EUDA
EUROPEAN UNION DRUGS AGENCY

Safe futures

Preventing youth recruitment and participation in European drug markets

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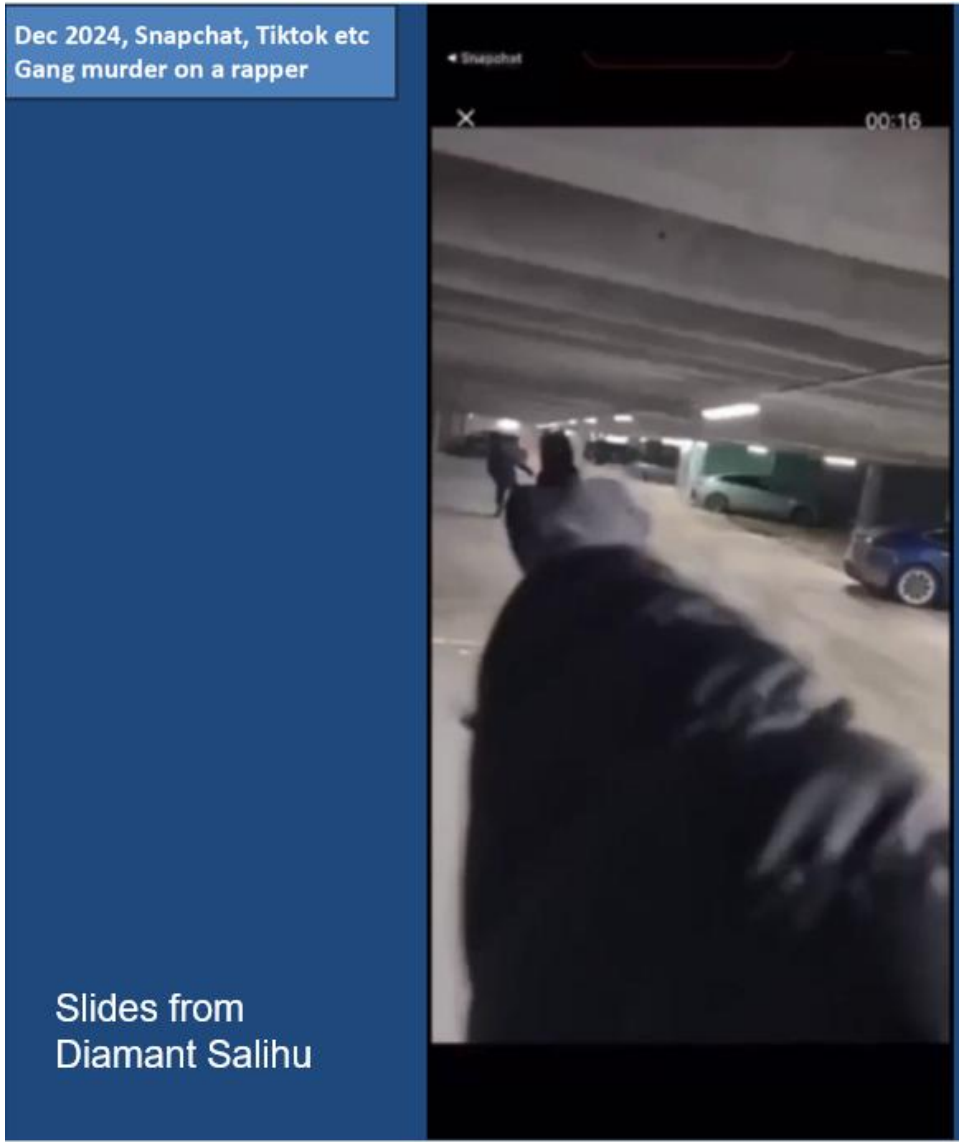
EUCPN Conference

23 OCTOBER
2026

Criminal recruitment on social media

- Recruitment of minors into serious and organised crime and terrorism is not a new phenomenon
- However… the use of online environments is increasingly a tactic used by criminal networks to avoid detection, capture, and prosecution
- Trend has expanded across more countries, with recruitment methods evolving and minors being **tasked with violent acts** such as **extortion** and **killings**

