreover, when crime takes over neighbourhoods, it has a devastating effect on local economies, fostering an environment of despair where people feel abandoned and are more likely to get involved in crime.

An increasing problem

Several EU Member States have identified the growing involvement of young people in organised crime, particularly in the illicit drug trade, as a major concern. In 2024, the Maritime and River Police arrested 16 minors on suspicion of drug-related offences in the port of Antwerp ([Belgium](#)). They were mainly involved in extracting the drugs from the port. Overall, the Federal Judicial Police identified 643 minor suspects in ongoing cases. More than 99 % of the 1 246 minors reported to the Judicial Authorities in [Italy](#) in 2023 were reported for drug trafficking. The increased demand for recreational drugs is spreading from traditional drug trade hubs into other areas. For example, in [France](#) this type of activity was historically limited to cities such as Marseille and the Paris suburbs, but it has recently been observed in smaller cities as well. Gangs in Marseille are increasingly hiring adolescents as police spotters or to sell drugs. This has already led to children harming innocent bystanders or killing each other with Kalashnikovs. This shift from minor crime to more serious, especially violent, crime has also been seen in [Sweden](#). Similarly, in [the Netherlands](#) a shift is under way from the major urban centres to smaller cities and rural areas, indicating a widening scope of youth involvement in organised crime.

Recruitment into OCGs is strongly correlated with socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but juvenile criminality is spreading to other neighbourhoods, thereby extending the reach of the problem beyond its initial geographical area of incidence. In [Portugal](#), for example, while young people are often recruited from vulnerable neighbourhoods in Lisbon and Porto, the associated violence and criminal activity have been observed in other neighbourhoods of these cities, as well as on public transportation used by young offenders. In many cases, there is a link between youth gangs, (football) hooliganism and organised crime. There is a growing threat of gang recruitment of children as young as 12 in [Sweden, Denmark and Ireland](#). Juvenile gangs also exist in other countries, such as [Greece](#). Even though girls and young women are less likely to engage in acts of violence related to organised crime than boys and young men, EUCPN warns against underestimating their role in organised crime. In fact, according to EUCPN, there is increasing involvement of girls and young women, but 'criminal justice systems may have blind spots for the criminal activity among females'.

It is important to highlight that data on minors in organised crime are scarce, often unreliable and therefore hardly comparable. Law enforcement data often under-represent the problem, as they only

capture instances where young people have been apprehended or suspected of a crime. The age of criminal liability differs between Member States, and therefore some minors are directly referred to social services instead. Moreover, protection of juvenile justice data and the lack of clear age distinctions in reporting systems contributes to underreporting, with the true extent of the issue remaining unknown. The lack of a unified definition of organised crime across EU Member States further complicates data gathering and comparability. EUCPN also insists that a distinction should be made between increased recruitment of young people into organised crime and increased visibility of young people's involvement in organised crime, for instance through a growing number of violent acts. Another distinction that should be made is between voluntary recruitment and exploitation. In the former case, young people may deliberately join a group or network in order to seek financial gain, whereas in the latter youngsters are forced into criminal acts or have no viable alternative. There is, however, a shared understanding that drug markets are growing and that organised crime activity, as well as youth involvement in organised crime and related violence, is on the rise. Moreover, recruitment is occurring at increasingly younger ages. The phenomenon, while not new, has therefore become a major concern in several – though not all – EU Member States.

Looking at the global context, similar patterns of youth involvement in OCGs can be seen. For example, in [South Africa's Western Cape](#), street gangs recruit children as young as 12 years old. In Malaysia, all-female branches of 'Number Gangs' target school girls from the age of 13 for drug manufacturing and prostitution. In [Brazil](#), criminal organisations like Comando Vermelho, Terceiro Comando and Amigos dos Amigos recruit young people at an early age. They start as lookouts or transporters and can work their way up to managers. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ([IACHR](#)) reports that children are typically recruited into OCGs between the ages of 13 and 15, although some as young as 6 to 9 years old have been involved in criminal activities.

