

Preventing youth recruitment into organised crime:

INSIGHTS FROM A MULTINATIONAL PERSPECTIVE





The seriousness of the problem of youth involvement in organised crime, often paired with increasing violence, underscores the need for an integrated preventive response. Effective prevention will reduce the high cost of youth recruitment into organised crime, both in financial terms and in terms of community well-being.

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Preface

This paper summarises the findings from an expert meeting on youth recruitment into organised crime held in Brussels on 26 and 27 March 2024. In this meeting, co-organised by EMPACT Cocaine, Cannabis, and Heroin (OA 7.1) and the EUCPN, twenty-one experts, representing 15 EU Member States, the European Commission, and the European Crime Prevention Network, shared the latest insights on the growing problem of youth recruitment into organised crime, the multifaceted risk factors contributing to youth involvement in organised crime, and opportunities for prevention. This report highlights key insights relevant for intervention frameworks and actionable recommendations.

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Introduction

Criminal networks require a large amount of labour, both skilled and unskilled, to conduct criminal operations. This need is met in a variety of ways. Criminals with particular skills may offer their services through a crime as a service scheme. Low-skilled roles are often filled through the recruitment or exploitation of young people. When it comes to illegal drug trafficking in particular, criminal networks increasingly recruit young people, at increasingly younger ages, or at least, this is the perception. The range of activities they take on is wide: emptying containers filled with drugs, committing acts of violence against rival networks or defectors, acting as a money mule, or simply as a lookout during drug transactions. Outside of the drug trade, young people in organised crime networks may be involved in criminal activities such as property crime or online fraud. Young people are attracted to criminal networks by the prospect of quick material gain, but also by a perceived grandeur of the criminal lifestyle.

To counter this trend, protect young people, and disrupt organised crime, it is essential to invest in effective crime prevention policies and tools. The EU Roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime identifies prevention as one out of four priorities, next to the European Ports Alliance, the dismantling of criminal networks, and international cooperation. Within prevention, four lines of actions have been put forward: creating barriers for organised crime by widening the application of the administrative approach, combating the proliferation of designer precursors, improving public safety and public health in drug-affected areas, and preventing criminal networks from recruiting children and young people.¹

To counter this trend, protect young people, and disrupt organised crime, it is essential to invest in effective crime prevention policies and tools.

Boosting prevention, however, requires reliable knowledge of this trend, as well as evidence regarding what works to reverse it. This turns out to be challenging in many cases. Many Member States have patchy, anecdotal evidence at best for the increased recruitment and exploitation of young people in organised crime; others indicate it is not considered a problem in their Member State. Recruitment processes themselves are poorly understood and appear to differ from one country to the next.

The expert meeting on the on the recruitment of young people into organised crime, co-organised by EMPACT CCH (OA 7.1) and the EUCPN, addressed this challenge by collecting available information on the problem, its general social and geographical context, root causes and risk factors, as well as the evidence that we have (or lack) regarding all of these aspects.

Methodology

The meeting was structured in accordance with Prof. Paul Ekblom's 5Is framework.² The 5Is framework captures and consolidates knowledge of good practice in crime prevention. In the words of the developer, "It aims to improve performance, scope and delivery of that practice locally, nationally and internationally, enabling smarter responses with reduced resources. It is applicable to all of crime prevention, covering both situational and offender-oriented approaches, and service-like approaches as well as project-based ones."³

The use case for the 5Is framework is twofold. As an advanced process model, it gives practitioners a comprehensive guide for designing, planning, and implementing preventive action. As a knowledge capture framework, it gives practitioners a tool to describe their actions, including successes and failures, in such level of detail that it is useful for others in the field.