Europol, 2024: "*The recruitment of young perpetrators for criminal networks*"



Slide from Diamant Salihu, SVT, EU Internet Forum 05/03/2025

Criminal recruitment on social media

LA PRESSE

ACTUALITÉS INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE CONTEXTE AFFAIRES SPORTS AUTO ARTS CINÉMA SOCIÉ

Chroniques Éditoriaux Caricatures Analyses National Politique Élections municipales Grand Montréal Just

À un clic de la criminalité

Ils n'ont pas de dossier criminel, mais acceptent d'extorquer sur commande, de frauder ou de mettre le feu à des commerces. Ces jeu délinquants sont recrutés non pas en prison ou dans la rue, mais sur de applications comme *Snapchat* ou *Telegram*.

NJi Nederlands Jeugdinstituut

Voor wie Kennis Databanken Actuee

Nieuws

Online uitbuiting kinderen neemt toe

19 maart 2025

Lees voor

De online uitbuiting va
ronselen van jonge dad
en jongeren om zelf bui
Europol. Mike Loef: 'Jor

JUSTITSMINISTERIET

Kontakt Ministeriet Presse Forskning

Justitsministeren mødes med techgiganter for at drøfte misbrug af digitale tjenester til organiseret kriminalitet

20. september 2024

I dag mødes Justitsminister Peter Hummelgaard og de øvrige nordiske justitsministre med repræsentanter fra Google, Meta, Snapchat og TikTok for at drøfte udfordringerne med misbrug af digitale tjenester til organiseret kriminalitet, herunder rekruttering af børn og unge. Mødet finder sted under Nordisk Justitsministermøde i Uppsala.

Slik rekrutteres barn til frontlinjen i gjengkrigen

Kriminelle kan ha bestilt barn til å utføre granatangrepet i Oslo og skytingen i Sarpsborg. Fremgangsmåten er godt kjent i Sverige.

PUBLISERT 5. OKT. KL. 13:00 | OPPDATERT 5. OKT. KL. 15:35

Benjamin Vorland Andersrød +5 til

Journalist

Lapsia ja nuoria pyritään radikalisoimaan uusin keinoin

25.9.2024 9.52

Väkivaltaiset ääriryhmät kohdistavat yhä enemmän propagandaa lapsille ja nuorille tavoitteena radikalisoida alaikäisiä ja saada heidät mukaan väkivaltaiseen toimintaan. Laps ja nuoriin kohdistuva rekrytointi ja propaganda on tullut entistä näkyvämmäksi erityisesti koronapandemian jälkeen. Lasten ja nuorten radikalisoitumisen uhkaan on herätty monessa maassa. Jos kehitystä ei onnistuta pysäyttämään, tulee se vaikuttamaan väkivaltaisen radikalisoitumisen ja terrorismin uhkaan sekä yhteiskuntien vakauteen myös pidemmällä aikavälillä.

Alaikäisten radikalisoitumisen ehkäisy on yksi EU-tason yhteistyön prioriteetti ja EU-jäsenmaat