Motivations and risk factors

Children are often lured into crime due to a **range of factors**, including the promise of expensive gifts, the desire for status and respect and the need for a sense of belonging. These factors can be very appealing to vulnerable young people who may feel isolated or be seeking validation. According to [UNICEF](#), the factors that may contribute to children's involvement in crime can be categorised into several levels, including **individual** factors; **family, peer and community influences**; **social, economic and political** factors; and **organisational** factors. Children may join OCGs as a means of self-empowerment or to challenge societal and family norms, often seeking a sense of identity and self-worth. Perceived injustices or feelings of inadequacy can also drive this association. Additionally, adolescents' tendency to take risks and seek rewards can make them more vulnerable to involvement with such groups. Peer relations – where young people involve others in criminal activities – are particularly important to developing adolescents; also, older children often groom younger ones into crime. Organisational factors play a part in determining whether and how violent groups recruit minors. EUCPN adds that young people with certain psychological disorders or mental health conditions, particularly those lacking pro-social skills, are more likely to engage in criminal activity. Prior involvement in (non-organised) crime and unstable home situations, such as single-parent households, those affected by addiction or domestic violence or those who have a familial relationship to crime, are also at higher risk. In many instances, organised crime networks actively recruit members from youth gangs, exploiting these groups as a pipeline for new recruits. The

proximity of criminal networks and organised crime operations is an additional risk factor. Criminal groups exploit vulnerabilities in young people when looking for new recruits.

Not all minors who become involved in organised crime do so voluntarily. Many are **coerced** or **forced** into criminal activity against their will, often by family members, traffickers, or other exploiters. Vulnerable families may be coerced into giving up their children for forced labour, often leading to human trafficking, organised begging or sale to other EU-based networks or groups. Some EU-based family clans even [exploit](#) their own children, relatives' children, or adopted children, forcing them into crimes such as property theft, begging, or soliciting donations for fake charities. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)), in 2022 children made up 38 % of detected trafficking victims worldwide. Girls were more likely to be trafficked for sexual exploitation, while boys were primarily forced into labour and forced criminality. In western and southern Europe, approximately 22 % of identified trafficking victims are forced into criminal activities, with a significant portion being exploited for drug trafficking purposes. Europol [estimates](#) that a single trafficked child can generate up to €160 000 in annual income. The number of victims being exploited by just one mobile organised crime gang can range from 10 to 100 minors. These children, some as young as five years old, are subjected to systematic training and coercion to engage in various criminal activities, including pickpocketing, organised begging, shoplifting, and burglary. Drug cartels often traffick both European and third-country children, who are then forced to play a role in the street-level distribution of drugs.

Another reason for the participation of younger children, aged 12-15, in criminal networks can be attributed to the **presence of older youths**, typically between 15-20 years old, in their local community. These individuals often appear to lead attractive lifestyles that are easily accessible, so younger children may be drawn to them. Initial contact between the older youths and younger children can be initiated by either party. However, when younger children take the first step, their entry into the criminal network often follows a process that bears a resemblance to [sexual grooming](#). Many adolescent individuals are unaware that accepting an offer from an older youth can lead to a loss of autonomy and a prolonged period of subordination to that individual.

The migration of unaccompanied minors also contributes to the recruitment of children into OCGs, as their increased vulnerability makes them more susceptible to exploitation and manipulation. Between 2021 and 2023, at least [51 433](#) unaccompanied child migrants disappeared after arriving in European countries. These unaccompanied minors tend to be wary of seeking help and, as a result, they become prey for criminal organisations. OCGs often deceive them with promises of a luxury life, but, once under their control, minors can be subjected to violent treatment and even threatened with the dissemination of compromising videos. In Europe, a majority of these cases involve boys from North Africa, primarily from Morocco or Algeria, between the ages of 14 and 17, who very often do not seek asylum and therefore remain under the authorities' radar. Unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan, who do tend to apply for asylum and are then placed in reception centres, often find themselves forced to repay the debt contracted with smugglers, making them even more vulnerable.

