Toolkit

Youth recruitment into organised crime

EUCPN
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK

ENAA
TACKLING SERIOUS AND ORGANISED CRIME

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TOOLKIT YOUTH RECRUITMENT INTO ORGANISED CRIME

Part 01 **Understanding the phenomenon**

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Recruitment reflects broader social, economic and community vulnerabilities that result in some young people being exposed to criminal opportunities to a greater extent.

Introduction

Across Europe, organised crime groups are drawing upon children and young people to take part in a growing range of criminal activities. In several countries, reports from law enforcement, research and frontline practitioners suggest that young people are playing an increasingly visible role within many criminal markets.

Europol has identified 731 high-risk criminal networks operating in the European Union, involving more than 400,000 individuals.[1] Although the scale of youth involvement in these networks remains difficult to measure accurately, Europol notes that minors are present across more than 70% of criminal markets, ranging from cybercrime, online fraud, migrant smuggling, property crime to drug trafficking.[2]

However, the use of young people is not a standard feature of all criminal networks. Among the most threatening criminal networks (MTCNs) analysed by Europol, around 6% were identified as exploiting young people.[3] While this represents a relatively small proportion of networks, it can involve large numbers of young people in individual cases.

The illegal drug trade is particularly relevant in this context. It remains one of the main drivers of organised crime in Europe, both in terms of profits and of the number of actors involved.[4] Young people are often used to perform lower-level roles, such as street dealing, transport, drug storage or surveillance. These roles may appear minor, but they can expose young people to violence, coercion, debt, exploitation and rapidly escalate into more serious offending.

A further concern is the increasing involvement of children and young people in serious and violent crimes, including extortion, shootings and contract killings.[5] This development is not confined to major urban centres anymore. France, for example, has observed growing concern about a geographic shift away from large urban centres such as Paris and Marseille towards smaller municipalities. This expansion creates new prevention challenges for local authorities that may have less experience, fewer specialised services and weaker coordination structures.

Several factors help explain these developments. First, drug markets have expanded and diversified. Criminal networks are active across a wider range of substances, distribution methods and local markets, thereby creating a demand for people who can transport drugs, store products, deliver packages, collect debts, monitor locations or act as intermediaries. This creates opportunities for young people to become involved at different levels of the market.

Organised crime has also become more visible in some local communities and online environments. Drug dealing and criminal lifestyles are displayed more openly in public spaces, music videos, social media or peer networks. Visible signs of money, status and violence can contribute towards the normalisation, and at times, glamorisation of organised crime. For some children and teenagers, especially those growing up in environments marked by marginalisation, insecurity or limited opportunities, this image can appear to offer success, belonging, protection or recognition.

Criminal networks appear increasingly willing to use children and young people as part of their operations. In the past, young people were seen as unreliable, inexperienced or untrustworthy, and informal barriers may have limited the exploitation of children.[6] In many contexts, these barriers appear to have weakened. Young people are now increasingly being treated as a flexible and disposable workforce.

Recruitment should not be understood only as a matter of criminal networks actively targeting young people. It also reflects broader social, economic and community vulnerabilities that result in some young people being exposed to criminal opportunities to a greater extent, being more likely to see these as attractive or necessary, or being more vulnerable to pressure when it occurs.

The role of elders in criminal networks

Insights from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) and its 2023 report "Children and youth in criminal networks: Network entry, offending, conditions and network exit."[7]

> *At the top of many criminal networks are* "the elders" *– dominant figures who command respect and control over younger members, referred to as their own "youngers". These elders are not only older in age but also more established and respected within the criminal hierarchy. These power dynamics are fluid: one individual may be an elder to some and a younger to someone else, depending not just on age but on* length of involvement, influence and accumulated criminal capital.

The elder-younger dynamic is marked by loyalty, ownership and exploitation. Owning youngers is a marker of status within the criminal network. Elders may even "loan out" their youngers to allied groups. Youngers are expected to be constantly available, and their activities, such as drug delivery or storing weapons, are often dictated by their elder. This dynamic can expose youngers to disproportionate risks. Elders might delegate risky tasks to youngers to shield themselves from legal consequences. In some cases, youngers are required to take the fall for elders during police investigations, by falsely confessing or claiming responsibility to help protect older members.

When elders are absent, due to incarceration, relocation or other disruptions, their influence over youngers weakens. These moments can trigger internal conflicts or, in some cases, provide a rare opportunity to exit the network.

While some young people describe feeling loved, protected and safe under the guidance of an elder, many also acknowledge being manipulated, exploited and afraid. This ambivalence, consisting of love mixed with fear, reflects the deep psychological hold elders often have over their youngers. Ultimately, these relationships are based on socialisation, coercive loyalty and power, often maintained by mixing kindness and violence.

Challenges in gathering intelligence

Giving an accurate image of youth recruitment into organised crime at the European level presents several challenges, starting with the terminology itself. Each of the key concepts ('youth', 'recruitment' and 'organised crime') may be interpreted differently across Member States and policy frameworks.

A key limitation when analysing organised crime across the European Union lies in the absence of a unified definition of what constitutes 'organised crime'. This term is often conflated with serious international crime, which can obscure the local dimensions of harm and recruitment.[8] Following the United Nations' definition of 'organized criminal group',[9] the European Union defines a 'criminal organisation' as

> *"a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences [...], in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit."*

with 'structured association' further defined as

> *"an association that is not randomly formed for the immediate commission of an offence, nor does it need to have formally defined roles for its members, continuity of its membership, or a developed structure."*[10]

While widely adopted, this definition has been criticised for being overly broad, potentially encompassing smaller, less sophisticated criminal collaborations that may not align with the public or institutional understanding of organised crime. As a result, Member States often apply varying criteria and classifications that encompass a wide range of criminal behaviours, groups and organisational structures. This diversity leads to inconsistencies in data collection, reporting and cross-country comparisons, which therefore complicate efforts to measure and respond to the phenomenon at a European level.

Beyond the difficulties associated with defining 'organised crime', there is also no common understanding of what constitutes recruitment into organised crime.[11] Recruitment is often understood as the processes through which individuals are identified, approached, influenced and gradually drawn into criminal activities or networks by organised crime groups. As we will discuss below, these processes may involve socialisation, grooming, financial incentives, peer influence, coercion or the promise of financial gain.

Recruitment is not always a direct interaction between a criminal group and a young person: different actors may fulfil distinct roles within the recruitment process. These may include the instigator or customer who benefits from the criminal activity, the recruiter who identifies and approaches potential recruits, the enabler who facilitates involvement by providing access, transport, accommodation or resources, and finally the recruit themselves.[12] This illustrates the structured and relational nature of recruitment processes within organised crime.

While 'recruitment' is widely used, the concept of 'involvement' may better reflect the reality on the ground. Not all young people enter organised crime through a deliberate recruitment process. Some actively seek out criminal opportunities, respond to online advertisements, join through family or peer relationships, or perceive their participation as a voluntary choice rather than as a result of recruitment. Some young people describe their entry into drug trafficking as "applying for a job" rather than being recruited.[13] In such cases, terms such as 'recruitment' may fail to capture the full range of pathways into organised crime.

This distinction is important because an exclusive focus on recruitment risks obscuring the broader social, economic, and environmental factors that make criminal opportunities attractive in the first place. The concept of involvement therefore encompasses a broader spectrum of experiences, ranging from coercion and exploitation to self-initiated participation. For this reason, while the term 'recruitment' is used throughout this toolkit, it should be broadly understood as referring to the various processes through which young people become involved in organised crime.

Definitions of the target group add another layer of complexity. Across research, policy and practice, the terms "child", "young person", "minor", "adolescent" and "young adult" are often used differently, making comparison across studies and countries difficult. Some studies focus exclusively on minors, while some others also consider young

adults up to the age of 21 or even older. The United Nations defines children as people younger than 14 and youth as people between 15 and 24.[14] Most European countries do not have a clear legal definition of "youth" but it is generally understood to begin between the ages of 12 and 16 and end somewhere between 24 and 35.[15] As a result, young people are sometimes grouped together with older offenders in official statistics, making it difficult to isolate age-specific trends.

This ambiguity is further complicated by national differences in legal thresholds for criminal responsibility. In the European Union, the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) varies greatly between Member States, contributing to inconsistencies in how 'young people' are defined in crime statistics and research. The most common MACR is 14 years, as seen in countries such as Germany, Austria, Spain and Italy. However, there are notable exceptions: in Ireland, the MACR is set at 12, though children as young as 10 can be held criminally liable for serious offences such as murder, manslaughter or rape. In Poland, the general MACR is 17, but it can be lowered to 15 for certain serious crimes,[16] while in Luxembourg, the MACR is set at 18.[17] These differences reflect national legal traditions. A lower minimum age of criminal responsibility does not necessarily translate into harsher youth justice practices, as we will discuss further in this toolkit with the example of Ireland.

These differences show why age should be treated with some flexibility when examining youth involvement in organised crime. Legal thresholds, developmental stages and national definitions do not always align, and the risks associated with criminal involvement can continue beyond the age at which a person is legally considered a child. For the purposes of this toolkit, the term 'young people' is therefore used broadly to cover minors and young adults.

These definitional and legal differences are particularly relevant when attempting to measure the scale of youth involvement in organised crime and compare findings across countries. Even where data exist, they may be difficult to interpret because young people may enter different systems depending on the national context, the nature of the offence or the response chosen by authorities. Some may be recorded in police or justice statistics, while others may be referred primarily to child protection, social services or diversion schemes. This creates gaps between what is visible in official crime data and what practitioners observe on the ground. Underreporting is likely to be particularly significant in drug markets, where children often perform low-visibility roles such as acting as lookouts or couriers, or storing drugs and weapons, which therefore reduces their likelihood of detection by law enforcement.

Risk factors

Research shows that youth recruitment into organised crime is shaped by several risk factors at different levels: individual, family and friends, and community. Many of these factors are not unique to organised crime, but are also associated with youth offending and criminal involvement more broadly.

It is therefore important to stress that these factors do not individually predict that a young person will become involved in organised crime, as they encompass a broad spectrum of the population. While the predictive nature of these risk factors is low, their accumulation can increase children's vulnerability and lead to a greater likelihood of being involved in organised crime, especially in the absence of protective influences. This cumulative risk highlights the importance of paying close attention to changes in behaviour, as they may be early signs of exploitation or involvement in criminal networks.

Individual level

Boys and young men are statistically more likely to engage in criminal activity. In France, for instance, around 90% of individuals arrested for drug possession or dealing are male.[18] The Netherlands reports a similar figure: around 90% of young drug suspects are male, and 22% of them are minors.[19] However, this should not be interpreted as meaning that girls are absent from organised crime or recruitment processes. Their involvement may be less visible or less frequently detected. Girls may occupy less public-facing roles or be used because they attract less suspicion. The gendered nature of recruitment and exploitation is further discussed below.

Research suggests that certain masculine norms may increase vulnerability to recruitment into organised crime. For some young men, experiences of educational failure, unemployment or limited economic prospects can create feelings of marginalisation and a loss of status. Drug trafficking and other criminal activities may then appear attractive because they offer financial rewards, social recognition and opportunities to perform traditional masculine roles associated with independence, strength and providing for oneself or one's family. The absence of positive male role models and the desire for acceptance, camaraderie or approval from older male offenders can further increase vulnerability.[20]

Belonging to an ethnic minority group can increase the risk of being targeted by criminal groups, as recruiters favour recruiting people from the same ethnic background because shared language, culture or social networks facilitate trust and communication.[21] This familiarity makes it easier to approach, influence and monitor potential recruits.

In addition, other factors such as school disengagement or drug use can further heighten a young person's vulnerability to being targeted by criminal networks. Dropping out of school, in particular, reduces contact with teachers, counsellors and other support services, making it more difficult for professionals to identify risks early or intervene before recruitment takes place.

Emotional vulnerability can make young people more susceptible to recruitment by criminal networks. Young people experiencing low self-esteem, loneliness, social exclusion or a lack of purpose may be drawn to criminal groups in search of identity and belonging. This concern is particularly relevant given evidence of declining adolescent well-being across Europe. Between 2018 and 2022, the percentage of 15-year-olds reporting high life satisfaction dropped by around 5%, with an EU average of 71%.[22]

These emotional and social vulnerabilities can overlap with mental health and behavioural difficulties. The rates of conditions such as ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), ODD (oppositional defiant disorder) and CD (conduct disorder) seem to be higher among young people involved in organised crime. These conditions do not in themselves lead to criminal behaviour, but some associated difficulties, such as impulsivity, problems with emotional regulation or antisocial behaviour, may increase vulnerability when combined with other risk factors.[23]

Prior delinquency can also serve as a gateway to organised crime. Young people who engage in low-level offences, such as shoplifting, burglary or bicycle theft, may draw the attention of older members of organised criminal groups. These early acts of delinquency can create a sense of kinship and belonging with more experienced offenders, increasing the likelihood of involvement in criminal networks.

Family and friends level

Family and peer networks are among the strongest predictors of involvement in organised crime.[24] Young people rarely enter criminal networks in isolation. Rather, involvement is often facilitated through existing social relationships with family members, friends, acquaintances or romantic partners who are already connected to criminal activities.