NYHETERNA Start Nöje Sport Nyhetsmorgon

Senaste nytt Inrikes Utrikes Politik Ekonomi Brott och straff Klimat Tech Väder

Nya fenomenet: ”Krimfluencers” skrämmer svenska barn till lydnad

”Många unga följer den här bilden” • Livesändning nådde 19 000

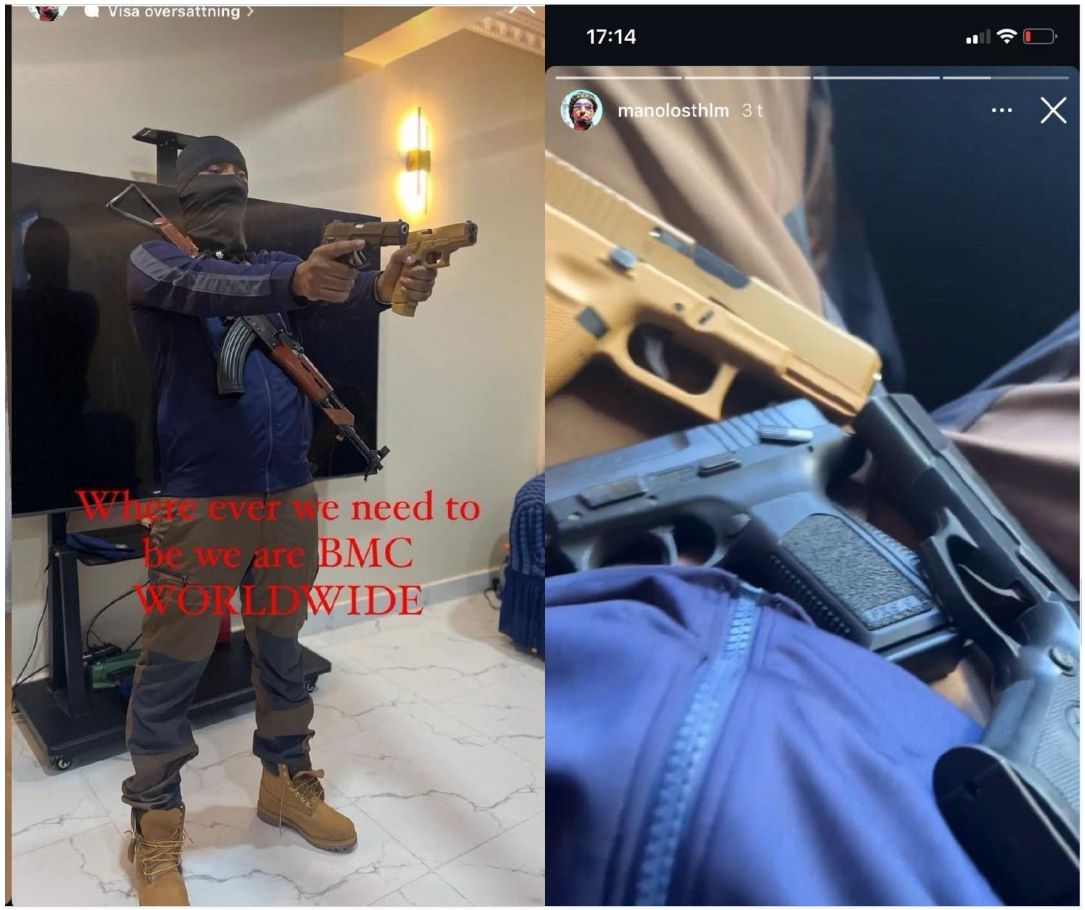
Uppdaterad: 31 oktober 2023 Publicerad: 31 oktober 2023

Kriminella nyttjar sociala medier för att få ut sitt budskap och locka unga.

– De vill skrämma andra unga till lydnad och visa sitt våldskapital, säger Emil Arvidson, journalist och författare, i Nyhetsmorgon.

What are European countries reporting?

- **11 EU Member States** report awareness of online recruitment of young people by criminal networks (for drug market-related activities)
- **4** report **worsening trend**
- **5** report **frequent links to violence**
- Platforms most mentioned: Telegram (10), Snapchat (10), WhatsApp/Signal (8), encrypted forums/marketplaces (8), gaming platforms (7), Instagram (4) and TikTok (4)
- Several countries have developed/are developing slang/emoji glossaries – to decode criminal messaging online



Photos: Diamant Salihu, SVT, EU Internet Forum 05/03/2025

What are the roles involved?

Often four distinct “roles” involved — each operating from different locations, and each creating entry points for the recruitment of young people.

