EUCPN
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK

Preventing online recruitment into organised crime

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Why does the online environment matter?

Reach

Recruiters can access large numbers of young people through widely used platforms.

Targeting

Online spaces make it easier to identify people who may be vulnerable or interested in particular subcultures.

Anonymity

It can be difficult to identify who is behind an account or where they are located.

Low visibility

Contact can develop outside the view of parents, teachers,...

Why keeping children off the internet is not the answer

Risk exposure does not automatically lead to harm

Some exposure is developmentally necessary: it teaches children to navigate challenges.

Banning or over-restricting online access:

- Undermines children's rights to participation, learning, creativity and social connection.
- Removes opportunities to practice digital skills and coping strategies.
- May push activity to less supervised spaces.

Social media age restriction in Australia

- Since December 2025, social media platforms must take reasonable steps to prevent Australians under 16 from having accounts.

Four pillars

1. Building online resilience

Teaching coping, not avoidance.

Resilience = positive adaptation in the face of adversity.
→ It develops only when young people are allowed to face manageable online challenges.

Recognise

- Is someone manipulating me?
- Does this account or offer seem suspicious?
- Are money, status, secrecy or pressure being used?

Respond

- Block or mute
- Report content or accounts
- Protect privacy
- Keep evidence where appropriate

Reach out

- Talk to a trusted adult
- Talk to a friend or professional
- Know where support is available
- Ask for help early

2. Strengthening digital literacy

Digital literacy is a promotive factor not because it prevents risk, but because it prevents harm.

- Definition: skills, knowledge, attitudes enabling safe, critical, creative digital participation.
- Different types of digital skills: technical, information, social/communication, creative.
- Digitally skilled youth encounter more risks (because they are more active), but suffer less harm because they know how to respond.

Strong digital literacy + resilience = better wellbeing after negative experiences.

3. The social shield: parents, schools and community

Schools: building critical, informed users

Integrate digital safety, critical thinking, and media literacy into curricula

Teach recognition of:
- manipulation and grooming tactics, fake profiles
- organised-crime glamour narratives: belonging, excitement, financial incentives

Parents: supportive and transparent guidance

- Use safety tools together: privacy settings, content filters, blocking/reporting tools
- Build a support network: help children know who to turn to when something goes wrong
- Encourage balanced routines that include offline belonging (sports, arts, youth groups)

4. Technological prevention

Platform accountability and regulation: the Digital Services Act (2022/2024)

EU's landmark regulation for a safer, more transparent online environment

Protecting minors:
- Ban on targeted ads for children
- Safety by design → platforms should integrate protection of minors into their design
- Trusted flaggers can notify platforms of illegal content, which platforms must prioritise for handling.

Why it matters for prevention:
- The DSA explicitly recognises criminal recruitment of minors as an online risk
- Platforms must ensure privacy, safety, and security of minors (Article 28)

Limits of the DSA:
- Encrypted messaging platforms fall largely outside scope
- Enforcement challenges: many platforms, slow procedures, resource limits

Conclusion

Targeted support for vulnerable youth

Offline vulnerabilities increase online vulnerabilities

Young people experiencing difficulties or instability offline may also face greater vulnerability online.

- Isolation or loneliness
- Low self-esteem or confidence
- Mental health difficulties
- Instability at home
- Lack of trusted adults or support
- Limited opportunities for achievement and belonging

Online prevention cannot be only about what happens online.

How do we tackle online youth recruitment into organised crime?

A multi-layered approach

Young people	Resilience and digital literacy
Social environment	Parents and schools
Digital environment	Platform responsibility & regulation, tech solutions
Offline world	Support, belonging and meaningful alternatives

Reducing youth involvement in organised crime means not only disrupting recruitment, but offering real alternatives for belonging, identity, and purpose.

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Thank you

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