These social relationships create opportunities for involvement but they can also generate strong feelings of loyalty and obligation. When a family member or a friend asks a young person to carry out a task, they may feel compelled to comply out of trust or a sense of duty. This loyalty can also make disengagement more difficult, as leaving a criminal network may mean distancing oneself from their loved ones.

> *Children born into crime families, often referred to as "insiders", form a distinct group within this dynamic. Those raised in mafia families, for example, may be socialised into criminal values from an early age. As a result, they may bypass typical recruitment processes and enter criminal roles without needing to prove loyalty first as "foot soldiers".*[25]

The influence of family on criminal trajectories appears to vary according to both the gender of the parent and the child. Research suggests that children of mothers involved in crime may face a particularly elevated risk of offending themselves.[26] One possible explanation is that female offending is less common and may therefore signal a higher concentration of criminality and related risks within the family environment.

Mothers are often primary caregivers, meaning that maternal offending or incarceration may have particularly disruptive consequences for children. Evidence from the Netherlands on children of organised crime offenders adds further nuance: 44% of children of organised crime offenders had a criminal record, but the share was much higher among sons than daughters: around 60% of sons compared with around 30% of daughters. Sons of mothers involved in organised crime were also three times more likely to offend than sons of fathers involved in organised crime.[27]

Regardless of which parent is involved, children of organised crime offenders show earlier first recorded offending than their parents. While the parents were recorded committing an offence for the first time at an average age of 27, their sons were first recorded at 18.3 years and their daughters at 21.2 years. Sons were also more likely than daughters to commit serious offences and receive prison sentences. These findings point to a strong intergenerational link in offending, although a person's age when committing their first recorded offence does not necessarily indicate when offending or involvement in organised crime actually began. Earlier registration among the children may reflect earlier involvement in offending, but could also be influenced by greater visibility to law enforcement.[28]

A difficult home situation is an important risk factor. Children with absent or drug-addicted parents, or those exposed to domestic violence, abuse or neglect, often lack the consistent support and emotional stability that can act as a protective buffer against criminal networks. The lack of structure or living through traumatic childhood experiences can leave them emotionally vulnerable and more susceptible to manipulation, grooming and exploitation by criminal actors. While poverty and low socio-economic status are frequently associated with vulnerability, children from financially secure families can also be drawn into drug trafficking, particularly if other risk factors are present.

SAAMO (Belgium): Strengthening protective factors through community development

> *While many prevention initiatives focus on reducing risk factors, others seek to strengthen protective factors within communities. SAAMO, a Belgian community development organisation, works with residents, municipalities, schools, social services and local organisations to tackle poverty, social exclusion and neighbourhood disadvantage.*

Rather than targeting crime directly, SAAMO aims to strengthen social cohesion, community participation and access to opportunities. Its projects support residents in addressing local challenges, improving neighbourhoods and building stronger social networks. By increasing social connectedness, fostering a sense of belonging and improving access to services, such initiatives can help reduce some of the vulnerabilities that criminal networks often exploit.

This approach highlights the fact that preventing youth involvement in organised crime is not only about reducing risks, but also about strengthening the protective factors that help young people, families and communities thrive.

Community level

At the community level, young people living or spending time in neighbourhoods where organised crime groups are present are more at risk of being recruited by those groups. Members of organised crime groups may project the image of a desirable lifestyle by displaying designer clothing, expensive cars, luxury holidays and other visible signs of wealth.

In neighbourhoods where organised crime is highly visible, involvement in criminal activities may become normalised. Regular exposure to offenders, drug markets and criminal lifestyles can reduce perceptions of risk and increase acceptance of criminal behaviour as a legitimate means of achieving status, income or social recognition.

Living in close proximity to criminal networks increases the visibility of these groups, but also makes it easier for them to identify potential recruits. Criminal groups operating in the area can easily approach young people who spend significant time on the street without adult supervision. This proximity makes it easier for these groups to identify and target vulnerable young people. For example, teenagers who have committed petty offences may come to the attention of local criminals, who may see them as having potential or being susceptible to further involvement. It can also work the other way around: young people may approach these groups themselves if they are looking to make money.

Residential care homes and youth institutions may also constitute recruitment environments. Research from Sweden found that some young people viewed residential care placements as places where criminal contacts could be established and expanded. Such institutions helped young people develop criminal networks and gain access to new markets and opportunities in other towns and cities. While these settings play an essential protective role for many vulnerable children, they can also inadvertently facilitate contact between young people involved in offending.[29]

Being part of a deviant youth group or a street youth gang increases the risk of recruitment into organised crime. These gangs represent several risk factors we have already discussed: committing non-serious crime, social ties with friends and the impact of the surrounding community. Later on in this chapter, we will take a closer look at the relationship between youth gangs and organised crime.

Environmental/structural level

Beyond individual characteristics, family relationships, and community influences, broader environmental and structural conditions can also shape opportunities for recruitment. The physical environment influences how people interact, the strength of community ties and the level of informal social control within a neighbourhood. Areas that lack safe public spaces or opportunities for positive social interaction may contribute towards social exclusion and community disengagement, reducing protective factors against criminal involvement.

Poorly lit streets, abandoned buildings and neglected public spaces can facilitate criminal activity and provide settings in which recruitment can occur with limited oversight. By contrast, well-designed and actively managed public spaces can increase natural surveillance, encourage positive community interactions, reduce opportunities for illicit activity and strengthen a sense of collective ownership over neighbourhoods.

The way in which public spaces are managed also plays a key role. Certain environments, such as transport hubs, commercial centres, parks, entertainment districts or other locations where large numbers of young people gather, may become hotspots for criminal activity and recruitment if not properly managed and monitored.

Institutional factors are equally important. Weak coordination between agencies and services may allow early warning signs to go unnoticed, while children and young people who move between municipalities or regions can sometimes fall through gaps in service provision. Limited access to education, youth services or employment opportunities can further reduce legitimate pathways to success and increase the attractiveness of criminal alternatives that promise quick financial rewards.

Addressing all these risk factors (see Figure 1) requires interventions at multiple levels. Prevention cannot focus only on reducing individual vulnerability. It must also strengthen the protective factors that help young people resist recruitment and build a life outside criminal networks. These include positive school engagement, stable family and social support, meaningful relationships with trusted adults, access to sport, culture and youth activities,[30] opportunities to experience success, employment prospects, and the development of a positive identity and future ambitions.

Structural and environmental conditions also matter: safe public spaces, accessible services and well-coordinated institutions can reduce exposure to criminal networks and increase young people's access to legitimate alternatives. The prevention strategies discussed in the following sections therefore address both sides of the equation: reducing risk factors while reinforcing the protective conditions that support resilience and a sense of purpose.

Risk factors at the Individual level

- Gender
- Ethnic minority
- Emotional vulnerability
- Mental health issues
- Delinquency
- School disengagement
- Drug use

Risk factors at the Family and friends level

- Relatives involved in criminal activities
- Peer pressure
- Romantic relationships
- Difficult home situation: parent's substance abuse, domestic violence
- Poverty

Risk factors at the Community level

- Living in high-risk or low-socio economic neighbourhoods
- Proximity to criminal networks
- Belonging to street youth gang / deviant peer group
- Public space design
- Institutional gaps

Figure 1: Summary of risk factors increasing vulnerability

Girls and young women in organised crime

Although boys and young men continue to form the majority of recruits into organised crime, girls and young women are also involved and face distinct pathways into criminal networks, as well as specific forms of exploitation and victimisation. Organised crime remains overwhelmingly male-dominated, particularly in visible, street-level drug markets and violent criminal networks. Boys and young men are more likely to be recruited, expected to prove themselves through risk-taking or violence and progress through status-based hierarchies. However, focusing exclusively on males risks overlooking the experiences and vulnerabilities of girls and young women.

Their involvement may be overlooked because the tasks they perform are often less visible, such as storing drugs or weapons, transporting cash or narcotics, packaging drugs and assisting with fraud. At the same time, gender stereotypes can contribute to this invisibility. Girls and women are often viewed primarily as victims, rather than as individuals who also commit offences and play active roles within criminal networks.

The social ties discussed in the previous section are particularly relevant when it comes to the involvement of girls and young women. While boys and young men may enter organised crime through a variety of pathways, young women are most often drawn into criminal networks through close personal relationships, typically through family connections or romantic involvement with someone already engaged in crime. Their position within the network is therefore often shaped less by a formal criminal "career path" and more by their relationship to male members. Unlike boys, who may be expected to prove themselves through risk-taking or tests of loyalty, girls and young women often enter "from the side", through a boyfriend, brother, cousin or male friend. Their status may depend less on their own progression within the hierarchy and more on the position and reputation of the male relative or partner through whom they are connected.[31] This has led some researchers to describe a "gender paradox": although girls and women are less likely than boys and men to become involved in organised crime, when they do, it often reflects a higher concentration of criminality within their immediate social or family environment.[32]

This does not mean that girls and young women lack agency. Evidence shows that women and girls can take on a wide range of roles, including logistics, money laundering, recruitment, drug distribution and, in some cases, leadership. Women have been identified as suspects and active participants across all forms of organised crime, with no criminal domain appearing to be entirely closed to their involvement.[33] Research from Sweden further shows that women and girls can also be involved in violent offending, including assaults, robberies, intimidation and retaliatory violence. However, their agency often operates within highly gendered systems marked by male power, emotional dependency, economic vulnerability and normalised violence. This makes it important to avoid simplistic distinctions between "victim" and "offender". As with boys, involvement can include choice, pressure, coercion, and exploitation at the same time.

Criminal networks may also deliberately use girls and young women because they attract less attention from law enforcement. They are often perceived as less suspicious, less likely to be searched, and therefore more suitable to move drugs, weapons, money or information without detection. Women and girls are commonly used as low-level drug labourers precisely because they are believed to fly under the radar.[34] In some cases, gendered recruitment strategies are employed. For example, male offenders may create the impression of a romantic relationship, sometimes referred to as the "boyfriend model", to manipulate girls into transporting drugs, storing products, selling drugs from their homes, or otherwise supporting criminal activities.[35]

These pathways create specific risks of victimisation. Girls and young women involved in criminal networks may be exposed to emotional manipulation or sexual exploitation. Social media can further intensify these risks. In some cases, girls are approached online through attention, status or romantic interest, while intimate photographs or videos may later be used as leverage to coerce them into criminal activities or prevent them from leaving the network.[36] As a result, criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation frequently overlap.

For girls and young women, grooming frequently takes the form of romantic relationships, which can mask exploitation and control. Research shows that once girls become involved in these criminal networks, they face a higher risk of both criminal and sexual exploitation. Because recruitment is framed through affection and intimacy, the line between genuine connection and manipulation blurs, leaving these risks underreported and misunderstood.

Leaving organised crime may also be different for girls and young women than for boys and young men. Because they are often less formally embedded in gang hierarchies and may remain involved for shorter periods, they do not always require the same type of formal exit programmes. However, disengagement can still be extremely difficult. Their social lives may be closely tied to criminal environments, they may depend financially or emotionally on relationships linked to organised crime, and they may fear retaliation or social exclusion. Addiction, trauma, mental health difficulties, and unstable housing can further limit their ability to leave.

For prevention practitioners, this means that girls and young women should neither be treated solely as victims nor automatically assumed to be highly embedded offenders. Effective responses require an understanding of the specific roles they perform, the relationships through which they become involved, the gendered forms of coercion and dependency they may experience and the support needed to disengage safely from criminal networks. A gender-sensitive approach can help ensure that both their criminal involvement and their vulnerability to exploitation are recognised and addressed.

Recruitment mechanisms and exploitation dynamics

Young people become involved in organised crime through a variety of pathways, ranging from voluntary participation to coercion and exploitation, and from face-to-face interactions to online recruitment. These pathways are not mutually exclusive and often overlap. Regardless of how involvement begins, it can lead to sustained participation in criminal networks and rapid escalation into more serious forms of offending.

The entry of young people into criminal networks is quick, especially compared to a decade ago.[37] It can occur through various mechanisms:

- Active recruitment: elders or peers directly approach younger people with offers of work, often presented as an opportunity to earn quick and easy money.
- Self-initiated contact or soliciting: young people seek out members of organised crime groups themselves, often inspired by what they see in their communities or on social media.
- Social network: children with relatives or friends connected to criminal networks become involved gradually through exposure to crime from a young age.

Most of the available insights into the recruitment process are anecdotal and are often drawn from the testimonies of persons formerly engaged in organised crime. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) found that recruitment often takes place between the ages of 12 and 15 and is typically initiated by slightly older peers, usually aged 15 to 20,[38] who serve as intermediaries between the core criminal network and new recruits. Female offenders usually enter criminal organisations at a later age, typically after reaching the age of majority.

Recruitment often builds on the visibility and perceived legitimacy of criminal actors within local communities. Street dealers often flaunt their extravagant lifestyle, which can be appealing to some young people facing economic hardship or social marginalisation. In some cases, they can also show generosity towards children and residents of the neighbourhood, offering gifts or financial support. This behaviour not only projects power and status, but it also fosters a sense of care for their community and informal legitimacy. Within deprived communities, where state institutions may be absent or distrusted, these criminals can come to be seen as providers, protectors or even role models.