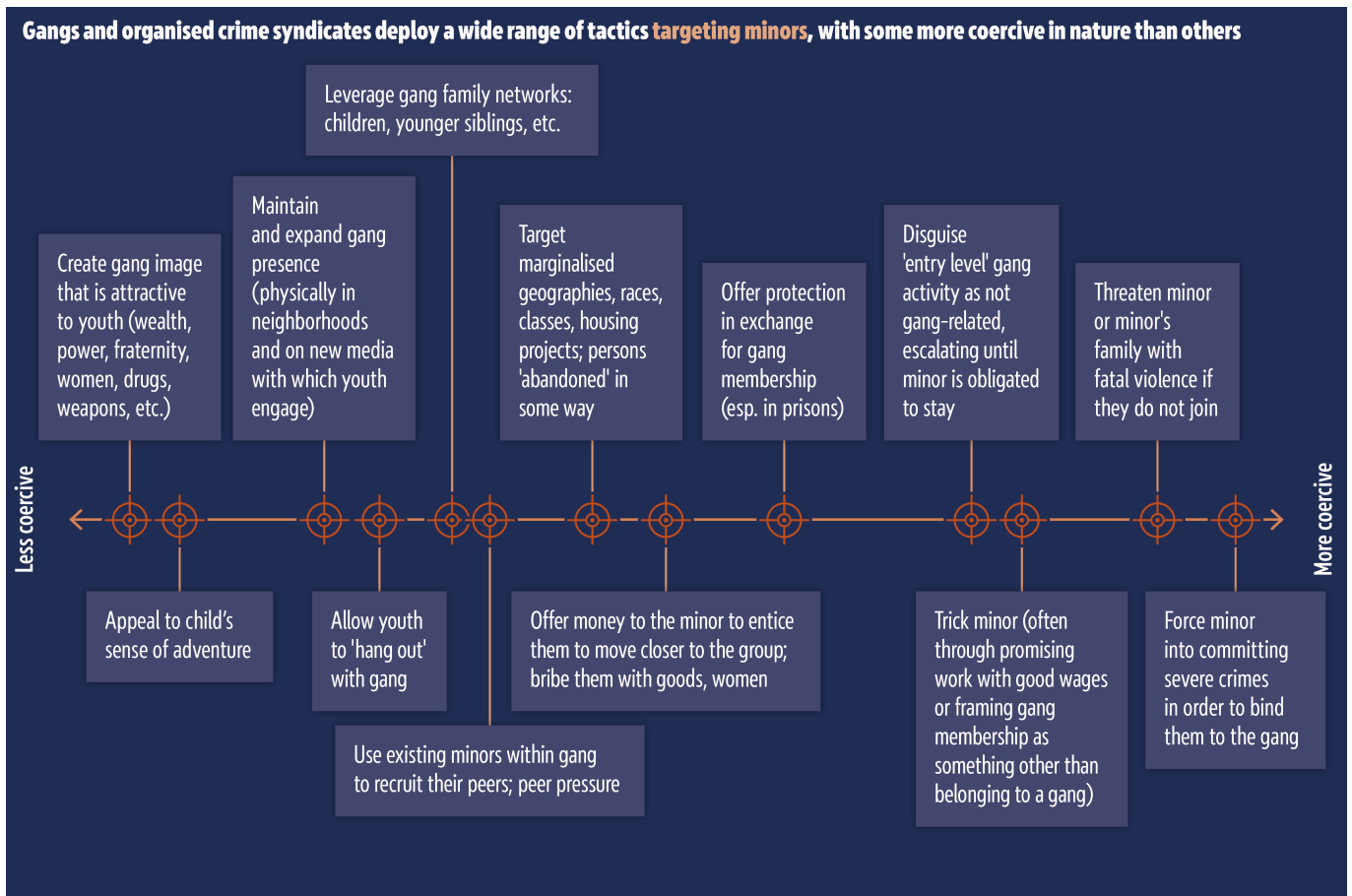
Socio-economic factors like coming from a disadvantaged background, having limited job opportunities or familial ties to crime further contribute to the likelihood of recruitment. In addition, family structures, parental behaviours, and social factors, such as peer networks, can also contribute to a child's vulnerability to violent ideas and behaviour. Social, economic, and **political factors** can contribute to children's feelings of exclusion and inequality, making them more vulnerable to joining OCGs. Limited access to social services and a lack of livelihood opportunities can fuel grievances,