The expert meeting focused exclusively on the first task stream: intelligence. The aim of the meeting was to create an overall intelligence picture of the current problem of youth recruitment into organised crime in the EU, as well as to identify gaps in that intelligence picture. In accordance with the 5Is framework, we looked at information on all of the following aspects of this problem:

The 5Is Framework consists of five interlinked task streams:

- > **Intelligence:** what do we know about the crime problem, offender, victim, context, modus operandi?
 - > **Intervention:** how can we block, disrupt or prevent criminal activity?
 - > **Implementation:** how can we turn this into action on the ground?
 - > **Involvement:** who (people, organisations) should be mobilised?
 - > **Impact:** how to evaluate and improve the outcomes of the intervention?
- > General social and geographical context of the crime problem, including location, demographic patterns and trends, and historical and current action;
 - > Initiation and demand for action;
 - > The crime problem to be addressed, including definitional frameworks and actions frameworks, the offenders, modus operandi, and targets;
 - > Evidence of crime problem – sources of information and analysis;
 - > Significant harmful consequences of problem, including the immediate effects and costs and wider effects such as fear and restriction of leisure, economic, and domestic activities;
 - > Immediate causes, remote causes and risk factors for offending, including conjunction of criminal opportunity, risk and protective factors.

General social, geographical context of the crime problem

This section discusses the socio-geographic locations of youth recruitment into organised crime, as well as demographic trends and patterns, and historical and current action.

In several EU Member States, there has been a demonstrable increase in the involvement of young people in organised crime. In Sweden, for instance, children under 18 are increasingly involved. Within youth crime, there is also a shift from minor crime to more serious, especially violent, crime. This appears to be linked to the increased availability of firearms, at least in Sweden.

Another trend is that youth involvement in organised crime, especially the illegal drug trade, is expanding from traditional drug trade hubs into other, and more, areas. In France, for instance, the phenomenon was traditionally confined to Marseille and the Paris suburbs, but has recently been observed in other, smaller cities. In the Netherlands, too, there is noticeable shift from major urban centres to the rest of the country. One explanation that has been suggested for this trend is the increased demand for recreational drugs. There appears to be a banalisation of drug use, which in turn has lowered the threshold for entering the illegal drug trade. In all cases, youth recruitment into organised crime is concentrated in socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods. However, the impact of the growing youth involvement in the organised drug

trade manifests itself beyond those neighbourhoods. In Portugal, for instance, young people are typically recruited in certain vulnerable neighbourhoods of Lisbon, but acts of violence have occurred elsewhere in the city, alongside the public transport used by young offenders.

In many cases, a link can be observed between youth gangs, (football) hooliganism, and organised crime recruitment. Organised crime networks often recruit from youth gangs. In Greece, for example, such youth gangs are sometimes linked to sports clubs (hooliganism), so that the recruitment into the organised drug trade tends to align, socially and geographically, with the activities of such youth gangs. In Portugal, where young people in the drug trade are typically 15–25-year-old males of African-Lusophone descent, there is link between gang subcultures, often revolving around drill rap, violence, and organised crime.

Drill rap, a subgenre of hip-hop, is often linked to gang violence due to its raw, hyper-realistic lyrics that frequently depict street life, including crime, feuds, and retaliation. With its violent and hostile lyrics, drill rap often perpetuates ongoing conflicts between rival groups. Social media amplifies these tensions, as drill tracks sometimes name-drop or allude to specific individuals or events, escalating rivalries. The phenomenon is also seen in other countries (Belgium, France), but is considered on decline in the Netherlands.

With respect to gender, it is widely observed that girls and young women are less likely to engage in acts of violence related to organised crime than boys and young men. Girls and young women tend to play different roles in organised crime, such as hiding and transferring illegal drugs or weapons, or being involved in money laundering schemes, at young ages typically through money-muling. In some places, such as Greece, it is

also observed that young women typically enter organised crime at a later age than boys, typically over the age of majority. Young women also occupy particularly vulnerable positions in organised crime networks, as highlighted by reports of sexual exploitation to pay off debts incurred by the loss of illegal drugs. Finally, care should be taken not to underestimate the role of girls in women in organised crime: criminal justice systems may have blind spots for the criminal activity among females, focusing more on boys and men.