These ideas of visibility and legitimacy are closely linked to the importance of social ties in the recruitment process. Organised crime groups tend to prefer recruiting young people they already know within their family, circle of friends or extended community, because this familiarity offers a degree of trust and predictability. Recruiters are more confident in the recruit's personality, reputation, and loyalty. However, while these existing social bonds remain a common entry point, the influence of online recruitment means that they are no longer a requirement.

Criminal exploitation

While some young people actively seek out criminal opportunities, their involvement in organised crime does not necessarily remain voluntary. In many criminal markets, particularly drug markets, relationships are marked by unequal power and dependence. What may begin as a way of earning money or gaining status can gradually become exploitative, involving control, coercion, debt or violence. Recruitment and exploitation should therefore not be seen as completely separate processes, as young people may move from one to the other over time.

Ireland introduced the Criminal Justice (Engagement of Children in Criminal Activity) Act 2024, which is specifically aimed at tackling the exploitation of minors for criminal purposes.[39] Under the Act, it is a criminal offence for an adult to compel, coerce, deceive or otherwise manipulate a child into engaging in criminal activity, with penalties ranging from up to 12 months' imprisonment on summary conviction to five years on indictment.

Crucially, liability is restricted to adults, reflecting a broader youth justice objective of keeping children out of the criminal justice system wherever possible. This approach recognises that many young people drawn into offending are in fact victims of manipulation and exploitation. It also serves as an example of a diversion-oriented strategy, a topic that will be examined in greater detail in a later section of the toolkit.

Besides voluntary involvement, criminal exploitation plays a key role in the recruitment of children and young people into organised crime. In this context, criminal exploitation refers to various abusive practices, ranging from deception and manipulation to coercion and violence. Criminal groups exploit existing power imbalances, whether relating to age, status, experience, social position, financial dependence or emotional vulnerability, to control and benefit from the activities of young people.

Exploitation often begins with subtle coercion and can escalate to more aggressive forms of control. Organised crime groups may apply pressure by means of threats or intimidation, not only directed at the young person but also at their family or friends. Physical violence, blackmail, and psychological manipulation are frequent tactics to ensure people's loyalty and discretion.

In some cases, exploitation takes the form of debt bondage, where young people are forced to work off a debt owed to the group, either real or fabricated. For instance, they might be given drugs to stash at home, and then told they owe money for these drugs after a staged robbery. Sometimes, debts can even be inherited from family members already involved with the group.[40]

Criminal exploitation does not always involve force or threats. Another common method is grooming or psychological manipulation. This involves the gradual involvement of a younger person, often under the pretence of friendship or mentorship. Older members will identify vulnerable individuals and initiate a "courting" period to establish trust and loyalty, to slowly reel the young person in. They might invite them to social activities, share experiences, take them out for a meal, or offer gifts such as designer clothes, money or drugs. These gestures, especially in the context of a difficult home environment, can fulfil unmet emotional needs and create a false sense of belonging and protection. Young recruits seeking validation are made to feel special and valued, which fosters attachment to the network and makes it harder to leave, especially when they think they chose to join the group willingly.

Victim or offender?

The distinction between victim and offender is often less clear-cut than it appears. Young people involved in organised crime are frequently viewed either as willing participants or as victims of exploitation. In reality, they can be both at the same time. Some initially become involved voluntarily, attracted by the promise of money, status, excitement or belonging. However, what begins as a seemingly rational choice can gradually evolve into a relationship characterised by coercion, debt or violence. As a result, involvement in organised crime should not always be understood as a matter of free choice, but as a process that can increasingly limit a young person's autonomy.

This dynamic is increasingly described through the concept of Drug Market Criminal Exploitation (DMCE).[41] DMCE refers to situations in which an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate, deceive or otherwise involve a person in drug-related criminal activities for the benefit of others. It highlights the fact that many young people involved in drug markets are not simply offenders acting independently, but may be carrying out subordinate roles under the influence or control of more powerful actors. These roles can include storing, transporting, packaging or selling drugs, often while bearing most of the risks and consequences themselves. A common feature of criminal exploitation is the gradual erosion of a young person's autonomy. Older members may monitor recruits' movements through their phones,[42] require photographic proof of completed tasks, or maintain constant contact through messaging applications. Researchers have described this form of digital surveillance as a type of "remote mothering", allowing criminal actors to supervise young people without being physically present.[43] Such practices reinforce dependency and make disengagement more difficult.

Because of these dynamics, many exploited children and young people do not recognise themselves as victims. They may believe they joined willingly, emphasise the financial benefits they received or view their involvement as a personal choice rather than exploitation.[44] This can be particularly true for boys and young men, for whom adopting a victim identity may conflict with traditional ideas

of masculinity, independence, and self-reliance.[45] Loyalty to recruiters, especially when they are family members or friends, can further complicate matters. In some cases, young people who are themselves being exploited may also be involved in recruiting or exploiting others, blurring the boundaries between victim and offender even further.[46]

This complexity creates challenges for law enforcement and social services. Young people involved in criminal activities are often treated primarily as offenders, especially when they already have a history of offending or do not fit the traditional image of a victim. Recognising this overlap is essential for effective prevention and safeguarding. Rather than viewing victimhood and offending as mutually exclusive categories, practitioners should acknowledge that young people can occupy both roles simultaneously and may require both accountability and protection.

Street gangs

Being part of a street youth gang can significantly increase a young person's likelihood of becoming involved in organised crime. However, youth gangs and organised crime groups differ in important ways, particularly in terms of structure, motivation and scope.

Street youth gangs are typically informal groups of young people whose criminal behaviour forms an integral part of their collective identity.[47] Unlike organised criminal networks, youth gangs' activities are expressive rather than instrumental: crime is often a means of asserting their identity, loyalty or territory, rather than a calculated pursuit of financial rewards. These gangs tend to start with some friends from the same neighbourhood, brought together by a shared sense of familiarity, belonging, and local identity. Few gang members refer to themselves as a "gang".[48] Instead, they see each other as a close group of friends or a brotherhood, often providing a substitute for family where one is lacking.

Unlike organised crime groups, youth gangs allow for greater autonomy among their members. Participation is typically more flexible, driven by friendship rather than obligation. Members may come and go as they please, and there is rarely a formal system of internal control. This contrasts with the structured nature of organised crime, in which younger recruits are often closely supervised, their movements restricted and their roles enforced. In youth gangs, there is usually no expectation that others in the group dictate your actions. Freedom is part of the appeal.

Youth gangs show patterns of opportunistic and reactive delinquent behaviour, rather than strategic behaviour. Their criminal activities often include petty theft, vandalism or violence against rival groups, with the goal of reinforcing the gang's local superiority and territorial claims. In contrast, organised crime groups are defined by a hierarchical structure and focus primarily on generating financial profits. Elders typically manage operations, forming an inner circle that controls the lower levels of the enterprise.

Despite these differences, street gangs can act as important entry points into the world of organised crime. Criminal networks may use these local youth groups as intermediaries for low-level tasks, particularly drug distribution within their own communities.[49] These gangs are already established in the neighbourhood, have existing social ties, and are less likely to raise suspicion than outsiders. As such, they are often exploited by adult criminals to expand illegal markets at minimal risk to the core organisation.

While criminal networks often exert strict control over individual recruits, their relationship with youth gangs is more transactional. They may direct or influence certain activities but they do not necessarily control the gang's internal dynamics or take over the leadership. Instead, they exploit the gang's local presence to further their own objectives, without fully integrating them into the organised structure.

In some cases, youth gangs may evolve into more organised criminal groups. Under the influence of external criminal networks or ambitious members within the gang itself, drug dealing can shift from a side activity to the group's central focus, transforming it from a friendship-based group dabbling in crime into a structured, profit-driven drug operation.

This evolution often relies on the gang's increasing exposure to criminal networks, access to illicit resources and internal ambition. The sense of brotherhood and shared struggle that defines many youth gangs can become a foundation for loyalty, secrecy and group cohesion, which are values highly compatible with the demands of organised criminal activity.

	Street youth gangs	Organised crime groups
Structure	Informal, friendship-based	Hierarchical, structured
Motivation	Identity, loyalty, territory	Financial gain, exploitation
Member autonomy	Flexible	Restricted, controlled
Crime pattern	Opportunistic, reactive	Strategic, profit-driven
Relationship with criminal networks	Sometimes exploited	Controls operations

Figure 2: Comparison between street youth gangs and organised crime groups

Online recruitment

Digital technologies have transformed the way criminal networks identify, contact and involve young people in criminal activities. Social media platforms, messaging applications and online gaming environments allow recruiters to reach far larger audiences than was previously possible, extending beyond local neighbourhoods and social circles. Recruitment can now occur quickly, remotely,[50] and with a degree of anonymity that reduces the risks associated with face-to-face contact.

However, it is important not to overstate the role of technology. Research suggests that the distinction between online and offline recruitment can be misleading. Most young people do not become involved in organised crime solely through the internet. Rather, online and offline interactions are closely intertwined and reinforce one another. Existing social networks, such as friends, classmates, neighbours, family members or romantic partners, continue to play a central role in involvement in organised crime.[51] Social media often serves as an additional communications channel rather than a replacement for these relationships. For many young people, being online is not a separate activity but a continuous part of everyday life.[52]

Organised crime groups are increasingly using social media to promote their image and attract potential recruits. Through platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and Telegram, they showcase luxury lifestyles, expensive cars, designer clothing, money, drugs and weapons. Criminal activity is often portrayed as exciting and profitable. This content frequently mirrors influencer culture, using emojis, slang, music, humour and cultural references familiar to young audiences. Gangsta rap and drill music can further contribute towards the glamorisation of drug dealing and violence, although it is important to note that exposure to such content does not automatically lead to criminal involvement.

At the same time, not all criminal networks embrace social media. Some well-established groups deliberately maintain a low profile and avoid public online visibility. For these actors, social media may create unnecessary risks by attracting attention from law enforcement, generating digital evidence, or exposing business activities to competitors. The use of social media therefore varies considerably between criminal networks. Newer or less established groups may use online platforms to build a reputation, expand their reach and attract recruits, whereas more established networks may rely primarily on existing social ties and offline contacts.[53]

Social media are also increasingly used as a recruitment tool. Drug dealers and other criminal actors have been observed posting advertisements that closely resemble legitimate job

offers, seeking individuals willing to transport drugs, store products or carry out other criminal tasks.[54] These advertisements are often deliberately vague and may refer simply to "work opportunities", "easy money" or "side jobs". Young people responding to such messages do not always know in advance what type of activity is involved.[55] More detailed discussions typically take place later via private messages or encrypted communication channels.

Recruiters frequently rely on coded language, slang, abbreviations and emojis to disguise the nature of the activity being advertised. References to drugs or weapons may be communicated using symbols or expressions that appear harmless to outsiders. Importantly, these codes are often highly local and context-dependent. An emoji or slang term may carry a particular meaning in one city, region or country and a completely different meaning elsewhere. This creates challenges for practitioners and highlights the need for local knowledge when monitoring online recruitment trends.

Recruitment often unfolds in stages. Initial exposure may occur by means of public-facing content on social media platforms, in which criminal lifestyles are normalised or opportunities are advertised. Once contact has been established, conversations frequently move to private messaging apps, where specific instructions, payments and criminal tasks can be discussed with greater secrecy. This progression from public to private channels can make recruitment difficult to detect and monitor.

Online platforms also allow young people to actively seek out criminal opportunities themselves. Some browse social media channels, messaging groups or online communities in search of ways to earn money, making the distinction between recruitment and self-initiated involvement increasingly blurred. This reflects a broader trend discussed earlier in this toolkit: not all young people perceive themselves as having been recruited. Some describe their involvement as a personal choice or economic opportunity, even when they later become subject to exploitation.

Recent developments also suggest that digital platforms are increasingly being used to recruit young people to commit specific acts of violence. In these cases, young people are not necessarily integrated into a criminal network but are instead hired as disposable labour to carry out a particular task, such as intimidation, assault or even homicide. Once the task is completed, there may be no intention to maintain a longer-term relationship with the individual. This development presents significant challenges for prevention and law enforcement efforts.

Criminal actors are also exploiting gaming platforms and gaming-related communication channels. They are increasingly active on gaming platforms such as Steam and Discord, capitalising on their popularity to engage with and recruit young people. Video games are now a core part of youth culture across Europe: more than 80% of people aged 11-24 play video games.[56] This high engagement rate makes gaming platforms a prime environment for recruitment.

In these digital spaces, trust can be built gradually through shared interests and seemingly innocent conversations, before discussions move to private channels where criminal activities are discussed more openly.[57] Some criminal groups have adopted elements of gaming culture by framing criminal activities as "missions" or "challenges" and rewarding participation with money, status or recognition. Although the evidence base remains more limited than for mainstream social media platforms, these environments may create additional opportunities for grooming and recruitment, particularly among socially isolated or otherwise vulnerable young people.