while criminal groups may offer a sense of financial stability or control. Children may also join these groups for a steady income or as a means of survival. Furthermore, discrimination based on factors such as ethnicity, religion, poverty, and gender can exacerbate feelings of marginalisation. Growing up in violent contexts, including exposure to abuse by government security forces and police, can also drive recruitment.

Recruitment tactics

The recruitment tactics employed by gangs and OCGs to target minors are multifaceted and vary in their level of coercion. What is clear is that social media and the internet have become important – if not the most important – tools for recruitment, as they offer direct access to minors and allow for more anonymity. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) mapped the methods used by OCGs to recruit minors, detailing how criminal groups deploy a wide range of tactics targeting minors, with some more coercive in nature than others. These tactics can go from creating a gang image that is attractive to youths and appealing to a child's sense of adventure to forcing minors into committing severe crimes or threatening the minor or minor's family with fatal violence if they do not join.

Figure 1 - Recruitment tactics targeting minors



Source: IOM Spotlight - Gang and organised crime recruitment and use of minors (October 2016), adapted by Samy Chahri.

Online recruitment

Young people are recruited both directly, through dedicated chat applications, and indirectly, through the glamorisation of criminal lifestyles and drug trafficking, and the promotion of violence on social media and online video games and in-gaming chats. Several key factors contribute to the online recruitment of children, and one of the main ones is the [increase](#) in time spent online and children's

exposure to the internet from a younger age. In fact, in most of the cases nowadays, the recruitment of young perpetrators by criminal organisations typically occurs on social media and messaging apps. Criminal networks often initiate contact with children through popular social media apps such as TikTok, Instagram or Snapchat. [Online recruitment](#) provides a lot of advantages to OCGs. The use of encrypted messaging services and customisable privacy settings enable the creation of anonymous groups and channels, which minimise the risk of detection. Furthermore, features such as self-destructing messages, deletion of conversation histories and restricting group access to verified members only, make it difficult for authorities to monitor communications. As a result, interactions can occur and disappear without leaving a digital trace, effectively evading detection.

These types of communications eliminate the need for physical meetings and make it possible to target a large audience with minimal effort. To do so, recruiters use persuasive language, such as promises of 'easy money' or 'quick cash', to present illegal activities as harmless and easy opportunities. OCGs use everyday language, slang, emojis and coded phrases that are familiar to young people but difficult for others to understand. Europol explains that by using symbols and terms that are common in youth culture recruiters make their messages accessible and appealing to minors. For example, they might use harmless-sounding words or symbols, such as 'snowflakes' to represent cocaine or 'trees' to refer to marijuana. They also use phrases like 'job opportunity' or 'business' to make their illegal activities sound legitimate, making it easier for minors to get involved.

Another technique often used by criminal recruiters to lure in minors is mimicking the style and language used by social media influencers. They present illegal activities as 'challenges' to make them seem exciting and less intimidating. This '[gamification](#)' approach appeals to young people familiar with online gaming and social media. By framing criminal activities as a game or competition, criminal groups desensitise minors to the risks and encourage participation. As a result, after completion of a task, young perpetrators feel a sense of achievement which makes them more interested in getting involved in criminal activities. Moreover, criminal recruiters use emotionally charged language to build trust, loyalty and a sense of belonging among minors. They make minors feel special by offering opportunities that play on their unique qualities. By exploiting a child's emotional needs, OCGs create a blurred line between friendship and exploitation. These tactics closely resemble those used for grooming for online sexual exploitation and abuse.