Key takeaways

In some countries, the problem of youth recruitment into organised crime is growing and expanding into smaller cities and towns.

Young women, too, are increasingly involved in organised crime, but they are often overlooked by criminal justice systems, and they have different roles to men.

Immediate causes, remote causes, and risks factors for offending

This section discusses the root causes and risk factors for the recruitment of young people into organised crime.

A key contextual parameter for the increased involvement of young people in the illegal drug trade is the increased demand. Demand for cocaine, specifically, is soaring in many EU Member States, and so is its social acceptance. In Ireland, heroin is now widely seen as “dirty drug”, with users aging out, whereas cocaine is perceived as a “clean” drug, with few harmful consequences. Drug use has also permeated popular culture (including social media), which might contribute to its normalisation. The increased demand and apparent normalisation have resulted in

a growing need for workers in the illegal trade and increasing recruitment.

There are two categories of risk factors for youth recruitment into organised crime: psychological, personality traits on the one hand, and social and economic factors on the other. In all cases, stacked risk factors, i.e. the presence of multiple of the risk factors listed below, leads to a higher risk of organised crime involvement.

On the personal level, young people with certain psychological disorders or mental health conditions are more likely to engage in criminal activity, specifically when these conditions may result in a lack of pro-social skills. These include, but are not limited to, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD), two conditions

that increase the risk for both drug use and crime involvement. Prior involvement in (non-organised crime) also presents a higher risk of recruitment.

An important socio-economic risk factor is a lack of stability in the home situation. Children growing up in a single-parent family or in families affected by addiction or domestic violence are at a higher risk. Relative deprivation and limited access to the labour market are also major risk factors, as is a familial relationship to crime.⁴ A final risk factor is the proximity of criminal networks and organised crime operations. These risk factors do not preclude cases of young people from non-deprived neighbourhoods, i.e. middle or upper class youth, becoming involved in drug trafficking, as has been observed in some cases.

It appears that the increased incidence of youth recruitment in some EU Member States can be partly explained by a mind shift in the crime groups themselves. In the past, (very) young recruits were often avoided by high-profile organised crime groups, who deemed young people unreliable and untrustworthy. Following a clearly observable shift from hierarchical organisations to looser, cell-based networks, there is less reluctance to hire the services of young people, even minors.

Key takeaways

Important risk factors relate to the young offender's family (addiction, domestic violence, absent parents, bad parenting, etc.) or the neighbourhood (deprived neighbourhoods, proximity of organised crime activity). A lack of pro-social skills is an important risk factor. Compounded risk factors lead to higher risk of organised crime recruitment.

Growing recreational drug use, especially cocaine, and the banalisation of recreational drug use are the major remote cause of increased drug-related organised crime activity.

The crime problem to be addressed

This section outlines the problem itself, with attention to definitional frameworks and actions frameworks, as well as the modus operandi.

There are several phenomena that can be subsumed under "youth recruitment into organised crime". Even though they are related, it is useful, for analytical purposes, to distinguish between them to the maximum extent possible.

A first distinction can 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. In some countries, such as in France, there are clear indications that there is both an increased involvement of youth in the illegal drug trade in response

to increased demand, and an increase in the use of violence. In other jurisdictions, reports of increased violence (also in popular media) were the initial cause for concern, and while this may imply a growing youth involvement in organised crime, the evidence for that is less strong. This is the case in Sweden and Portugal.

A second distinction is that between voluntary recruitment and exploitation. With some drug markets growing, more money is circulating and the criminal lifestyle is sometimes glamourised, a phenomenon that is frequently observed on social media. In such a context, young people may deliberately seek to join a crime group or network in search of quick financial gain. On the other hand, there are cases where young people are forced into criminal activity, or have no viable alternative. This distinction has an important legal dimension as well. In the Netherlands, a landmark ruling has been made stating that the involvement of minors in organised crime automatically constitutes criminal exploitation, which offers a different perspective on essentially the same phenomenon.