Addressing online recruitment requires cooperation between governments, law enforcement, educators, parents, civil society and the technology sector. Legislative initiatives such as the Digital Services Act have strengthened the responsibilities of online platforms to address harmful and illegal content, including content that may facilitate criminal recruitment. However, many recruitment processes quickly move from public platforms to private and encrypted communication channels that fall outside the scope of many platform-based interventions. As a result, online prevention cannot rely solely on content moderation or technological solutions. Addressing the underlying vulnerabilities that make young people susceptible to recruitment remains essential.

Why organised crime recruits young people – and why young people join

The growing involvement of young people in organised crime is not accidental. It is driven by a convergence of interests between criminal networks seeking a flexible and expendable workforce and young people looking for money, status, belonging or opportunities that they struggle to find elsewhere. Understanding these mutual incentives is essential to understanding why recruitment has become such a prominent feature of contemporary organised crime.

From the perspective of organised crime groups, young people represent valuable assets. They are often easier to influence, control and exploit than adults, while also attracting less attention from law enforcement. Criminal networks rely on a constant supply of new recruits to sustain and expand their activities. In many cases, older adolescents and young adults are expected to recruit younger individuals beneath them, creating a self-perpetuating cycle in which each generation helps recruit the next. While criminal structures vary considerably, this dynamic allows more senior members to distance themselves from street-level activities and minimise their exposure to law enforcement.

Young people also offer strategic advantages. They frequently occupy low-level and high-risk roles, such as transporting drugs, storing illicit goods, collecting debts or carrying out acts of violence on behalf of others. Because they often have only a limited understanding of the wider network, their arrest poses less risk to senior members. In many jurisdictions, minors also face less severe legal consequences than adults. Criminal groups may further seek to recruit individuals who do not fit traditional criminal profiles, including girls and young women, who may attract less suspicion from authorities.

A clear example of the strategic use of young people is the county lines model in the United Kingdom, described by the British authorities as a "harmful form of child criminal exploitation".[58] Young people are used to transport drugs and money across regions or cities. This movement reduces their visibility to local police and makes tracking them more difficult, thus decreasing the likelihood of arrest.[59]

However, recruitment is not driven solely by the needs of criminal organisations. Young people may also perceive involvement in organised crime as a way of addressing problems or achieving goals in their everyday lives. What may appear from the outside as a harmful or irrational choice can, from the young person's perspective, be seen as a way to earn money, gain status, find belonging, gain independence or respond to immediate pressures. These perceptions do not mean that young people freely choose criminal involvement: financial hardship, social exclusion, peer pressure, exploitation and coercion can all shape the choices available to them.

Many young people also describe the attraction of risk, excitement and adrenaline. The fast pace of criminal activities, the prospect of easy money and the perceived status associated with offending can make involvement appear exciting rather than dangerous. For others, the strongest attraction may be the promise of friendship and brotherhood. Criminal groups can present themselves as surrogate families, offering support, loyalty and a sense of community to those who feel isolated or neglected. However, these relationships are rarely equal. Behind the rhetoric of solidarity often lies a transactional relationship in which younger members are expected to generate profit, take risks and obey orders. The resulting imbalance of power can make it difficult for young people to recognise when belonging has turned into manipulation and exploitation.

For organised crime groups	For young recruits
• A cheap, expendable workforce, easier to influence • A quick way to expand operations • Shields senior members from street exposure • Reduces the risk of detection: young people have a limited view of the operations	• Quick financial rewards, "easy money" • Escape bad family conditions • Status, reputation, protection, security • A feeling of belonging/brotherhood • A way of asserting or proving their masculinity, social identity • Thrill, adrenaline

Figure 3: Summary of incentives for OCGs (Organised crime groups) to hire young people and for young recruits to join these networks.

Conclusion

Youth involvement in organised crime is a complex phenomenon that is shaped by multiple, interconnected factors operating at the individual, family, community, and structural levels. These include family ties to crime, school disengagement, social exclusion, community dynamics, prior offending, gendered expectations and exposure to criminal networks, among many others. While no single factor determines whether a young person will become involved, the accumulation of vulnerabilities can significantly increase the likelihood of recruitment. Equally importantly, strong protective factors, such as supportive family relationships, positive school engagement, trusted adults, access to youth services, employment opportunities and meaningful recreational activities, can reduce vulnerability and strengthen resilience.

What emerges from this analysis is that involvement in organised crime rarely occurs in isolation. Rather, it reflects broader social, economic and emotional circumstances that shape young people's lives. Many of the vulnerabilities associated with recruitment into organised crime are also found in other forms of harmful involvement, including youth violence, gang membership and violent extremism. Despite these similarities, research and policy responses often remain fragmented, highlighting the need for greater cross-sectoral cooperation and knowledge sharing.

Understanding the scale and nature of the problem remains a challenge. Differences in definitions, legal frameworks and data collection methods make it difficult to compare findings between countries or to assess the true extent of youth involvement in organised crime at the European level. Improving data collection and strengthening the evidence base will therefore be essential as a means of developing effective prevention strategies and identifying practices that can be adapted across different contexts.

The complexity of the phenomenon also means that no single intervention can address all of its causes.[60] Effective prevention requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach that combines early intervention, family support, community engagement, diversion and targeted responses to criminal exploitation. Particular attention should be paid to groups that are often overlooked, including girls and young women, whose pathways into organised crime and experiences of exploitation may differ from those of boys and young men.

Ultimately, preventing youth involvement in organised crime is not only about disrupting recruitment. Prevention must also address the needs and opportunities that criminal networks exploit, while offering credible alternatives for income, belonging, recognition and social status. Sustainable prevention requires investment not only in enforcement and safeguarding, but also in the social conditions that allow young people to thrive.

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Summary

Understanding youth involvement in organised crime requires looking beyond recruitment itself. Young people enter criminal networks through different pathways, and their involvement is shaped by a combination of individual, family, community and structural factors. This section examined the scale and nature of the problem, the different ways young people become involved and the factors that can increase or reduce their vulnerability. It also considered the challenges of defining and measuring youth involvement across different national contexts.

TOOLKIT YOUTH RECRUITMENT INTO ORGANISED CRIME

Part 02
Community-based approaches

EUCPN
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK

Effective prevention requires coordinated action involving municipalities, police, schools, youth workers, social services, community organisations, families and residents themselves.

Introduction

Communities play a crucial role in preventing youth involvement in organised crime. While law enforcement remains an important actor, no single entity can address the complex range of factors that make young people vulnerable to criminal networks. Effective prevention requires coordinated action involving municipalities, police, schools, youth workers, social services, community organisations, families and residents themselves.

According to the social disorganisation theory, crime tends to increase in communities with weak social ties. In such environments, informal social controls, such as neighbours looking out for one another, adults supporting young people or residents taking ownership of local problems, tend to weaken. This can create opportunities for criminal groups to exploit existing vulnerabilities, establish influence within the community and attract young people by offering a sense of belonging, protection or opportunity that they do not find elsewhere.

Building community resilience is therefore a key element of prevention. Community resilience refers to the ability of a community to resist and recover from crime-related harms while maintaining social cohesion. Resilient communities are better able to identify risks early, support vulnerable individuals, mobilise local resources and prevent criminal actors from gaining influence. They provide young people with positive social connections, opportunities for participation and access to support before vulnerabilities escalate into criminal involvement.

Strengthening resilience requires more than isolated interventions. It depends on strong partnerships between public authorities, civil society organisations and local communities. Multi-agency collaboration enables organisations to combine their expertise, coordinate responses and address the multiple factors that contribute towards youth recruitment into organised crime. At the same time, local residents, families and young people themselves possess valuable knowledge and play an essential role in creating safer communities.

Community-oriented policing represents one important component of this broader approach. By building trust, strengthening relationships and working collaboratively with local actors, police can contribute to safer and more resilient neighbourhoods. However, community policing alone is not sufficient. Lasting prevention requires coordinated action across sectors and sustained investment in local communities.

This chapter explores how community-oriented policing, multi-agency collaboration and community engagement can work together to strengthen local resilience and reduce the risk of youth recruitment into organised crime.

Community-oriented policing

Community-oriented policing (COP) is not a new concept, but its relevance has grown in the face of complex social challenges, including the rise of youth recruitment into organised crime. It is an approach to policing that emphasises close and continuous engagement between police and the communities they serve. While terms such as neighbourhood policing or proximity policing are used in different countries, the underlying idea is to make policing more responsive to local needs and to involve communities in addressing local safety concerns. Rather than focusing solely on responding to crime after it occurs, COP emphasises prevention, partnership and joint problem-solving.

Across Europe, COP has been applied to issues such as vandalism, burglary, drug use, anti-social behaviour and other forms of low-level offending. Its relevance extends beyond maintaining public order: sustained engagement with local communities can help police understand local concerns, identify emerging problems and strengthen cooperation with schools, youth workers, community organisations and families.

In the context of youth recruitment into organised crime, these relationships can be particularly important. A sustained local police presence can help build trust and lead to an improved understanding of the environments in which young people live, while cooperation with local partners can help identify vulnerabilities and connect young people to appropriate support before problems escalate. COP provides a framework through which police can contribute to prevention without being expected to address youth recruitment on their own.

An important principle associated with community policing is policing by consent: the idea that police legitimacy depends not only on legal authority, but also on the cooperation and support of the communities they serve. When residents perceive police actions as fair, respectful, and proportionate, they are more likely to report concerns, share information and participate in prevention efforts.

However, there is no unified approach to community policing across the European Union. This diversity reflects differences in languages, cultures, legal traditions and policing structures: "one of the central features of community policing is exactly the adaptation of policing to local communities – a feature that must generate heterogeneity and thus some difficulties in definition."[1] Community policing is therefore better understood as a broad and flexible philosophy rather than a fixed set of tools or procedures. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Its strength lies precisely in its ability to respond to local needs and dynamics.

Shifting the focus: from enforcement to prevention

Unlike traditional policing, which typically centres on responding to incidents and enforcing the law after crimes occur, community policing adopts a proactive and preventive approach. It emphasises partnerships, local problem-solving, and long-term engagement, particularly with vulnerable or marginalised groups such as at-risk youth (see Table 1 for an overview of the differences between traditional policing and community-oriented policing).

Whereas traditional policing often views the public primarily as a source of information or potential suspects, community policing recognises residents as co-producers of safety. Officers work collaboratively with local stakeholders, such as schools, youth organisations, social services, and municipalities, to identify emerging risks, reduce tensions and build resilient neighbourhoods. Communities possess knowledge, relationships and insights that police cannot obtain through enforcement alone. Residents, teachers, youth workers, and families are often the first to observe changes in behaviour, signs of vulnerability, or emerging recruitment activities.

Community policing is not solely concerned with responding to serious crime. It is problem-oriented and seeks to identify and address the everyday issues that matter most to residents, such as disorder, anti-social behaviour or public nuisance. While these concerns may appear minor, they can undermine trust, weaken social cohesion and create conditions that allow more serious criminal activity to flourish. By addressing these underlying problems, community policing aims to strengthen the overall resilience of communities.

Many community policing initiatives draw upon problem-oriented policing approaches, such as the SARA model (Scanning, Analysis, Response, and Assessment), which encourages police and community partners to identify root causes and develop tailored responses rather than repeatedly reacting to individual incidents.

Community policing is also grounded in the idea of local legitimacy. It seeks to earn the trust of communities not only through visibility and presence, but through dialogue, transparency, accountability and procedural fairness. Adopting a dialogue-first approach is not without challenges, as citizens may simultaneously be viewed as partners in prevention and as potential sources of crime or disorder. Striking the right balance between enforcement and collaboration requires nuanced approaches that combine authority with approachability.

The shift towards community-oriented policing therefore requires more than new tactics. It demands a cultural change within police organisations, supported by appropriate training, leadership, resources and incentives for long-term community engagement. Building trust takes time and cannot be achieved through occasional engagement activities alone. In communities with a history of strained police relations, residents may initially view community policing initiatives with scepticism, making consistency and long-term commitment essential.

Traditional policing	Community policing
Reactive, enforcement-led	Proactive, prevention-oriented
Focused on incidents and crime	Focused on underlying problems and harm
Limited or transactional community contact	Sustained engagement and dialogue
Centralised, top-down decision-making	Locally adapted, community-informed
Short-term interventions	Long-term relationship and trust building
Coercive authority	Dialogue, negotiation, and co-creation
Uniform solutions	Tailored responses to local needs

Table 1: Differences between traditional policing and community policing

Fostering positive youth–police relations

The relationship between young people and the police is often fragile and strained. Young people tend to hold more critical views of the police than older age groups. In a survey from the Belgian region of Flanders, 53% of young respondents reported sometimes feeling anxious when they see police officers.[2] These negative perceptions are particularly pronounced among young people from minority backgrounds, who are more likely to experience negative interactions with law enforcement. Similarly, individuals with lower levels of education or those living in marginalised or deprived neighbourhoods tend to report lower levels of trust in the police. These patterns are particularly concerning because they overlap with several known risk factors for youth involvement in organised crime.

The relationship between young people and the police is often shaped by mutual distrust and negative expectations. Young people may feel intimidated, singled out or unfairly targeted by police controls.[3] Stop-and-search practices, particularly when perceived as discriminatory or unjustified, can reinforce feelings of unfairness and resentment.[4] Many young people report experiencing a sense of being over-policed as potential offenders while being under-protected as potential victims. At the same time, police officers may fear verbal or physical attacks, especially in neighbourhoods with a history of tension, and this may then lead to more defensive or coercive interactions.

