Addressing the Recruitment of Young People into Organised Drug Crime: insights from the Safe Futures project.

RESEARCH
EVIDENCE INTO
POLICY PROGRAMMES
AND PRACTICE

YOUTH CRIME

EUDA
EUROPEAN UNION
DRUGS AGENCY

Dr Eoin O'Meara Daly, REPPP, School of Law,
University of Limerick, Ireland.

UNIVERSITY OF
LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

‘Safe Futures’ is an EUDA funded project ‘*Addressing the Recruitment of Young People into Organised Drug Crime’*

Establish a multi-disciplinary (multi jurisdictional) Community of Practice with key EU jurisdictions

Review existing research, map existing interventions, and develop a conceptual framework for intervention

Communicate findings from the theoretical and empirical work

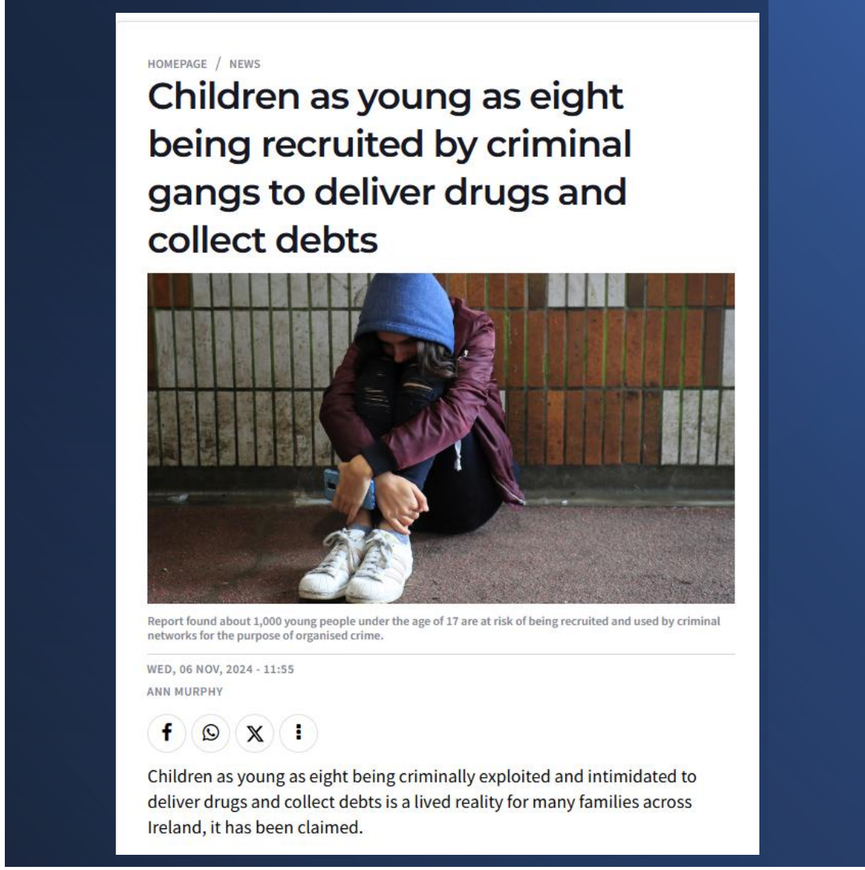
EUDA
EUROPEAN UNION DRUGS AGENCY

UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Addressing the knowledge gap in youth recruitment & intervention

- **This is a problem worth addressing**…
- Framed as a **‘wicked’** problem in Ireland, one with a **conscious opposition**.
- Evidence on interventions to prevent this problem is fragmented and methodologically limited (Boertien et al., 2024).
- Initial objective: conduct a desk review of literature on **promising approaches** to address the issue.
- **Rapid Evidence Review (RER)** selected to provide initial evidence.

NB. the inclusion of grey literature and widening the net!