Use of violence

There is an [increasing use of violence](#) by OCGs in several EU Member States and violence is spilling over into wider society. According to estimates by the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)), a staggering number of young people, around 193 000 between the ages of 15 and 29, become victims of homicide each year. This number includes deaths at the hands of OCGs, violent extremist groups or armed gangs. Minors sometimes become innocent victims, such as a 10-year-old boy from Nîmes (France), an 11-year-old girl from Antwerp, and a 13-year-old boy from Stockholm (Sweden), who in 2023 died as bystanders during drug-related violence. But minors can also become deliberate targets for criminal groups, including at the hands of other minors, and they can become the perpetrators of such killings or other types of violence. There are no data sustaining the increase of violence used by minors specifically, but [Europol](#) sees a 'clear demand' from the criminal underworld for youngsters willing to carry out violent tasks. Often they are part of violent youth groups or street gangs, but there is also a supply of vulnerable young people being groomed for this purpose via social media and messaging

applications or coerced into doing so. It is important to note here that non-OCGs – such as [groups with extreme ideological views](#), including terrorist groups – also try to manipulate and coerce minors into committing violent acts. They mostly do so by means of online groups that have a common purpose of destroying civilised society through the corruption of young people. This mostly implies a radicalisation process, which is usually not the case when it comes to organised crime. [UNICEF](#) insists that the internet and social media are not the drivers of radicalisation among young people; rather, they facilitate the dissemination of information and propaganda, as well as the recruitment of new members.

The concept of 'violence-as-a-service', where OCGs hire outsiders to commit violent acts, often involves the use of young and vulnerable individuals to carry out threats, assaults or killings in exchange for payment. OCGs recruit and instruct teens – below the age of criminal responsibility – online. Social media platforms often portray these criminal activities in a misleadingly attractive way, suggesting that it could be a great opportunity for young adolescents. Potential earnings may range from a few thousand euros to as much as €20 000 for killings.

In [Sweden](#), an estimated 14 000 individuals are deemed active in criminal networks, of which around 1 700 are children and adolescents under 18. Over the past decade, Sweden has witnessed a sharp and alarming increase in the involvement of young people in serious crime. Between 2014 and 2023, the number of suspects aged 15-20 involved in murder, manslaughter, and assault with a fatal outcome increased dramatically, from 34 to 167 – a 391 % increase. A notable trend within youth crime is the shift towards more serious and [violent offences](#), which appears to be correlated with the increased availability of firearms in Sweden. Moreover, children as young as 12 years old are being targeted and then transported from Sweden to [Denmark](#) to commit crimes. In Brussels ([Belgium](#)), there have been reports of young people, including undocumented minors, being exploited by drug gangs as 'child soldiers' to carry out violent acts, such as shootings. In some cases, there is also a cross-border element of recruitment.

EU action and support to Member States

Tackling organised crime and drug trafficking is a top priority for the EU and its Member States. Cross-border law enforcement and judicial cooperation is essential to address security threats in the EU. Operational activities are the responsibility of the Member States, but the EU does everything that falls within its [remit](#) to assist the Member States in fighting organised crime effectively. One of the main actions to avoid criminal networks infiltrating the legal economy and society is reducing the space for criminal groups to fill their ranks, with a special focus on children and young people.