Research consistently shows that personal experiences with the police are among the strongest predictors of young people's attitudes towards law enforcement. Negative encounters can reinforce alienation and reduce willingness to cooperate, seek assistance or engage with public institutions. This reluctance may in turn be interpreted by officers as hostility or defiance, prompting more forceful responses. Over time, these dynamics can create a self-reinforcing cycle of mistrust that becomes increasingly difficult to break.[5]

Improving youth–police relations is not simply a matter of changing perceptions; it requires changing practices. Trust must be earned through consistent, respectful and meaningful engagement. Community policing can play an important role by fostering dialogue, ensuring accountability and involving young people as active partners in creating safer communities.

In order to interrupt this cycle of mistrust, the Marseille police run CLJ 13, a youth centre seeking to offer an alternative to delinquency and violence.[6] Through sports activities, leisure programmes, workshops and discussion panels led by police officers, CLJ 13 creates opportunities for structured and positive interactions between young people and law enforcement. By sharing experiences outside traditional enforcement contexts, officers and young people are able to build mutual understanding and trust. Such everyday, non-confrontational & can help foster positive relationships, strengthen civic engagement and reduce stereotypes on both sides.

Understanding the strained relationship between young people and the police is particularly important in the context of organised crime prevention. The same factors that contribute towards distrust in public institutions, such as social exclusion, poverty, discrimination, unemployment, identity struggles and feelings of marginalisation, are often exploited by organised criminal groups. Criminal networks may present themselves as providers of opportunities, protection, recognition and belonging, in situations where young people perceive institutions to have failed them.

This overlap between youth mistrust of institutions and the appeal of organised crime highlights the importance of preventive, trust-building approaches. Community policing offers a way to counter these dynamics by actively reconnecting young people with their communities and reinforcing confidence in public institutions. In doing so, it can help reduce the influence of criminal networks and strengthen the resilience of communities to recruitment and exploitation.

Key principles for effective community policing

The following principles provide a general framework for community policing and highlight the main elements that are particularly relevant to preventing youth involvement in organised crime. They are not exhaustive and should not be applied as a fixed blueprint. Their application should be adapted to local social, cultural and political realities.

1. Community policing is rooted in trust and legitimacy.
2. Community policing is driven by prevention and problem-solving.
3. Community policing adapts to local needs and contexts.
4. Community policing is a long-term commitment.
5. Community policing relies on open, two-way communication.
6. Community policing thrives through community engagement activities.
7. Community policing depends on trained and supported officers.
8. Community policing extends into the digital space.
9. Community policing is guided by evaluation and accountability.

Trust-building and legitimacy

Trust and legitimacy are the foundation of community policing. Without them, residents are less likely to cooperate with police, report concerns, share information or participate in prevention efforts. Yet in many communities, broader concerns around racial profiling, institutional discrimination and a perceived failure by police to effectively prevent crime can undermine public confidence. These perceptions are not easily overcome and represent significant obstacles to relationship-building.

Building trust and police legitimacy requires more than visibility alone. It demands fairness, accountability and consistent, respectful engagement. For young people especially, feeling respected and treated fairly is critical: when that standard is met, they are more likely to view officers as protectors rather than oppressors.

An Garda Síochána provides an example of a policing model that places particular emphasis on accessibility and community engagement. Ireland has a longstanding tradition of unarmed policing, with An Garda Síochána described an "unarmed, community-focused policing service".[7] The example illustrates how the organisation and culture of a police service can shape how officers interact with communities and how approachable they are perceived to be.

Being unarmed does not, in itself, guarantee trust or positive relationships with young people. Rather, the Irish experience highlights how the design and culture of policing can create conditions for more accessible and community-oriented interactions.

This is particularly relevant to preventing youth involvement in organised crime. Low trust in public institutions can create space for criminal groups to present themselves as alternative sources of protection, status or support. Young people who feel disconnected from public authorities may be more receptive to criminal actors who appear more accessible or responsive to their needs.

Police should therefore consider how their actions are experienced by young people, particularly those who already feel marginalised or targeted. What police see as a friendly presence may be experienced as intrusive by individuals who already feel singled out or marginalised. Youth organisations, social workers and other trusted local actors can help bridge this gap by using their existing relationships with young people to facilitate dialogue and cooperation between communities and police.

Youth workers: A bridge between youth and police

> *Youth workers play a central role in Jovem Design Lisboa (JDL),[8] a programme developed by the Lisbon Municipal Police for young people aged 12 to 18, particularly those excluded from mainstream education or at risk of anti-social behaviour.*

Each participating team is supported by a youth worker and a police mentor. The youth worker acts as a trusted intermediary, helping young people develop practical skills while ensuring that their perspectives remain central to the process. Participants identify safety challenges in their neighbourhood and co-design solutions, which they present at a public showcase event. This gives young people a more active role in shaping their communities while creating positive and meaningful interactions with police and other public authorities.

The example illustrates how trusted youth professionals can help bridge the gap between young people and police, particularly where direct contact with police may otherwise be viewed with distrust.

Problem-solving and prevention-focused approach

Community policing uses structured problem-solving to identify local problems, understand their causes, develop appropriate responses and assess their effectiveness. The SARA model (Scanning, Analysis, Response and Assessment) provides a practical framework for this process and can help police and their partners address emerging risks before they escalate.

In the context of youth involvement in organised crime, local police may identify emerging concerns such as school disengagement, association with known offenders, gang involvement or sudden changes in behaviour. These observations can inform the analysis of a wider problem and can help determine whether responses should involve police action, youth services, schools, social services or other partners.

SARA consists of four stages:

- **Scanning:** identifying recurring or emerging problems, such as youth violence, drug-related activity or anti-social behaviour, using both available data and community knowledge.
- **Analysis:** examining the factors contributing to the problem, including social, environmental and behavioural factors, and drawing on partner organisations to develop a fuller understanding of the issue.
- **Response:** developing and implementing a targeted response. Depending on the problem, this may involve enforcement, youth outreach, mediation, environmental measures, referral to services or other preventive actions.
- **Assessment:** evaluating whether the response achieved its objectives and identifying what should be maintained, changed or discontinued.

Applied consistently, SARA can help move prevention from a general commitment to a structured process of identifying and addressing local problems.

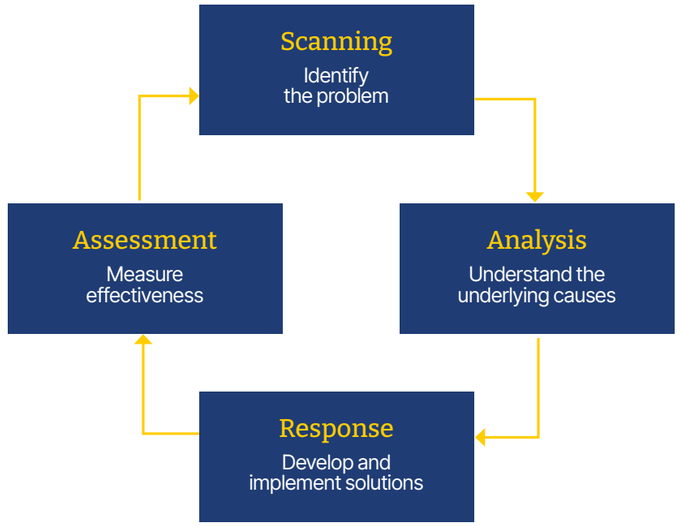

Figure 1: The SARA Model

Decentralisation and tailored local strategies

Community policing needs to be adapted to local circumstances. Different neighbourhoods may face different patterns of crime, levels of trust, social dynamics and vulnerabilities, meaning that a strategy that works in one community may not be appropriate in another. Local officers therefore need sufficient knowledge and flexibility to respond to the specific circumstances of the communities they serve.

This is particularly important for preventing youth involvement in organised crime. Recruitment patterns, vulnerable groups and the presence of criminal networks can vary considerably between neighbourhoods. Police who maintain sustained relationships with young people and local partners are better placed to recognise emerging concerns and develop responses that reflect local realities. Dedicated liaison officers can support this role by building relationships with groups that may be particularly vulnerable to marginalisation or criminal exploitation.

The Preventive Policing Unit of the Helsinki Police Department illustrates this approach.[9] The unit includes specialised teams addressing risks such as youth gang involvement, family criminality, radicalisation and violent extremism. In one case involving young men harassing people of foreign origin, police worked directly with the perpetrators while also involving ethnic community leaders, local organisations, housing services and other partners. The response combined targeted police action with efforts to address underlying issues such as unemployment and instability, contributing to a reduction in violence and disorder. The example illustrates how understanding local dynamics and involving relevant community actors can support more targeted prevention and strengthen long-term social cohesion.

The Danish experience illustrates the importance of maintaining a local police presence. In 2007, a nationwide reform reduced 54 police districts to 12. While intended to improve efficiency, the reform led to lower citizen satisfaction, reduced visibility and weakened relationships between police and local communities. A subsequent reform, launched in 2020, sought to strengthen local policing by establishing additional local units, increasing the number of community officers and improving accessibility in rural and disadvantaged urban areas. These developments illustrate how the organisation of police services can affect their ability to maintain close relationships with local communities.[10]

Long-term commitment

Community policing is not a quick solution. It is a long-term investment in people and relationships. Unlike reactive policing models, which often involve brief and transactional interactions, community policing relies on sustained engagement between officers and residents. This allows officers to develop knowledge of local communities, maintain relationships with residents and community organisations, and recognise changes or emerging concerns over time.

Long-term presence is particularly important in the context of organised crime prevention. Recruitment into criminal networks often develops gradually and may only become visible through subtle changes in behaviour, emerging tensions or shifts in local dynamics.

Continuity can be difficult when officers are rotated or reassigned frequently. When established relationships are lost, incoming officers may lose valuable local knowledge and communities may feel abandoned. In the United Kingdom, for example, residents have expressed frustration when Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) are moved out of their neighbourhoods, weakening established relationships and reducing the effectiveness of community policing efforts.

To address this challenge, Greater Manchester Police developed the Community Connect Tool, a structured handover protocol designed to preserve local knowledge during officer transitions.[11] The tool allows information such as key community contacts, local concerns and insights, neighbourhood tensions to be transferred to incoming officers, helping to maintain continuity even when personnel changes are unavoidable. Nevertheless, where possible, assigning officers to the same communities on a long-term basis remains preferable.

Long-term commitment should be balanced with proportionality. A sustained police presence can strengthen familiarity and trust, but excessive or intrusive policing may have the opposite effect, particularly in communities that already have low levels of trust in the police.

Two-way communication

Community policing depends on communication that goes beyond providing information to the public. Police should create regular opportunities for residents and community actors to raise concerns, provide feedback and contribute to local priorities. This can include informal conversations, meetings with residents and community leaders, neighbourhood forums, and outreach activities in schools, youth centres and other community settings.

In the context of youth recruitment into organised crime, accessible communication channels can help police identify concerns that may not otherwise come to their attention. Parents, teachers, youth workers and other community actors may notice changes in behaviour, peer relationships or exposure to criminal activity before these concerns become visible through police data. Regular communication can therefore support the earlier identification of vulnerabilities and facilitate appropriate referrals or preventive action.

Two-way communication is most effective when accompanied by responsiveness. Communities are more likely to engage if they see that concerns are taken seriously and lead to appropriate action. This is particularly important when working with young people and communities who may already have limited trust in the police.

Community engagement activities

Community engagement activities create opportunities for police and young people to interact outside traditional enforcement contexts. In the context of preventing youth recruitment into organised crime, these activities can be particularly valuable in communities where young people have had limited positive contact with the police or where trust in public authorities is weak. Engagement should go beyond police visibility and create meaningful opportunities for young people to participate, build relationships and access positive activities and support.

Research suggests that positive interactions with police can be particularly valuable for young people who have previously experienced negative encounters with law enforcement.[12] Creating opportunities for meaningful contact outside enforcement settings can help challenge negative perceptions and strengthen relationships.

Youth-focused initiatives can bring police together with youth centres, sports clubs, NGOs and other local organisations to create safe and structured environments. These partnerships can strengthen young people's connections to positive role models and support networks, while providing opportunities for police to build relationships with young people in non-enforcement settings.

Estonia's SPIN programme illustrates this approach.[13] Targeting young people aged 9 to 18 living in communities with fewer opportunities and higher levels of youth crime, the programme brings together schools, local authorities, police, football clubs and social services. SPIN combines football training with life-skills development, helping participants develop self-control, social skills, academic performance and resilience while reducing risk-taking behaviour.

A different approach can be found in the United Kingdom, where West Midlands Police partnered with the Coventry UK City of Culture Trust and local arts organisations to develop arts-based community policing programmes.[14] One initiative brought at-risk young people identified by schools together with police officers for a residential forest camp involving activities such as bushcraft, cooking, photography and music. The shared activities created informal opportunities to discuss issues including safety, identity, mental health and wellbeing, helping to build trust and understanding between officers and participants.