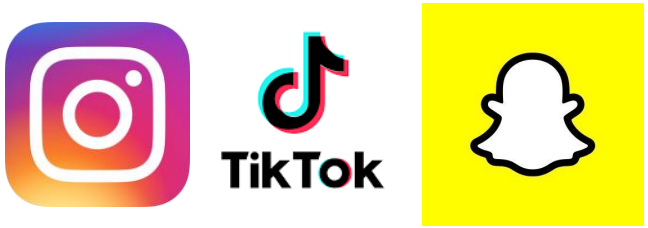
1. **Instigator**
   Orders and finances the crime.
   Often based abroad and insulated from the scene; drives the operation while remaining hidden.
2. **Recruiter**
   Identifies, contacts and grooms potential perpetrators.
   Works mainly through encrypted apps, gaming platforms or chat forums; available 24/7 to persuade, pressure, or manipulate — including minors.
3. **Enabler**
   Organises the conditions for the attack.
   Provides logistics, tools, contacts, safe transport, payments — making the operation possible without the instigator ever appearing.
4. **Perpetrator**
   Carries out the violent act.
   Frequently a minor with no criminal record, selected for their perceived invisibility to law enforcement.

How social media enables criminal recruitment

Stages of the “recruitment process”

Investigations undertaken by the Swedish Police Authority sheds some light on the recruitment process of children and young people, as perpetrators of acts of violence, on social media.

Step 1: Attract attention



- Follow/interact with accounts/groups with violent content
- Similar accounts/groups suggested by algorithm
- Accounts/groups push user to other platforms

Step 2: Lure with “job offers”

- More graphic/violent content shared
- “Job offers” posted with brief description (e.g. murder, shooting, bombing), geographical location, payment, etc.

Step 3: Planning/coordination

- Planning/coordination on E2EE apps exclusively

Criminal gig-economy

Slide from Diamant Salihu, SVT, EU Internet Forum 05/03/2025

Slide from Andreas Franke, Swedish Police Authority, EU Internet Forum 05/03/2025

Teenagers lack consequenstialism.

Unable to back out, Executor will often be used until caught to avoid payment.

Nyheter / Sociala medier

Gängens barnsoldater straffas om de drar sig ur – eller misslyckas

Polisen: ”Det sker regelmässigt”

DEFECTION

Threatened by the recruiter to finish the job, recruit someone else or fined as punishment.

FAILURE

Relatives fined and made to pay back for expenses e.g. flight or train tickets

SUCCEED

Sought after by opposing criminal networks. Will be made to continue performing acts of violence until arrested.

Polisen

OTF GRIMM: EU Response to Violence-as-a-Service

Launched April 2025 to counter:

Violence-as-a-Service

Recruitment of young individuals

Led by Sweden, with Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands and Norway

Europol provides coordination, threat analysis and operational support

Responds directly to:

Youth recruited and instructed online

Encrypted apps, social media, coded language and gamified tasks

OTF GRIMM role:

Coordinate cross-border intelligence and joint investigations

Map recruitment methods, roles and monetisation in VaaS networks

Identify and dismantle violence-on-demand service providers

Cooperate with tech companies to prevent online recruitment

Produce public intelligence (e.g. Europol notification on youth recruitment)

Not only drugs: cyber-attacks, online fraud, violent extortion and cross-border crime

REWIRE: from concern to evidence

The evidence gap

We know online environments are increasingly relevant. We know much less about how recruitment unfolds in practice, how young people experience it, and when online contact becomes offline involvement.

REWIRE asks not only WHERE recruitment occurs, but HOW it works.

1

Approach

How are young people approached for drug-related crime and violence?

2

Platforms & narratives

Which channels, messages and transitions shape involvement?

3

Vulnerability & risk

What risk factors emerge from these cases?

4

Strengthen monitoring, prevention and response

How can we strengthen monitoring, prevention and response, including cooperation between relevant stakeholders?

How REWIRE will build the evidence

FOUR CITY CASE STUDIES

ROTTERDAM	ANTWERP	GOTHENBURG	MARSEILLE
Netherlands	Belgium	Sweden	France

METHODS

01	**Scoping review**	What is already known and where are the gaps?	02	**Stakeholder interviews**	Police, prosecutors, youth work, social services and researchers
03	**Interviews with young people**	Experience of involvement, exploitation and pathways	04	**Open-source case analysis**	Media reports and published court material for illustrative cases

July 2026–June 2027 Outputs: Research report, topic summaries and policy-relevant recommendations

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Thank you

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