HOMEPAGE / NEWS

Children as young as eight being recruited by criminal gangs to deliver drugs and collect debts

Report found about 1,000 young people under the age of 17 are at risk of being recruited and used by criminal networks for the purpose of organised crime.

WED, 06 NOV, 2024 - 11:55

ANN MURPHY

Children as young as eight being criminally exploited and intimidated to deliver drugs and collect debts is a lived reality for many families across Ireland, it has been claimed.

Three main parts to review findings

1. Drivers and contexts of recruitment are important for intervention

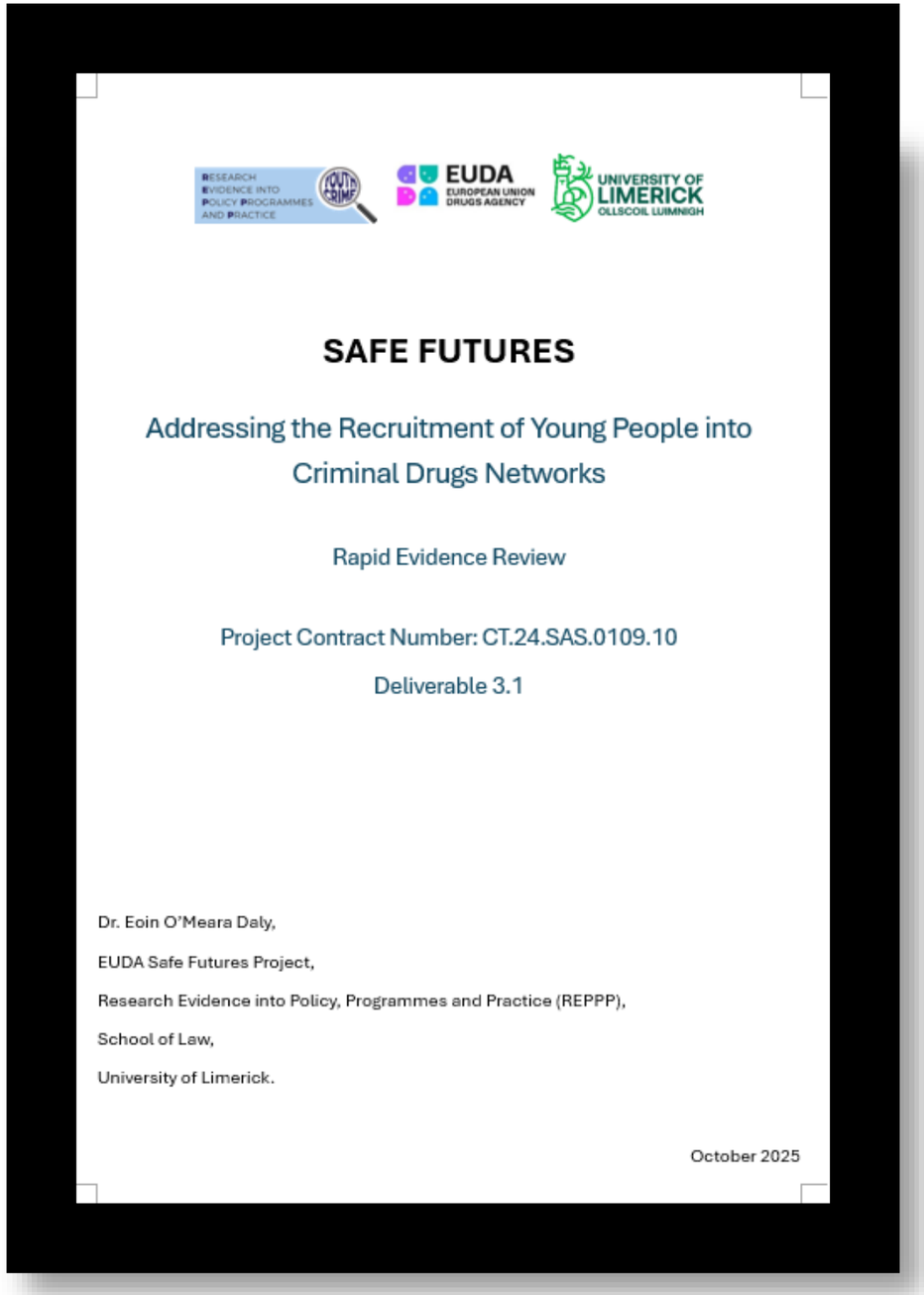
2. Eight intervention approaches identified over 22 evidence sources (10 academic, 12 grey)