Policijos Klubas: Engaging youth in Vilnius, Lithuania

> *Established in 2001 by the Vilnius Police in cooperation with the municipality, Policijos Klubas provides a safe and supportive space for children and young people aged seven and above. Operating from two locations in Vilnius, the initiative aims to prevent youth involvement in drug use and criminal activity by adopting a community-based approach.*

The programme combines primary, secondary and tertiary prevention.[15] It offers activities for children and young people generally, targeted support for those facing risks such as difficult family circumstances, addiction or violence, and reintegration support for those already experiencing behavioural or legal problems.

Through educational, cultural, sports and creative activities, Policijos Klubas promotes inclusion and positive participation in the community. The initiative works with volunteers, social workers, schools, parents and local organisations to provide social, psychological and practical support.

Training, support, and officer development

Effective community policing requires officers to have the skills and organisational support needed to engage with diverse communities. Beyond technical policing skills, officers should develop cultural awareness, communication and relationship-building skills, as well as an understanding of the social realities of the neighbourhoods they serve. This should include the ability to recognise signs of recruitment and criminal exploitation, and the often-blurred boundary between victimisation and offending.

New police recruits can benefit from community immersion during their initial training. In The Hague, Netherlands, for example, police officers participate in a two-week programme known as Culturele Wasstraat ("Cultural Carwash").[16] Recruits visit local schools, meet religious leaders, engage with youth groups and learn about the cultural practices of the communities they will serve.

Such experiences can help officers develop a better understanding of local dynamics before beginning operational duties.

Training alone, however, is insufficient if officers are not structurally supported. Community officers need adequate time, resources and organisational backing to maintain relationships with residents and local partners. If they are routinely diverted to emergency response, administrative tasks or short-term operational priorities, community engagement can become occasional and transactional, undermining the continuity on which trust depends.

Community policing should therefore be recognised as a core policing function rather than an optional addition to enforcement. Leadership support, appropriate resources and recognition within performance and career structures can help ensure that community engagement is valued and sustained.

Online community policing

As criminal networks increasingly use social media and gaming platforms to recruit and exploit young people, community policing must also extend into the digital environments where young people spend much of their time. Effective prevention requires police to understand online communication practices, youth slang, digital recruitment tactics and the platforms commonly used by young people.[17]

Digital engagement should not be limited to monitoring risks. Police can also use online channels to communicate with young people, raise awareness, promote local initiatives and respond to concerns. When adapted to local contexts and youth audiences, these channels can increase accessibility and create opportunities for positive engagement outside traditional policing settings.

Preventing online recruitment also requires cooperation with other actors, particularly technology companies and relevant authorities. Partners may need to identify and remove harmful content, and respond to signs of exploitation. Such cooperation should be based on clear responsibilities and appropriate information-sharing arrangements.[18]

Online community policing must be guided by the same principles as community policing more broadly: trust, legitimacy, and transparency. Digital engagement should not become synonymous with surveillance. Excessive monitoring or intrusive data collection can undermine trust and discourage young people from engaging with police. Clear safeguards and transparent communication are essential.

Digital engagement should complement rather than replace face-to-face interaction. Extending community policing into digital spaces allows police to remain relevant in the very environment where recruitment is increasingly taking place, whilst maintaining the relationship-based approach that lies at the heart of community policing.

Evaluation and accountability

Community policing should not be evaluated solely through traditional policing indicators such as arrests, response times or recorded crime. These measures provide useful information, but they do not capture some of the outcomes that community policing seeks to achieve, such as increased trust, stronger partnerships, improved perceptions of safety and the earlier identification of local problems.

Evaluation should combine quantitative and qualitative measures and include both community-level and prevention-specific indicators. These may include improved identification of recruitment or exploitation risks, increased referrals to appropriate support services, stronger cooperation between police and youth-focused partners and changes in young people's perceptions of and willingness to engage with the police. Longer-term indicators may also consider changes in youth involvement in crime, although such outcomes are influenced by many factors beyond community policing alone.

Community feedback is particularly important. Young people, residents and local partners can provide information about whether police interventions are perceived as fair, accessible and responsive, and whether they address concerns that matter to the community. Evaluation should therefore incorporate opportunities for these groups to provide feedback on prevention activities and their outcomes.

Finally, evaluation should support continuous learning and adaptation. Community policing strategies should be reviewed regularly and adjusted in response to evidence, changing local conditions and community feedback. This helps ensure that resources are directed towards approaches that are relevant and effective in reducing vulnerabilities and strengthening protective factors around young people.

Partnerships and multi-agency collaboration

No single actor can prevent youth involvement in organised crime. The factors that increase vulnerability to recruitment, such as family circumstances, school disengagement, social exclusion, exposure to criminal networks, often cover multiple domains and fall within the responsibility of different organisations. As a result, effective prevention requires a coordinated response involving a range of stakeholders, including municipalities, police, social services, schools, youth workers, health services, community organisations and families.

Crime prevention is increasingly recognised as a shared responsibility.[19] Effective collaboration allows organisations to combine their resources, expertise and perspectives to identify risks earlier, coordinate interventions and provide more coherent support to young people.[20] Across Europe, initiatives such as Preventie met Gezag in the Netherlands, Rätt Kurva and SSPF in Sweden, Communities That Care in Germany and the LIMITS programme in France demonstrate the importance of structured collaboration in preventing youth involvement in organised crime.

At the centre of many of these approaches stands the municipality or local authority. Although organised crime networks may operate across regions or even internationally, recruitment often takes place in specific neighbourhoods, schools, families and peer groups. Local authorities are therefore uniquely positioned to coordinate prevention efforts because they are responsible for many of the services that influence young people's lives, including education, youth work, social welfare, housing, public space management and community development.

This coordinating role has become formalised in some European countries. In Sweden, for example, municipalities have a legal responsibility for local crime prevention.[21] They are required to analyse local crime problems, develop action plans, coordinate relevant stakeholders and ensure that crime prevention efforts are evidence-based and regularly evaluated.[22]

Municipal leadership in practice: the LIMITS programme (France)

> *LIMITS (Limiter l'Implication des Mineurs dans les Trafics de Stupéfiants – Limiting the Involvement of Minors in Drug Trafficking)[23] is a French prevention programme launched by MILDECA (Mission interministérielle de lutte contre les drogues et les conduites addictives) to reduce the involvement of young people in drug trafficking.*

First piloted in three municipalities in 2020, the programme has since been expanded to around thirty municipalities and territories with methodological and financial support from MILDECA. The programme is financed through assets seized and confiscated from drug traffickers, with an overall budget of approximately €6 million.

A distinctive feature of LIMITS is its emphasis on locally tailored, multi-agency prevention. Rather than prescribing a single intervention model, the programme encourages local authorities to design responses based on local needs and risk factors, usually over two to three years. Actions focus on four areas: support for minors, support for families, interventions in the wider social and physical environment, and coordination between local partners.

In practice, LIMITS combines awareness-raising,[24] early identification of vulnerable young people, mentoring, school engagement, psychosocial skills development, work placements,25 parenting support26 and public space initiatives. It brings together municipalities, schools, social services, justice actors, law enforcement and community organisations.

The programme illustrates how local authorities can act as coordinating anchors for prevention, ensuring that responses to youth involvement in drug trafficking are adapted to local needs.

Principles for effective collaboration

Effective multi-agency collaboration requires more than simply bringing organisations around the same table. Partners often have different mandates, priorities and professional cultures.[27] To build an effective partnership, they need a shared understanding of the problem, clear roles, regular communication, trust and structures that allow collaboration to continue over time. The following six principles are informed by the practical experiences shared by practitioners from across EU Member States during field visits, workshops and expert consultations conducted as part of the development of this toolkit. These practitioners, including police officers, social workers, youth workers, local authorities and other front-line professionals, highlighted what enables, and what hinders, effective collaboration in practice. Together, the principles provide a practical framework for establishing and sustaining partnerships to prevent youth recruitment into organised crime.

Shared understanding and objectives

Partners often approach youth involvement in organised crime from different professional perspectives. Police may focus on public safety and crime prevention, while schools, social services and youth organisations may prioritise safeguarding, wellbeing and social inclusion. A first step is therefore to develop a shared understanding of the problem.

This includes identifying the relevant partners, mapping local recruitment dynamics, agreeing on common definitions and clarifying which young people or communities the partnership aims to support. Young people, families and community members should be consulted where possible, as they often possess valuable knowledge about local dynamics and barriers to support. Objectives should be realistic, clearly defined and adapted to local conditions. Collaboration is most effective when it is driven by local needs rather than organisational assumptions.

Ireland's Local Community Safety Partnerships (LCSPs) bring together An Garda Síochána, local authorities, social services, community representatives and residents, including young people and minority groups, to jointly develop and implement local safety plans.[28]

The model reflects the principle that crime prevention is a shared responsibility and that local communities should help identify safety concerns and shape responses. In areas such as Dublin's North Inner City, this approach has supported initiatives like The Bridge Project, which provides early intervention and tailored support for young people at risk of involvement in crime.[29]

Roles and governance

Effective collaboration requires clear structures and agreed ways of working. Partners should establish who is responsible for what, how decisions are made, who coordinates activities and how accountability is maintained. Clear role definitions help prevent duplication, reduce uncertainty and ensure that gaps in service provision are identified and addressed.

Formal governance arrangements, such as cooperation agreements, referral frameworks, memoranda of understanding or local coordination structures, can help clarify responsibilities and provide continuity when staff change roles. At the same time, governance arrangements should remain flexible enough to adapt to local circumstances and emerging needs.

Successful partnerships also require leadership and coordination. Someone must be responsible for convening partners, maintaining momentum, monitoring progress and ensuring follow-up on agreed actions. Depending on the context, this role may be assumed by a municipality, police service, social service or dedicated coordination body.

Trust and relationships

Formal agreements alone do not guarantee effective collaboration. Partnerships ultimately depend on relationships between people. Professionals often operate within different organisational cultures, professional languages and working methods. Trust cannot be assumed simply because organisations participate in the same partnership.

Trust is built through regular interaction, openness, reliability and a willingness to work towards shared goals. Joint training, informal exchanges and face-to-face meetings can help professionals understand each other's responsibilities, constraints and perspectives.

Personal relationships remain particularly important in practice. When practitioners know and trust one another, communication is often quicker, misunderstandings are easier to resolve and collaboration becomes more effective. Investing time in relationship-building helps create the interpersonal trust that enables partnerships to function successfully over the long term.

SWaPOL (Social Work and Policing)[30] illustrates how joint learning can strengthen cooperation before professionals meet in practice. The initiative brings police officers and social workers together in a shared training environment, allowing them to better understand each other's roles, constraints and professional cultures.[31]

By discussing cases, expectations and dilemmas together, participants can challenge stereotypes, develop a shared language and build the interpersonal trust needed for future collaboration. Embedding this type of training early in professional development helps create stronger working relationships and makes multi-agency cooperation more effective.

Communication and information sharing

Partnerships require regular communication to ensure that organisations work together rather than in parallel. Strategic, operational and case-focused meetings can help maintain a shared understanding of emerging risks, strengthen cooperation and support joint decision-making. Partnerships should also establish clear communication channels, designated contact persons and procedures for urgent situations.

Information sharing is often essential for identifying risks and coordinating interventions. However, it remains one of the most challenging aspects of collaboration. Professionals may have different views on confidentiality, data protection and the sharing of sensitive information. Effective information sharing therefore requires clear protocols and a shared understanding of the applicable legal frameworks.

GDPR is frequently perceived as a barrier to collaboration. In practice, the main challenge is often uncertainty about what can legally be shared rather than an actual prohibition on information exchange. Providing practical guidance, training and access to legal expertise can help practitioners share information confidently, lawfully and proportionately when safeguarding or prevention concerns arise.[32]

Learning and continuous improvement

Effective collaboration is not a fixed arrangement but an ongoing process of learning, reflection and adaptation. Preventing youth recruitment into organised crime requires partnerships to respond to changing circumstances, emerging risks and new evidence.

Partnerships should regularly monitor whether their activities are contributing to agreed objectives and assess outcomes for young people and communities. Monitoring should go beyond outputs, such as the number of meetings held or referrals made, and focus on whether interventions are producing meaningful change.

Learning is strengthened when partners receive feedback on referrals, joint interventions and collaborative activities. Regular opportunities for reflection can help identify successful practices, implementation challenges, emerging risks and lessons for future action. By embedding monitoring, feedback and adaptation into routine practice, partnerships can continuously improve their approaches and remain responsive to evolving local realities.

Communities That Care (CTC) is an evidence-based prevention framework implemented in several German municipalities. Rather than prescribing specific interventions, CTC provides a structured process through which local stakeholders identify risk and protective factors affecting young people, select evidence-based responses and monitor outcomes over time.

The model relies on regular data collection and community assessments to ensure that prevention efforts remain aligned with local needs. Schools, municipalities, police, social services, youth organisations and health professionals work together to analyse trends, evaluate progress and adjust interventions where necessary.

By embedding monitoring, evaluation and adaptation into routine practice, CTC illustrates how prevention partnerships can create a culture of continuous learning and improvement rather than relying on fixed programmes or assumptions.