With respect to the recruitment process itself and the MO of the recruiters, one noticeable trend is the increased use of social media to publish “job adverts” for criminal activities, at times including what it pays. This, again, points at a normalisation as well as the high demand for labour in the illegal drug trade.

One problem with regard to youth recruitment into organised crime in the EU is that there is no unified definition of organised crime itself, or criminal networks for that matter. In some Member States, organised crime is defined in terms of specific criminal activities, not in terms of the organisational characteristics of the group or network. Drug trafficking, in those cases, would be considered a form of organised crime. Other Member States, on the contrary, do define it in terms of the organisation. In Croatia, an organised crime group is a group of co-offenders who co-offend over time, cause social damage, are organised hierarchically, and are not

focused on a single type of crime. A similar definition is used in Estonia. Such definitions may make it difficult, however, to prove in court that an offender belongs to an organised crime group. Spain distinguishes between a criminal group and a criminal organisation, where the difference lies in the persistence of co-offending.

Several Member States have no legal definition of organised crime or organised criminal network whatsoever. Some of these countries use other terms instead. In Latvia, a “serious crime” is any crime punishable by eight years or more in prison. In the Netherlands, “subversive crime” refers to criminal activities in which the legal economy is implicated (e.g. abused for money-laundering purposes).



Key takeaways

There is agreement on the fact that drug markets are growing, organised crime activity is on the rise, and so are youth involvement in organised crime and violence related to organised crime— whichever came first.

Organised crime in itself is not defined consistently across EU Member States, although there is a shared understanding that international illegal drug trade is a form of organised crime.

Evidence of the crime problem

This section is about the availability, accessibility and reliability of the data on the recruitment of young people in organised crime.

A number of EU Member States identify the increased youth involvement in organised crime, specifically the illegal drug trade, as a problem. Nevertheless, reliable data on the phenomenon is often lacking. The nature of existing data makes cross-border comparisons difficult. This may be due to the ambiguity of organised crime itself (see above), but also due to the legal definitions of “young people”, or lack thereof, and the way in which data on minors is recorded and analysed across the EU Member States. Overall, it can be assumed that there is a considerable dark number.

Law enforcement data does not accurately represent the current situation. Simply put, the involvement of a young person in organised crime will only be captured by law enforcement data (or judicial data, for that matter) when that person has been caught, or at least is the suspect of a criminal act related to organised crime. Many young recruits have low-risk jobs in the criminal network (e.g. as a lookout) and continue to have a criminal record for at least a while.

Juvenile justice and the protection of data on minors have likely led to significant underreporting, but that is nothing new. For a long time, minors in Portugal could be labelled offenders in official databases, until recently, when a label for “minor offenders” was introduced. In Greece, when a minor offender is

referred to mediation, no more information is collected. A lot of information is potentially lost because there is no straightforward way to distinguish young people over the age of majority (or over the age of criminal responsibility from older individuals).

All of this indicates that new and creative ways to quantify the problem are necessary. The Netherlands has good experience with supplementing police data with qualitative research among frontline workers who are in contact with young people in an effort to more accurately identify trends related to youth recruitment. In Latvia, there is centralised database on minor offenders, including minors at risk of offending, which collects information entered by the police, the educational system, social services, the probation service, and healthcare professionals.

Key takeaways

Collecting and aggregating accurate and up-to-date data on youth involvement in organised crime remains a challenge, especially when dealing with minors or children under the age of criminal responsibility.

Given that this is a shared concern in many EU Member States, better tools for data collection are needed.

Significant harmful consequences of the problem

This section looks into the harmful consequences of youth recruitment into organised crime, including the immediate costs and wider impact on society.

Where youth recruitment into organised crime is on the rise, the immediate cost is considered high. That immediate cost includes the costs associated with the criminal justice system, missed tax revenues, and health impact and healthcare costs of drug use. Responses to organised crime compete with other policy domains, including healthcare, for resources. The creation of de facto no-go zones negatively impacts legal businesses.