3. Implementation lessons

   - Cross-cutting barriers (what gets in the way) e.g. Fear and intimidations

   - Cross-cutting facilitators (what helps)

   e.g. Multi-agency partnerships



RESEARCH EVIDENCE INTO POLICY PROGRAMMES AND PRACTICE

EUDA EUROPEAN UNION DRUGS AGENCY

UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

SAFE FUTURES

Addressing the Recruitment of Young People into Criminal Drugs Networks

Rapid Evidence Review

Project Contract Number: CT.24.SAS.0109.10

Deliverable 3.1

Dr. Eoin O'Meara Daly,

EUDA Safe Futures Project,

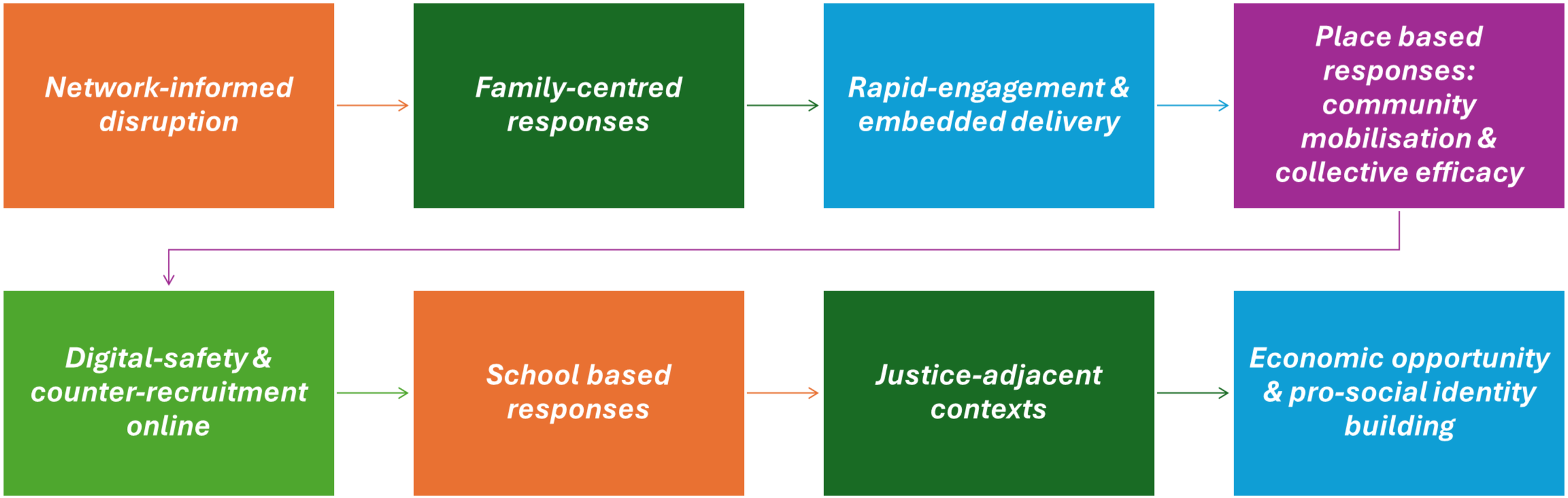
Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice (REPPP),

School of Law,

University of Limerick.