Sustainability and multi-level support

Building effective collaboration takes time, effort and resources. To have a lasting impact, partnerships must become embedded within participating organisations rather than relying solely on a few motivated individuals or temporary funding arrangements.

Collaboration should be institutionalised through documented procedures, established contact points, formal structures and integration into routine practice. Adequate resources, including coordination staff, training opportunities, meeting time and administrative support, are also essential if partnerships are to remain operational over the long term.

While prevention is often implemented locally, organised crime frequently operates across neighbourhood, municipal and regional boundaries. Local partnerships therefore benefit from support at regional and national levels. Such support may include training, methodological guidance, information exchange, coordination mechanisms and access to specialised expertise.

Examples such as Sweden's BOB structure and the Dutch Regional Information and Expertise Centres (RIECs) demonstrate how local prevention efforts can be strengthened through multi-level governance arrangements that provide continuity, coordination and specialist support beyond the local level.

Community-oriented prevention in practice

> *Across some European initiatives, a common model of good practice is emerging in the prevention of youth involvement in crime and organised criminal networks. Examples, such as Germany's Communities That Care, Sweden's Rätt Kurva and SSPF models, Ireland's Greentown project, and other initiatives discussed elsewhere in this toolkit, such as France's LIMITS programme and the Dutch Preventie met Gezag approach, all point towards a locally anchored, multi-agency system of prevention and early intervention.*

While these initiatives differ in their target groups, governance structures and methods, they share several common features. First, municipalities or local authorities often act as coordinating anchors, bringing together various stakeholders. Collaboration is structured rather than ad hoc, and is supported by clear governance arrangements, regular meetings and sustained professional relationships.

Second, these approaches prioritise early identification and timely intervention. Rather than waiting until young people become deeply involved in criminal networks, they seek to identify vulnerabilities early.

Third, they combine prevention, safeguarding and public safety objectives. Youth recruitment into organised crime is treated as a broader social challenge. Appropriate, social support and protective interventions are combined with enforcement measures aimed at disrupting criminal pathways.

Finally, these initiatives are rooted in local realities and designed for long-term implementation. They reflect a shift towards a systemic, location-based and integrated model of prevention, in which youth recruitment into organised crime is addressed through sustained cross-sector collaboration rather than isolated projects.

Community-oriented policing in Brussels-West

Based on a meeting with Divisional Commissioner Dider Demelin (head of Brussels West police zone), Luc Van Der Taelen, and Elizabet Erkan, 18/02/2026

The Brussels-West police zone provides a strong example of how community-oriented policing can be applied in socially diverse and high-risk urban environments. The area faces significant socio-economic challenges and is affected by organised drug markets,[33] making it particularly vulnerable to the recruitment of young people into criminal networks.

Police have observed an increasing involvement of younger children in drug-related activities, alongside the growing use of social media to recruit young people from both within and outside Brussels. Rising levels of violence linked to competition within local drug markets reinforced the need for an approach that goes beyond reactive enforcement.

In response, the police zone launched an integrated strategy in 2026 that combines hotspot-focused enforcement with community engagement and prevention. The approach is built around the SARA model and draws inspiration from the UK's Clear, Hold, Build framework. Targeted enforcement actions seek to disrupt criminal networks (Clear); sustained police presence aims to prevent the reoccupation of hotspots while building trust with residents (Hold); and partnerships with schools, youth organisations, social services and neighbourhood associations address the underlying drivers of vulnerability (Build).

A defining feature of the initiative is its emphasis on local adaptation and multi-level governance. Information gathered by neighbourhood officers and residents feeds directly into hotspot analyses and operational planning. Regular meetings bring together residents, police, community organisations and municipal authorities, ensuring that local concerns are translated into concrete actions. This bottom-up approach allows policing priorities to be shaped by the realities of each neighbourhood.

Trust-building and communication are central to the strategy. The police maintain regular contact with residents through neighbourhood meetings, social media, community events and initiatives such as Coffee with a Cop.[34] Accessibility is further reinforced through dedicated neighbourhood officers who act as familiar points of contact within the community. Particular attention is given to young people.

Through the Youth & Police project, officers participate in sports activities,[35] community events[36] and debate programmes[37] alongside youth workers and local organisations. These initiatives create opportunities for positive interaction outside enforcement contexts, helping to improve mutual understanding and challenge negative perceptions on both sides. The police also works with social welfare services to engage vulnerable families and strengthen informal support networks.

The Brussels-West model demonstrates how community policing can combine enforcement, prevention, partnership and community engagement within a single strategy. By linking hotspot policing with trust-building, youth engagement and continuous evaluation, it offers a practical example of how local police can contribute towards preventing youth recruitment into organised crime while strengthening community resilience.

Community policing in Malta

Malta has firmly placed community policing at the centre of its police mission, as reflected in the Malta Police Force's mission statement: "To provide a professional and trusted policing service to ensure safety and security in partnership with the community."[38] The country's strong local identities and close-knit communities provide a favourable environment for community policing.

First introduced in 2019 in the town of Mellieħa, the initiative was developed in response to concerns about public trust in the police. Dedicated community officers were assigned to specific neighbourhoods, with their contact details and photographs made publicly available to encourage accessibility and direct engagement.

Following positive results, the model was progressively expanded and now covers most of the country.[39] Community officers maintain a visible presence through foot patrols, allowing them to engage with residents in a more approachable and informal manner. This sustained visibility is complemented by close cooperation with local councils, schools, social services, victim support organisations and community groups.

A key feature of the Maltese model is its focus on two-way communication. Officers use social media platforms, particularly Facebook, to share information, respond to concerns and gather feedback from residents.

The HALO event management system further supports local problem-solving by providing officers with real-time information on incidents and community issues within their assigned areas.

Community policing activities also include school visits, crime prevention campaigns, neighbourhood initiatives and outreach to vulnerable groups. The approach has proven particularly valuable in supporting cooperation between police and community organisations during periods of tension or unrest.[40]

Evaluation results suggest high levels of public support.[41] Surveys indicate growing trust in the police, strong appreciation for visible community officers and a willingness among residents to work with police to address local problems. Malta's experience demonstrates how sustained visibility, accessibility, partnership-building and effective communication can strengthen both public confidence and community resilience.

The Rätt Kurva programme in Sweden

Rätt Kurva ("Right Path") is a Swedish early-intervention programme adapted from the German Kurve kriegen model. It targets children aged 8 to 15 who have committed one or more offences and are considered at risk of progressing into more serious or organised criminal activity.[42] The programme was initially piloted in areas experiencing high levels of youth involvement in organised crime and is based on close cooperation between the police, municipalities, social services, schools, civil society organisations and private partners.

A key feature of Rätt Kurva is its focus on early identification and voluntary participation. When a child is referred to the programme, a dedicated family liaison officer works with the child and their family to develop an individual action plan tailored to their specific needs and circumstances. Support can continue for several months or, where necessary, a few years.

Rather than focusing solely on offending behaviour, the programme seeks to strengthen protective factors and reduce the vulnerabilities that increase the risk of criminal involvement. Interventions may include mentoring, educational support, recreational and sports activities, family support measures and assistance in accessing community resources. NGOs and private-sector partners can also contribute services and opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable to the child or the family.

The overall aim is to strengthen the child's support network, improve family functioning, increase motivation for positive life choices and create alternatives to criminal involvement. By combining early intervention, family support and multi-agency cooperation, Rätt Kurva seeks to prevent the escalation of offending and reduce the risk of recruitment into organised crime.

The Greentown project in Ireland

The Greentown Project is a research and prevention initiative developed by the University of Limerick and the Irish Department of Justice to better understand and prevent the recruitment of youth aged 12 to 18 into organised criminal networks.[43] Based on extensive research into how criminal groups influence and exploit young people, the project has evolved into a multi-agency prevention model implemented in several Irish communities.

Greentown recognises that children rarely become involved in organised crime in isolation. Instead, their behaviour is shaped by family circumstances, peer networks, neighbourhood dynamics and the influence of local criminal actors. As a result, the project adopts a whole-of-community approach, bringing together An Garda Síochána, social services, schools, youth services, local authorities and community organisations.

The programme is structured around four pillars.

- The first focuses on network disruption, identifying and targeting the individuals and networks responsible for recruiting and exploiting young people.
- The second aims to strengthen community efficacy by increasing trust, social cohesion and residents' ability to resist criminal influence through local initiatives and neighbourhood improvement projects.
- The third pillar promotes pro-social opportunities, helping young people reconnect with education, training, employment and other positive pathways.
- Finally, an intensive family support component works with vulnerable families to strengthen parenting capacity and improve child protection.

A distinctive feature of Greentown is its emphasis on understanding the social networks surrounding young people. Rather than focusing solely on individual behaviour, practitioners examine the wider environment in which recruitment occurs and coordinate interventions accordingly. The model combines prevention, safeguarding and enforcement, recognising that reducing youth involvement in organised crime requires criminal influences to be disrupted and protective factors to be strengthened.

Although Greentown is not a community policing programme in the narrow sense of the term, it demonstrates how community policing principles can support broader prevention strategies. Police officers work alongside other partners to build trust, develop local intelligence and coordinate responses, illustrating how multi-agency collaboration can be used to reduce the influence of organised criminal networks on children and young people.

SSPF in Sweden

SSPF is a Swedish collaboration model that brings together Schools (Skola), Social Services (Socialtjänst), Police (Polis), and Leisure Services (Fritid) to prevent children and young people from becoming involved in crime, substance abuse or other harmful behaviours.[44]

The core objective of SSPF is early intervention. By combining information and expertise from different sectors, partners can identify young people who may be at risk and provide coordinated support before problems escalate. The model focuses on children and adolescents who show early warning signs, such as school absenteeism, behavioural difficulties, substance use, association with delinquent peers or exposure to criminal environments.

A key feature of SSPF is its structured information-sharing process. With the consent of the young person and their guardians, schools, social services, police and leisure services can exchange relevant information and jointly develop an action plan tailored to the individual's needs. This allows partners to build a more complete picture of the young person's circumstances and coordinate interventions across different domains of their life.

Conclusion

Preventing youth recruitment into organised crime requires more than law enforcement alone. The examples presented in this chapter demonstrate that effective prevention is most successful when it combines community-oriented policing with strong multi-agency collaboration. Recruitment into organised crime is driven by a range of interconnected factors spanning family circumstances, education, social exclusion, community dynamics, and exposure to criminal networks. No single organisation can address these challenges in isolation.

Community-oriented policing plays an important role in this response. By building trust, fostering positive relationships with young people, maintaining a visible local presence, and strengthening community resilience, police can help identify risks early and create conditions that make recruitment more difficult. However, community policing is most effective when embedded within a broader network of partners, including municipalities, schools, social services, youth workers, health professionals, community organisations and families.

The initiatives highlighted in this chapter demonstrate that successful prevention efforts share several common characteristics. They are locally anchored, based on a shared understanding of the problem, supported by clear governance structures and information-sharing arrangements and built on trusting relationships between organisations and practitioners. They prioritise early intervention, combine safeguarding and public safety objectives and rely on continuous learning and adaptation rather than fixed approaches.

Municipalities often play a particularly important role as coordinating anchors, bringing together different stakeholders and ensuring that prevention efforts remain tailored to local realities. At the same time, regional and national support structures can provide expertise, resources and strategic direction that strengthen local partnerships.

For policymakers, the message is clear: invest in long-term partnerships rather than short-term projects, strengthen community resilience alongside enforcement efforts, support information sharing and coordinated action, and ensure that young people themselves have a voice in shaping local responses. Prevention should not focus solely on disrupting criminal networks, but also on creating opportunities, support systems, and positive environments that reduce young people's vulnerability to recruitment in the first place.

Ultimately, preventing youth involvement in organised crime is a shared responsibility. When police, municipalities, schools, social services, community organisations, families and young people work together, they can build resilient communities that are better equipped to resist criminal influence.

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Summary
Young people's involvement in organised crime does not occur in isolation from the communities in which they live, study and socialise. Communities can provide important protective environments, but weaknesses in social ties, trust and collective capacity can also create opportunities for criminal networks to gain influence. This section explored how community-based approaches and partnerships can strengthen local resilience, build trust with young people and create opportunities to identify and address vulnerabilities before they develop into criminal involvement.

TOOLKIT YOUTH RECRUITMENT INTO ORGANISED CRIME

Part 03
Strengthening families and schools

EUCPN
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK

Strengthening families and schools does not prevent organised crime on its own, but it can reduce some of the vulnerabilities that criminal networks exploit and help provide protective factors.

Introduction

Families and schools are two of the most important environments in a young person's life. They shape behaviour, social relationships, emotional development and access to support. When these environments are stable and supportive, they can act as protective factors by providing structure, supervision, trust, belonging and positive expectations for the future.

However, families and schools are not automatically protective. Some young people grow up in families affected by conflict, neglect, domestic violence, parental substance use or mental health difficulties. In some cases, family members may be involved in crime, creating opportunities for intergenerational offending or normalising criminal behaviour. Schools can also become places where vulnerability is visible, such as in the form of absenteeism, disengagement, peer conflict, behavioural difficulties or declining performance.