Wide-ranging effects are found in both the neighbourhoods directly affected by organised crime and society in general. Residents of neighbourhoods disproportionately affected by street gangs and organised crimes often feel left behind by the system, which in turn constitutes a risk factor for organised crime recruitment. Feelings of insecurity, fuelled to a large extent by reporting on violence committed by organised crime-involved youth, reach far beyond the neighbourhoods directly affected.

Key takeaways

The cost associated with organised crime, and young people involved in organised crime in particular, is exceedingly high—higher than other types of crime.

It also negatively affects the quality of life of residents of affected neighbourhoods and beyond, as they suffer feelings of unsafety/fear of crime.

Conclusions

The growing involvement of young people in drug trafficking within the EU is a multifaceted issue fuelled by social, economic, and structural factors. This phenomenon has become increasingly visible as drug markets evolve, offering low-barrier entry points for youth to participate in illicit activities. Urban centres and economically disadvantaged regions in countries like Spain, the Netherlands, and France have seen significant youth involvement. Port cities like Antwerp and Rotterdam are hotspots for drug importing, where youths are often used to unload and distribute illicit substances.

Organised drug traffickers operating within and across EU borders, increasingly rely on young people to perform high-risk roles, including drug couriers or dealers. These roles expose youth to exploitation, violence, and the judicial consequences of involvement. Organised crime networks often target minors because they face lighter judicial repercussions if apprehended, especially in jurisdictions with lenient juvenile justice systems.

Economic inequality and limited opportunities in marginalised communities push some young people towards criminal activities as a means of financial survival. Youths from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly vulnerable, as they may lack access to education or employment and perceive drug trafficking as an accessible and lucrative alternative. Recruiters exploit these vulnerabilities, offering small roles in supply chains, such as street-level dealing or transport.

Social media have simplified both drug trade operations and recruitment. Young people are recruited both directly, through job ads and personal contacts, and indirectly, through the glamorisation of criminal lifestyles and drug trafficking.

Governments and organisations across the EU are implementing interventions, such as community-based programmes, education, and law enforcement strategies, to address the root causes. However, tackling systemic

issues like inequality and lack of opportunity remains crucial to reducing youth involvement in this dangerous trade.

It remains difficult to get a comprehensive view of the size and nature of the problem. Fragmented data systems make it difficult to accurately track youth involvement in the illegal drug trade and other forms of organised crime.


The seriousness of the problem of youth involvement in organised crime, often paired with increasing violence, underscores the need for an integrated preventive response. Primary prevention should focus on fostering community resilience and awareness. Secondary prevention should aim to identify at-risk youth through detailed and integrated data on the phenomenon, which in some cases is lacking. Targeted community and developmental prevention initiatives should be strengthened to keep young people from engaging with organised crime. Businesses, schools, and civil society should be engaged in creating alternative opportunities for at-risk youth. In terms of tertiary prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies as well as investing in long-term support structures for young offenders can prevent that recruitment at young ages result in life-long criminal careers. Effective prevention will reduce the high cost of youth recruitment into organised crime, both in financial terms and in terms of community well-being.

Endnotes

- 1 European Commission, COM(2023) 641 final: The Eu Roadmap to Fight Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime, Brussels, 2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0641>.
- 2 P. Ekblom, *Crime Prevention, Security and Community Safety Using the 5is Framework*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- 3 P. Ekblom, What Is the 5is Framework, n.d., <https://crimeframeworks.com/5is-intelligence-intervention-implementation-involvement-impact/#what5is> (Accessed 19 Nov. 2024).
- 4 Cf. European Crime Prevention Network, *Family-Based Crime: Background and Theory of Prevention*, Part of the Toolbox on Family-Based Crime, Brussels: EUCPN, 2020, <https://eucpn.org/toolbox-familybasedcrime>.

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