October 2025

Eight intervention approaches identified over 22 evidence sources (lots more detail in review)



Phase Two: Empirical- semi-structured interviews and site visits

- Evidence review was the first phase of understanding what's needed for a conceptual framework for intervention in this area.

- Phase two of the project: Empirical- **semi-structured interviews** and site visits, deliberative strategy using a **purposive sample** (practitioners and policy makers)

- **Five jurisdictions visited** and **21 experts interviewed** in France, Sweden, The Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland- North & South.

Empirical Purpose/Question:

Question (SPIDER framework):

How do practitioners and policymakers across selected European jurisdictions understand, design, and implement interventions (to prevent young people's recruitment into criminal drugs networks) and what shape's their perceived effectiveness?

SPIDER Framework (qualitative question formulation)

SPIDER element	Specification for this study
S - Sample	Practitioners, policymakersjn selected European jurisdictions.
PI - Phenomenon of Interest	Approaches to preventing youth recruitment and participation in criminal drug networks; intervention design, delivery, and adaptation.
D - Design	Qualitative, semi-structured expert interviews (recorded, transcribed, anonymised; NVivo-supported analysis).
E - Evaluation	Perceived effectiveness, mechanisms, barriers/facilitators, and contextual influences; contribution to a European-level framework.
R - Research type	Qualitative (expert perspectives). Reflexive thematic analysis.

(Cooke, Smith, & Booth, 2012)

UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Reflections from Thematic Analysis- Tentative at moment!

- **What the problem looks like?**
  - Complex, different levels of organised vs impulsive behaviour

- **What intervention looks like?**
  - Evidence based vs informed, some bespoke with a mix of evaluation stages

- **What's working (according to interview participants)?**
  - Relational aspect… key worker trust, holistic intervention that includes the whole family

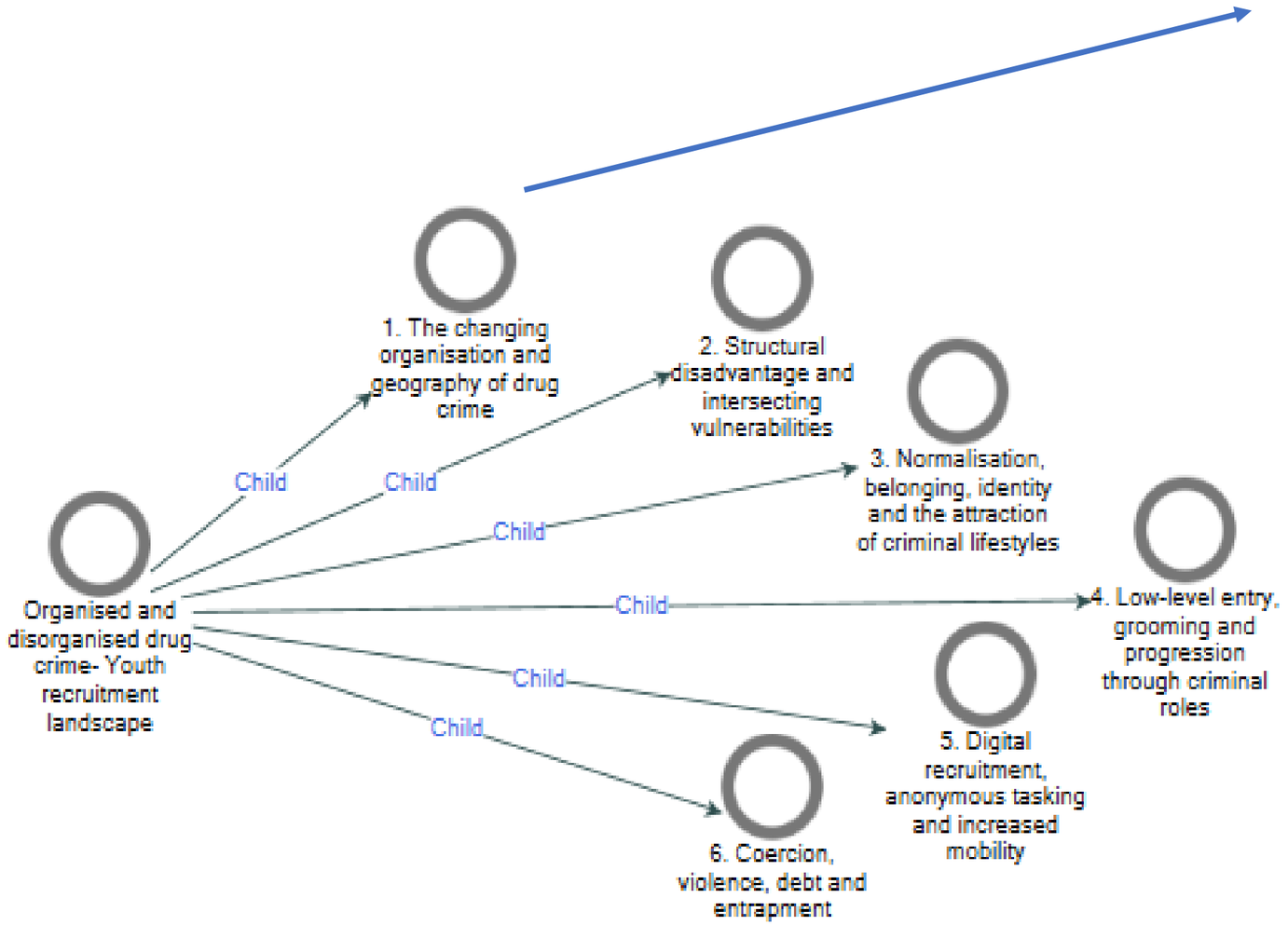
- **What helps implementation and what hinders it?**
  - The right people and their knowledge, commitment, multi-agency networks
  - The gravity of the problem, data sharing, funding/insecurity!