The EU, in its [strategy to tackle organised crime 2021-2025](#), recalled the importance of avoiding that minors 'become the members and leaders of tomorrow's criminal organisations'. The EU therefore focuses on targeted actions in neighbourhoods and communities to offer alternatives that prevent young people from joining a life of violence and crime. Moreover, crime prevention activities such as community policing or awareness campaigns in areas particularly affected by criminal activity are deemed essential to raise the resilience of society against the activities of OCGs. Europol, in its EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment ([SOCTA 2025](#)), warned that the criminal exploitation of young perpetrators not only damages the social fabric of society, but also shields the higher echelons from identification, allowing OCGs to develop and grow their criminal business, increase their

profits, and augment their resilience, creating a cycle of reinforcement. Therefore, the agency insisted that it is essential to also integrate approaches towards confronting these reinforcing tactics.

In October 2023, the European Commission adopted an [EU Roadmap](#) to fight drug trafficking and organised crime, setting out targeted actions in four priority areas, including exchanging best practices and guidance among Member States to prevent, among other things, the infiltration of society and the legal economy by criminal networks and the recruitment of minors. The Commission highlighted the importance of effective use of EU and national resources to improve social cohesion, address unemployment and ensure that young people do not abandon their education. The new [European internal security strategy](#) proposes a 'whole-of-society approach', promoting evidence-based crime prevention policies tailored to local contexts in order to reduce vulnerability and the appeal of illegal activities. Moreover, the Commission announced that, by 2027, it will present an action plan on the protection of children against crime, encompassing the online and offline dimensions. EUCPN has underscored the need for prevention to identify at-risk youths through detailed and integrated data on the phenomenon of recruitment of minors into organised crime. In order to empower local and other administrative authorities to disrupt criminal infiltration, the Commission will continue to support the wider application of the [administrative approach](#) to serious and organised crime.

The European Parliament [debated](#) the increasing gang violence in Sweden in February 2025, and the recruitment of minors into organised crime was the subject of a [hearing](#) in June 2025. Several of the speakers insisted on the need to focus more on prevention, awareness raising and the protection of minors. Some called for more stringent treatment of the adult recruiters, arguing that the children are first and foremost victims of a system of manipulation, especially very young children. The Commission representative highlighted the importance of the [Digital Services Act](#), which introduces a comprehensive set of measures specifically aimed at protecting children online, including rules regarding children and algorithms, focusing on safety, privacy, and transparency.

Best practices to prevent youth recruitment into organised crime were discussed at a [high-level conference on crime prevention](#) in Tallinn (Estonia) in 2024. An example discussed was the Greentown Project in [Ireland](#), which seeks to break the link between children and the gangs that seek to recruit them. This project consists of four pillars: disrupting criminal networks by targeting individuals who recruit children; empowering communities to reclaim public spaces through local activities; providing pro-social opportunities to encourage children to engage with school or training; and an intensive family programme to protect the child and family from exploitative network relationships. Other best practices include the introduction of a community-focused approach to policing in [Sweden](#), combined with mentorship initiatives for young people in areas with higher crime rates. Moreover, Sweden has [Crime Prevention Councils](#), crucial in coordinating efforts between police, schools, and other local actors, in 90 % of its municipalities. In [Italy](#), the 'Free to Choose' project aims to break the cycle of crime by breaking the link between children and their mafia family member(s). Judicial authorities can remove children and put them in foster families if they are deemed endangered by their family's criminal activities, with the goal of providing them with a chance for life outside criminal circles. So-called 'exit programmes' not only target juvenile but also adult offenders. These programmes consist of two key prevention mechanisms: desistance and rehabilitation, and reducing the harmful consequences of crime. The effectiveness of these programmes is largely dependent on the possibility of members leaving the organisation. Successful transition from a criminal social context to a law-abiding life requires a supportive environment that provides access to employment, education, and

social services. In [the Netherlands](#), Tilburg City Council has developed a crime prevention strategy, which includes the 'Breaking the Cycle' programme. This initiative aims to support young individuals from families with a history of criminal involvement, providing them with alternatives to a life in crime and trafficking. The aim of the programme is to break the cycle of crime that can persist across generations.

