Exploring the Links Between Youth Criminal Exploitation and Trafficking: Nordic Perspectives

Anniina Jokinen
30.9.2026

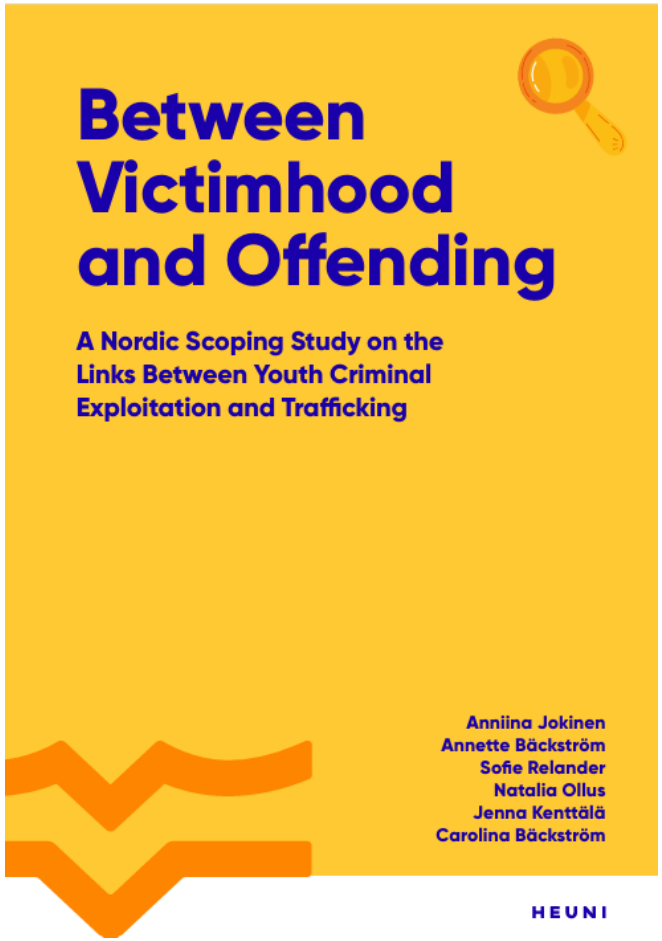
Nordic Council of Ministers
HEUNI

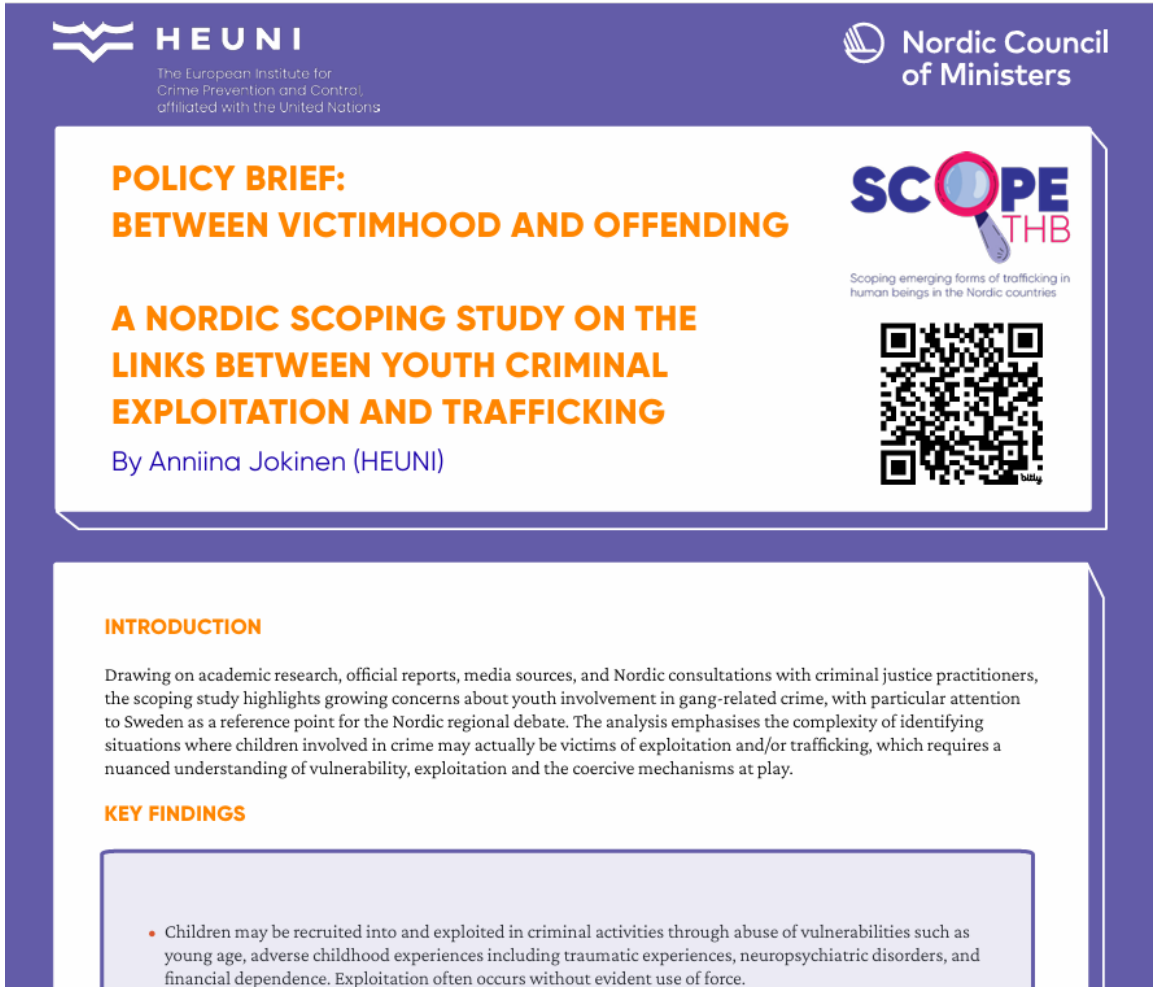
European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, affiliated with the United Nations (HEUNI)