"The family is the programme and we shape our intervention around their needs"
Participant 18

"We work to the rhythm of their life"
Participant 19

UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Example…



Fluid disorganised networks alongside local hierarchies

Organised drug crime was not always represented as a conventional, fixed hierarchy. Dutch participants described “a lot of loose, fluid, small networks,” in which young people might act as generalists or subcontractors carrying out tasks for different groups. Participant 9 explained: “No, we don’t have gangs. We have looser structures.” Young people could work for a network without being formal or permanent members of it.

UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

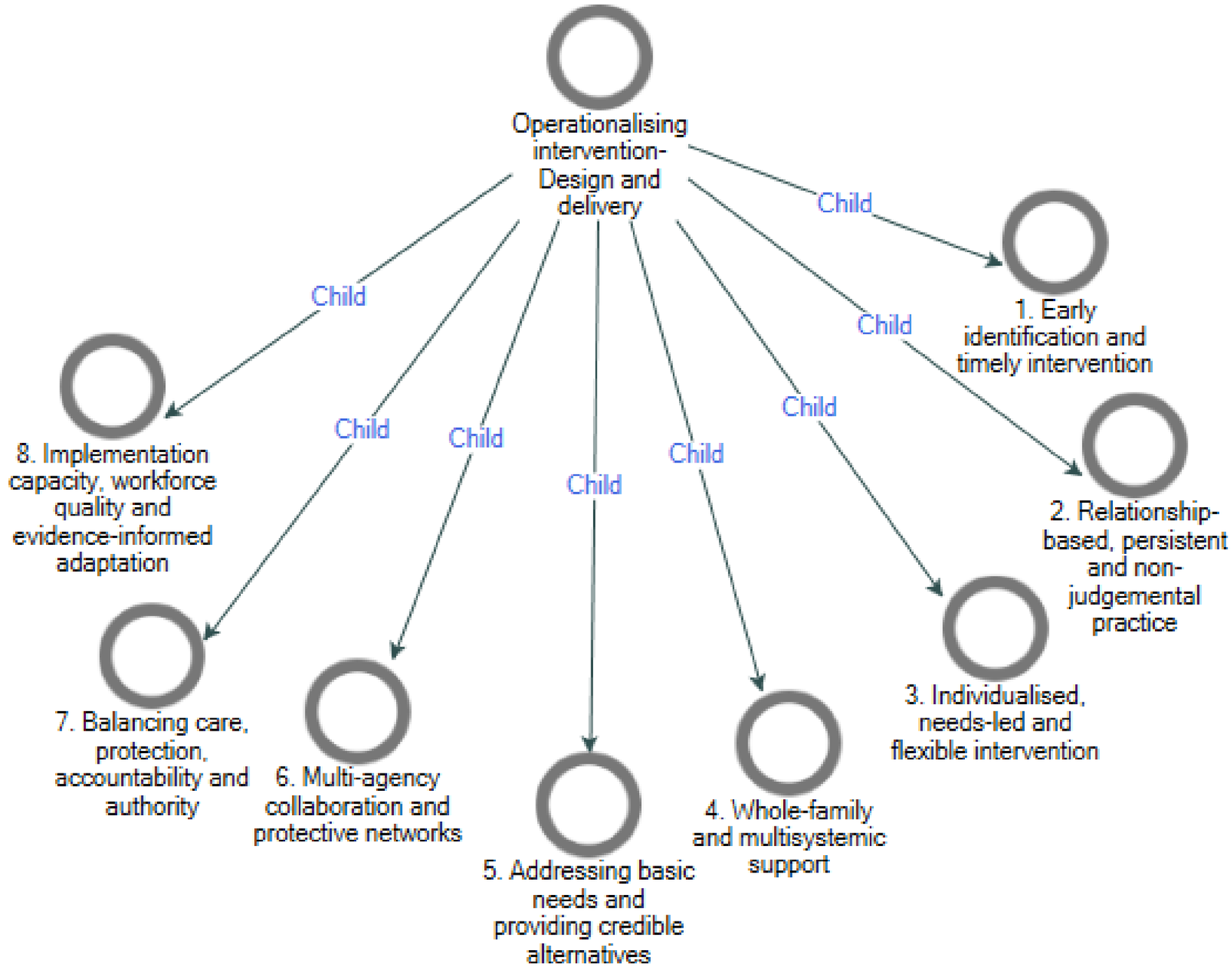
Overall analytical proposition of finding 1- Youth recruitment landscape

Youth recruitment into organised drug crime is best understood as a socially embedded and progressively exploitative process in which criminal networks convert structural disadvantage, developmental vulnerability, social belonging and digital connectivity into a flexible supply of young labour.

Young people may be attracted by money, status, belonging or excitement while simultaneously being targeted because of poverty, age, social isolation, cognitive vulnerability or lack of protection. Their initial involvement may appear voluntary and involve only minor tasks, but progression can expose them to debt, violence and increasingly restricted opportunities for exit.

UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Operationalising intervention…