The recruitment of minors by OCGs poses a significant threat to the economy, society, and young people's well-being, highlighting the need for a proactive approach, including targeted training and strengthened cooperation between law enforcement authorities. The EU justice and home affairs agencies provide a range of support to national authorities, including intelligence sharing, specialist training, and community outreach, to effectively combat organised crime and protect vulnerable individuals. [Europol](#) supports EU Member States in preventing and combating all forms of serious international and organised crime, cybercrime and terrorism. Europol also works with many non-EU partner states and international organisations. In April 2025, Europol created a new taskforce, [OTF GRIMM](#), led by Sweden, to combat the growing trend of 'violence-as-a-service' and the recruitment of young people into organised crime. The taskforce unites law enforcement agencies from six EU Member States plus Norway, with Europol providing support and coordination to tackle this emerging threat. [Eurojust](#) provides multifaceted support, including operational, technical, logistical, and financial aid, to national prosecutors who are actively involved in the prosecution of organised crime. In 2024, a new network was launched within Eurojust, the EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, to facilitate exchanges of information and cooperation amongst judicial authorities dealing with organised crime, the European Judicial Organised Crime Network ([EJOEN](#)). [Frontex](#), the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, collaborates closely with national authorities and other EU agencies to stop cross-border crime, including organised crime, and make the EU safer and more secure. Moreover, [CEPOL](#), the EU Agency for Law Enforcement Training, facilitates on-site training initiatives aimed at improving the capacities of law enforcement authorities to combat youth criminality and youth/street gang criminality, through the dissemination of knowledge and best practices.

Global response

While also at global level the true scale of the problem of the recruitment of minors into organised crime is impossible to know, due to a lack of accurate and up-to-date data, it is universally understood to be a significant and growing problem, affecting both developed and developing countries.

[International efforts](#) to prevent children from getting involved in organised crime, disengage them from organised crime and reintegrate them into society have increased accordingly, with organisations like UNICEF and UNODC playing key roles in implementing strategies to address this issue.

UN General Assembly Resolution of 17 December 2024 on preventing and countering violence against children by organised criminal groups and terrorist groups in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice

*'Calls upon Member States to implement, and strengthen as appropriate, **measures to assist in the rehabilitation and reintegration of children and youth** who have been involved in any form of organized criminal group, including gangs, as well as in terrorist groups, **while protecting their***

rights and giving full recognition to the importance of delivering justice and protecting the safety of victims of these criminal groups and that of society throughout the implementation of such measures'.

For example, the UNODC Youth Initiative aims to empower young people in vulnerable areas by developing their skills and providing job opportunities, reducing their chances of getting involved in organised crime. Community-based initiatives, such as the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's (GI-TOC) [Resilient Balkans](#) programme, provide safe spaces and engaging activities for teenagers, steering them away from illicit substances and criminal influences. Similarly, UNICEF training and education programmes aim to equip young people with the skills and knowledge to escape the potential lure of organised crime. In [Belize](#), the concept of a 'Child-Friendly City' aims to create a local governance system that prioritises the well-being and rights of children, as outlined in the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). The Child Friendly Municipalities Initiative (SCFM) has been implemented since 2014, in collaboration with local authorities, to create safe and nurturing environments for children, protecting them from exploitation, violence and abuse, and promoting their participation and access to green and safe spaces. In the [United Kingdom](#), a range of initiatives have been implemented to prevent and disengage minors from organised crime, and to reintegrate them into society. For instance, 'The Mini Police' is a voluntary programme aimed at prevention. It targets children aged 9-11 and seeks to build trust with communities, promote responsible citizenship and make children understand policing and community safety. Sports-based interventions have been found to have a positive impact on reducing youth violence and crime, but on the other hand there is a risk of violent outbreaks, behavioural problems or tensions between rivals. In Africa, where the problem is primarily the recruitment of young people into armed conflicts, comprehensive disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes have been implemented in over 30 countries, especially in [West Africa](#).

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