- Independent research and policy-making institute, functioning under the administration of the Finnish Ministry of Justice.
- Strategic focus areas include human trafficking and forms of exploitation, social sustainability in supply chains, criminal justice processes, and gender-based and other forms of violence.
- Seminars, expert meetings, research, and publications to generate evidence-based data for advancing humane and rational criminal justice policies and systems in the European region.

Youth criminal exploitation and trafficking

[SCOPE-THB. Scoping emerging forms of trafficking in human beings in the Nordic countries | Heuni]





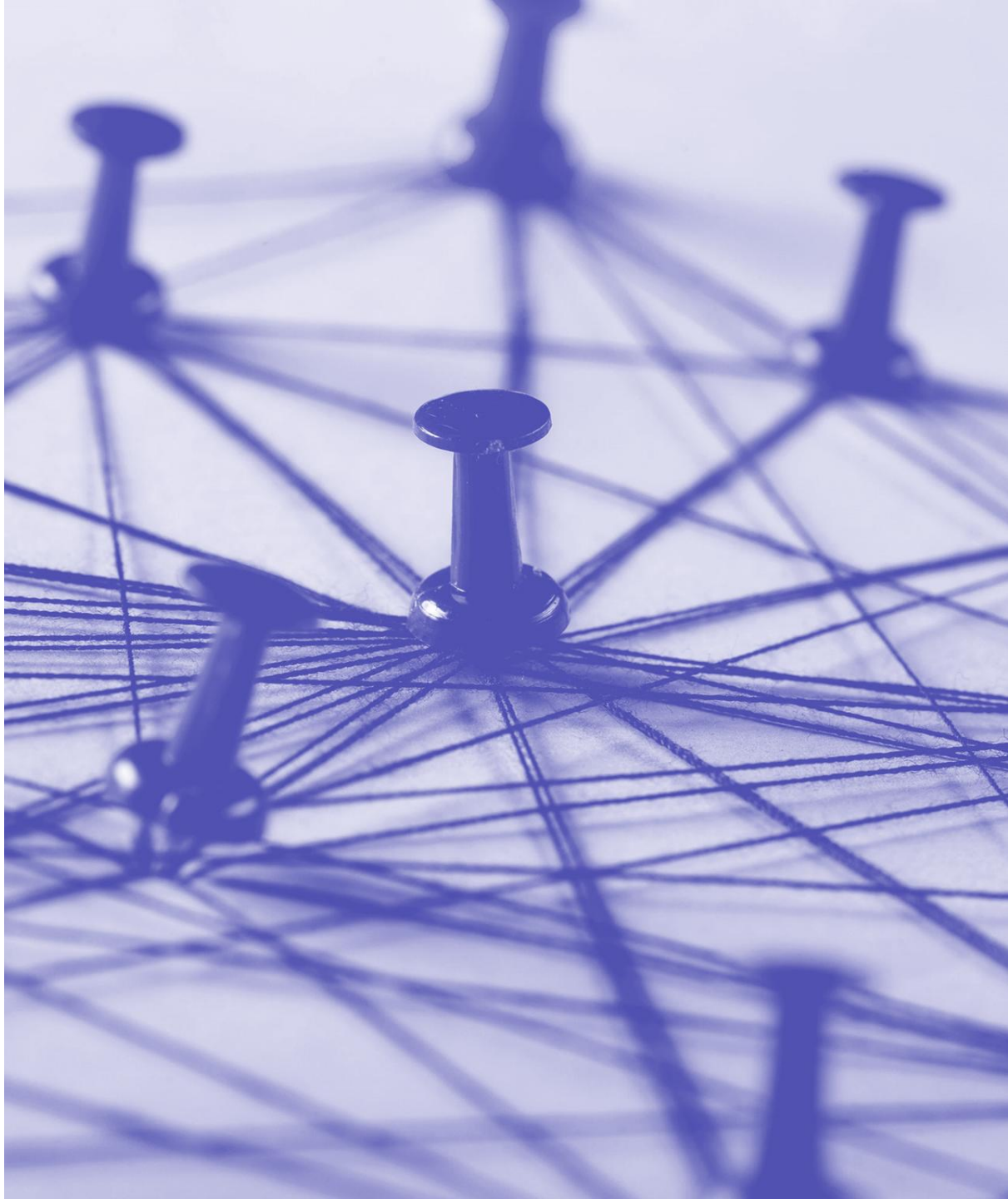
HEUNI Nordic Council of Ministers

Background

- Scoping links between recruitment of youth into organised/gang crime, criminal exploitation, and child trafficking.
- Focus on the Nordic countries, with Sweden as a key reference point.
- Based on academic research, official reports, media sources, and consultations and interviews with Nordic criminal justice practitioners and other relevant actors.
- Funded by Nordic Council of Ministers.