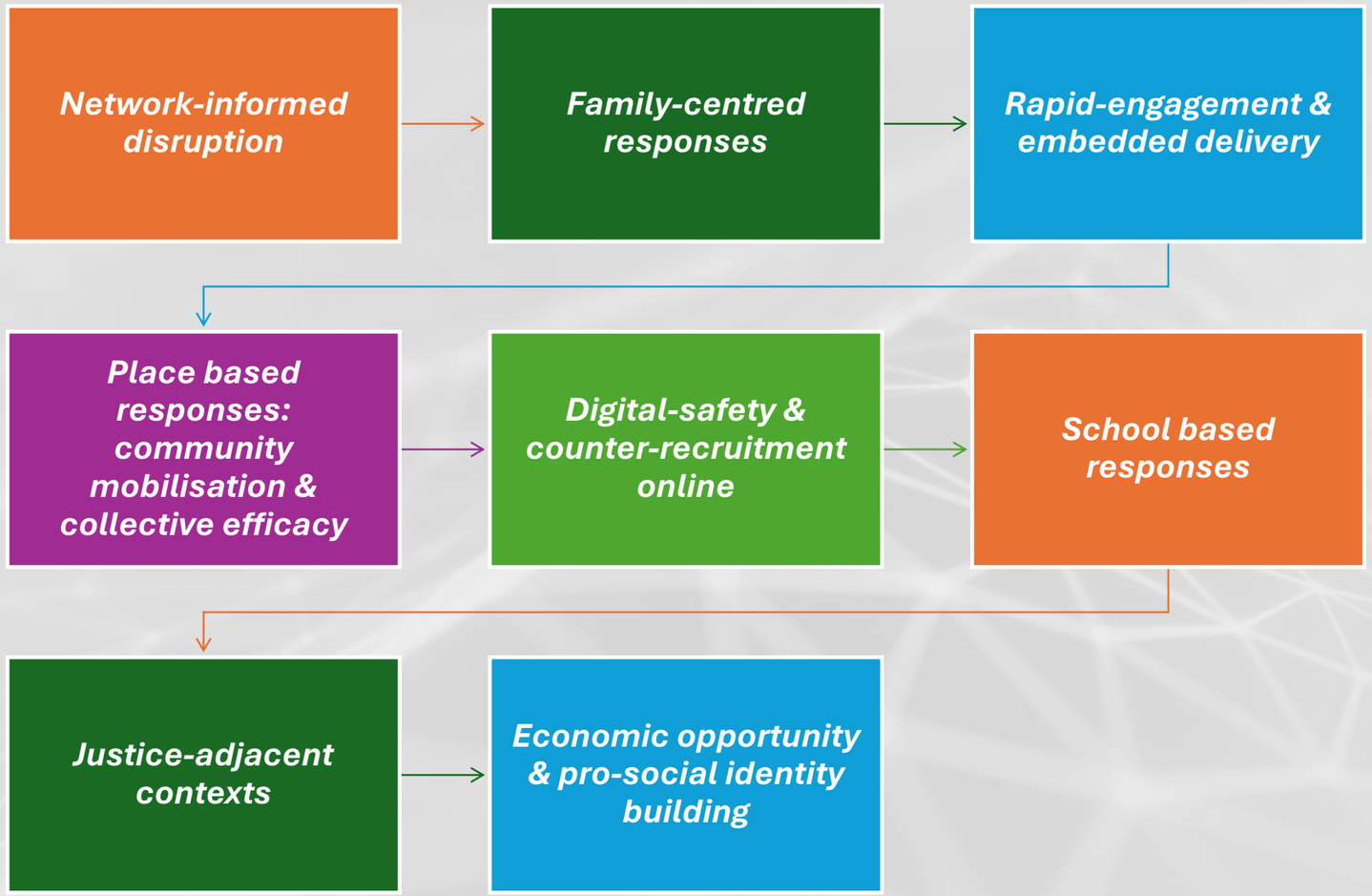
Overall analytical proposition of finding 2- Operationalising intervention

Effective intervention with young people affected by criminal drugs networks is best understood as a sustained, relationship-based and multisystemic process that combines practical assistance, family and community protection, credible opportunities and proportionate accountability.

The cross-jurisdictional evidence indicates that effective intervention should not be understood as the delivery of a single programme to an individual young person. Rather, it is a coordinated, relational and context-responsive process that operates across the young person's family, peer group, school, neighbourhood and service environment.

UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Go raibh míle maith agat – Thanks a million!



https://www.euda.europa.eu/publications/technical-reports/addressing-recruitment-young-people-criminal-drugs-networks_en