HEUNI

Nordic Council of Ministers



Criminal exploitation

- Activities can comprise of any number of criminal activities, such as pickpocketing, stealing, or selling or smuggling of drugs as well as violent crimes, destruction of property, arson and cyber-facilitated crimes such as fraud and scams.

- Children may be recruited into and exploited in criminal activities through abuse of vulnerabilities such as young age, adverse childhood experiences including traumatic experiences, neuropsychiatric disorders, and mental health problems and risk behaviours.

- Also family dynamics, broader living conditions (e.g. run-aways from institutional care) and societal factors (e.g. living in disadvantaged areas) further intensify the risk of becoming exploited in criminal activities.

Gender dimensions

- The exploitation of children in criminal activities is also gendered, girls and boys may be vulnerable to different types of recruitment and have different roles in the criminal networks, though both face significant risks in terms of exploitation (BRÅ 2025).

- Girls in particular may be led into criminal networks through deceptive romantic relationships and face additional risks characterised by sexual and physical violence.

- Victims may be subjected to multiple forms of exploitation at the same time, e.g. criminal exploitation plus sexual exploitation, and the distinctions between different forms of exploitation are becoming more blurred.

HEUNI Nordic Council of Ministers

Coercion and control

- Identifying situations where children and young people involved in crime as perpetrators might in fact be victims of exploitation is undoubtedly complex and demands specialised understanding of features of human trafficking as well consideration for each child's individual circumstances.

- The offenders may pressure and force the victims in complex ways that are difficult to detect and are based on the establishment of a personal relationship with the victim which makes disclosing difficult → trauma bond

- Misidentifying these children as offenders rather than victims can have serious and lasting consequences which could impact their lives in very concrete ways e.g. placement into institutional care.

HEUNI

Interview quotes

"A major issue is that the youth don't want to talk about being recruited, tricked, or forced into something. [...] And of course, there's also the real or perceived fear of what might happen if they do speak up. That's completely understandable – if someone has committed crimes themselves, they probably have to be in a pretty tight spot before they start talking about those crimes and expose the people behind it all. "– Expert interview 12, Finland

"When working with young people, it may be even more important to ensure that the young person themselves understands what is happening and what the consequences will be for them. If I report this, or if I tell someone what has really happened, what will happen to me? There needs to be clarity about what will happen next, what the consequences will be, and what the benefits are. Transparency, consistency, and a holistic approach are important."– Interview 7, social work professional

The benefit of the trafficking framework

- Recognising children exploited in criminal activities as victims of trafficking:

1. Ensures access to appropriate support and protection, incl. specialised care
2. Safeguards their rights and prevents re-trafficking.
3. Allows for a more nuanced understanding of the coercive circumstances under which children are recruited and involved in criminal activities, rather than focus on just singular events.

- However, collection of evidence and hight threshold for the application of the trafficking framework remains a challenge for the criminal justice system, including in relation to the application of the non-punishment principle.

Checklist for improved identification

- When assessing the situation of an individual “offending” child and whether it amounts to human trafficking, authorities should look at the wider circumstances around the child and evaluate the following factors:

  - ✓Identify intersectional vulnerabilities, such as substance use, neuropsychiatric and -developmental disorders, mental health conditions, gender and minority backgrounds.
  - ✓Note if the child depended on the perpetrator/adult for basic needs such as food, shelter, or safety.
  - ✓Assess whether the child feared consequences like retaliation, detention, or deportation if they did not comply.
  - ✓Evaluate whether the child was controlled through violence, threats, manipulation, debt, intimidation, or feelings of shame or fear.
  - ✓Consider whether the child’s freedom of movement was in any way limited or controlled.

- If one or more of the listed factors can be identified, this may be an indicator that the child’s actions were not voluntary. It is fundamental that a rapid intervention is conducted in such situations.

Conclusions

- The report concludes that applying a trafficking lens to criminal exploitation of children can improve victim protection and facilitate more comprehensive investigation into the individual situations while shifting accountability toward those who profit or benefit from exploiting vulnerabilities.

- Looking beyond punitive responses creates opportunities for rehabilitation, recovery, and more effective long-term prevention.

- Ultimately preventing human trafficking must be closely linked to broader efforts to prevent various forms of harm against children and youth.

HEUNI Nordic Council of Ministers

Thank you!

Anniina Jokinen
Anniina.jokinen@om.fi
@Jokinen_A

@heuni_institute @heuni_institute www.heuni.fi

HEUNI

The European Institute for
Crime Prevention and Control,
affiliated with the United Nations