These vulnerabilities matter in the context of organised crime recruitment. Criminal networks may exploit weak supervision, family stress, school disengagement or a young person's need for belonging, status, protection or income. They may present themselves as a substitute family or alternative source of identity, especially when young people feel disconnected from adults who are a positive influence, education or formal services.

Strengthening families and schools is therefore an important part of prevention. Family-based interventions can help improve communication, parenting confidence, supervision and family functioning. School-based approaches can help identify concerns early, keep young people connected to education and refer them to appropriate support. These approaches do not directly prevent organised crime on their own, but they can reduce some of the vulnerabilities that criminal networks exploit.

Family-based approaches

Family-based approaches focus on strengthening the relationships, routines and support systems around the young person. Their relevance to prevention lies upstream: they can improve supervision, reduce conflict, strengthen communication and help young people reconnect with positive sources of support before criminal involvement becomes more entrenched.

Practitioners should not assume that the family is always protective. In some cases, parents, siblings or wider relatives may be overwhelmed, absent, mistrusted by the young person or connected to criminal networks. Family dynamics therefore need to be assessed carefully to identify which relationships can safely be strengthened.

Where there are concerns about violence or coercion, family participation should be preceded by a careful safety assessment. Strengthening family relationships should never mean exposing the young person to further pressure or harm. This is especially important in families where organised crime is already present. Research focusing on the children of organised crime offenders suggests that intergenerational continuity can be shaped by several mechanisms, including exposure to criminal norms, the status, reputation or violent image of a parent, inadequate parenting and access to criminal networks.[1] In such contexts, young people may not enter criminal networks through a single act of recruitment, but may gradually grow into it as a result of day-to-day family relationships, social learning and proximity to criminal opportunities. At the same time, continuity is not inevitable: protective factors such as adequate supervision, prosocial relationships, education, work and support from child protection or therapeutic services can help interrupt these pathways.

Mental health and behavioural difficulties can also increase vulnerability when they are not recognised or addressed. Anxiety, depression, ADHD, conduct problems, trauma or substance use may affect young people's behaviour, relationships and their ability to cope with pressure. Family-based interventions are not a substitute for specialised mental health care, but they can help identify unmet needs, reduce stress within the family and connect children, parents or caregivers to appropriate support.

For these reasons, evidence-based family interventions form an important part of prevention. Programmes such as Triple P, Family Check-Up, Multisystemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy aim to strengthen family functioning, improve communication, support parenting confidence and reduce behavioural difficulties. Their value lies not only in reducing delinquency, but also in strengthening the protective relationships and everyday support systems that can make recruitment less likely.

Parenting support

Parenting support programmes focus on the everyday practices that shape a young person's behaviour, relationships and development. They help parents, caregivers and other trusted family members strengthen communication, set clear boundaries, respond consistently to difficulties and create a more stable home environment.

Triple P

Triple P, or the Positive Parenting Program, is an evidence-based parenting programme developed in Australia. It is intended for caregivers of children up to the age of 16, including parents, foster carers and grandparents. The programme is based on social learning, cognitive behavioural and developmental theories and aims to strengthen parenting skills, improve family relationships and promote positive child development.

Triple P helps parents build warm and stable relationships with their children, encourage positive behaviour and respond consistently to misbehaviour. Its approach is guided by five principles[2] of positive parenting:

- providing a safe and engaging environment,
- creating a positive learning environment,
- using assertive discipline,
- having realistic expectations,
- supporting parental self-care.

In practice, this means helping parents spend quality time with their child, set clear rules, use praise and encouragement, manage conflict calmly and recognise the importance of their own wellbeing.

One of the strengths of Triple P is its multi-level structure. The programme ranges from general information and public awareness activities to brief advice, short individual sessions, targeted group or online interventions, and more intensive family support for complex cases. This allows families to access different levels of help depending on their needs, from light-touch support for emerging difficulties to more structured intervention where behavioural problems, family conflict or parental stress are more serious.

By strengthening protective factors such as parental supervision, consistent boundaries, positive parent-child relationships and parental confidence, Triple P can help reduce some of the vulnerabilities that criminal networks may exploit. In this sense, parenting support contributes to prevention by reinforcing the family environment around the young person before criminal involvement becomes more entrenched.

European experiences show that implementation context matters. In the Netherlands, Triple P was introduced in 2006 and later rolled out in over half of the municipalities in that country, but evaluations found that its effects did not differ significantly from traditional care. In Sweden, by contrast, implementation reported positive results, including improved parenting confidence and longer-term benefits such as reduced bullying. This does not necessarily mean that the programme "works" in one country and not another; rather, it shows that added value depends on how the programme is targeted, delivered and integrated into existing services.

European evaluations also highlight practical implementation issues. In Switzerland, mothers reported increased self-esteem, reduced parenting stress and fewer disruptive behaviours in their children, whilst the effects were less pronounced for fathers. This suggests that programmes may affect parents differently and that engaging fathers may require additional attention. Cost is another important consideration for local authorities. In Sweden, the implementation of Triple P in Uppsala, a municipality of around 230,000 inhabitants, cost approximately €200,000 per year, covering training, salaries, materials and interpreters.[3] While such costs can be significant, they need to be weighed up against potential long-term savings resulting from reduced demand on social, health and justice services.

Family Check-Up

Family Check-Up (FCU) is a tailored parenting support programme for families with children or adolescents showing behavioural difficulties, defiant behaviour, signs of depression or substance use. It is based on the idea that families should not only receive support once problems have become severe, but should be offered help at key moments when risks begin to emerge. In this sense, FCU functions more like a preventive "check-up" than a crisis intervention.

The programme starts with a short assessment phase, usually delivered over three sessions. Practitioners first discuss the child's behaviour and the family context, while building trust with parents. They then assess the family's strengths, challenges and interaction patterns in order to develop a tailored family profile. One distinctive feature of FCU is the filming of parent–child interactions, which can help parents recognise both positive practices and behaviours that may contribute to conflict or escalation. The final assessment session provides feedback and helps the family set priorities for change.

Following the assessment, families may be offered support through the Everyday Parenting Curriculum. This includes sessions on encouraging positive behaviour, setting limits and strengthening family relationships.[4] The support is adapted to the family's specific needs and motivation, meaning that some families receive only short-term follow-up while others receive more intensive support over a longer period. All sessions are delivered individually rather than in groups. Parents are asked to track their own behaviours and complete home practice tasks, an effective way to discover what parenting approaches work best for their family, rather than simply receiving advice or reading a manual.

The Swedish experience illustrates how FCU can be adapted to local welfare and social service contexts. Minor changes were made to fit the Swedish setting, such as avoiding certain disciplinary strategies and using the term "family worker" rather than "therapist" since sessions were delivered by social services staff. Children aged 10–13 who participated in the Swedish trial showed significant short-term and long-term reductions in oppositional and defiant behaviour. Parents reported that positive effects were maintained two years after treatment, along with improved grades and school attendance. Parents also reported improvements in their own wellbeing, including greater patience, better emotional control and psychological health.

FCU highlights common challenges in parenting support. Some parents value the individualised approach, while others miss opportunities to connect with parents facing

similar difficulties. Some also want more direct support for their children, not only guidance for parents. This suggests that tailored parenting support may be most effective when it can be combined with peer support, youth-focused activities or referral to additional services where needed.

Triple P and FCU: Comparative overview

Triple P and Family Check-Up are both evidence-based parenting support programmes that aim to strengthen family functioning and reduce behavioural problems in children and young people. Both can contribute to prevention by improving supervision, communication, parental confidence and family relationships. However, they are not interchangeable. They differ in how families are identified, how support is structured and how strongly the intervention is tailored to individual circumstances (see Table 1 for an overview of the differences).

Triple P functions as a multi-level standardised system of parenting support. It can be offered broadly, from light-touch advice and group sessions to more intensive support for families with complex needs. This makes it useful for reaching a wide range of families and for embedding parenting support within community-based services. Family Check-Up, by contrast, is built around assessment and tailoring. It begins with an in-depth review of family strengths, needs and interaction patterns, after which support is adapted to the family's specific situation.

In prevention terms, Triple P may be particularly useful as an accessible first layer of support for families experiencing emerging difficulties, while Family Check-Up may be better suited to families where behavioural problems, family conflict or other risks are already more present. A comprehensive prevention system could therefore include both types of support: broad, accessible parenting support to strengthen protective factors early, and more individualised assessment-based intervention for families needing targeted help

	Triple P	Family Check-Up
Main purpose	To strengthen parenting skills and reduce child behaviour problems.	To improve family functioning and reduce risks through tailored support.
Target group	A broad range of families, from the general population to families with emerging or mild difficulties.	At-risk families, often with conduct or behavioural issues.
Approach	A multi-level system with predefined levels of support.	An assessment-based model followed by individually tailored support.
Intensity	Ranges from light-touch advice to intensive family support.	Varies according to the family's needs and motivation after assessment.
Key strength	Broad reach and flexibility across different levels of need.	Strong individualisation and collaborative goal-setting with parents.
Prevention role	Useful as an early layer of support to strengthen protective factors.	Useful where risks are more visible and families need tailored guidance.
Limitations	Added value depends on targeting, implementation and quality of existing services.	Individualised delivery may require more time, trained staff and follow-up capacity.

Table 1: Overview of the differences between Triple P and FCU

Family therapy for higher-risk young people

When behavioural difficulties are more serious or persistent, families may need more intensive support than parenting advice or short-term guidance. Interventions such as Functional Family Therapy (FFT) and Multisystemic Therapy (MST) are designed for young people whose behaviour may involve serious antisocial behaviour, substance use, offending or risk of continued delinquency. They work not only with the young person, but also with the family and the wider environment around them.

Compared with broader parenting programmes, intensive, family-based interventions require coordinated efforts across multiple agencies, specialised training and stronger referral pathways. They are most appropriate for young people and families with higher levels of need, for whom a light-touch intervention is unlikely to be sufficient. These interventions demonstrate that lasting change is achieved by strengthening the systems around young people, not just by addressing the symptoms they present.

Functional Family Therapy

Functional Family Therapy is a short-term, family intervention for young people, usually aged 10 to 17, who are presenting with behavioural problems, substance use or delinquent behaviour. Originally developed in the United States, it has since been implemented in several countries, including Norway and the United Kingdom. The intervention usually involves the young person and their parents or caregivers attending 8 to 30 sessions, depending on need, with the aim of improving family functioning and addressing the young person's behavioural issues.[5]

The programme is structured around several phases. It begins with engagement and motivation, during which the therapist works to build credibility and encourage the family to participate. This is followed by assessment, which helps identify the strengths and difficulties in family relationships. The behaviour change phase then focuses on practical skills, such as communication, anger management, parental supervision and conflict management. Finally, the generalisation phase helps families apply these skills in other settings, such as school or the wider community, and maintain progress over time.

Young people may be referred by youth justice, education, mental health or social services, depending on the national context. The therapy is usually delivered to the young person and their family over several months, often in their home. Its effectiveness depends strongly on how faithfully it is delivered. Evidence shows that the programme is most effective when practitioners adhere closely to the model, with improvements in conduct problems, hyperactivity, emotional difficulties and prosocial behaviour. Families who drop out showed little or no improvement, highlighting the importance of engagement and retention.

A recent adaptation of the model is Functional Family Therapy – Gangs (FFT-G), designed for young people who are at risk of gang involvement or already involved in gangs. FFT-G retains the core structure of Functional Family Therapy, but adapts it to address gang-related risks more directly. The clinical model and treatment length remain broadly similar, but therapists receive additional training and supervision, and the intervention places greater emphasis on issues such as negative peer relationships, gang-related group processes, delinquency, substance use, constructive use of time, family functioning and resisting peer pressure.

Evidence from the United States is encouraging, particularly for higher-risk young people. Evaluations of FFT-G have found promising outcomes among high-risk youth, including reduced recidivism, reduced substance use, and fewer delinquent behaviours one year after treatment.[6] Notably, these benefits were not observed among low-risk participants, which is consistent with the risk principle: intensive interventions tend to be most effective when targeted at young people with higher levels of risk or need.

While results from the United States are encouraging, they may not directly translate to European contexts, where criminal, social and legal landscapes differ. In the United Kingdom, an ongoing evaluation following a pilot study is assessing the effectiveness of FFT-G for young people at risk of County Lines involvement and child criminal exploitation.[7] Early implementation learning suggests that embedding FFT-G teams within children's social care can support referral, coordination and engagement with high-risk young people and their families.

Multisystemic Therapy

Multisystemic Therapy is an intensive, family-based intervention for young people with serious behavioural prob-

lems, including violence, criminal behaviour and substance abuse. As its name suggests, it is based on the idea that a young person's behaviour is shaped by several interconnected systems, including family, peers, school and wider community. Rather than focusing only on the young person, the therapy aims to intervene across all these systems to promote positive, prosocial change by addressing the patterns, relationships, and environmental factors that contribute to serious behavioural problems.

MST is usually delivered in the young person's home and community over several months. Therapists work intensively with families, often with small caseloads and high availability, so that support can respond to difficulties as they arise. The intervention is structured around clear goals and practical strategies, but it is adapted to the specific risks and strengths of each family. This makes MST particularly relevant for young people whose difficulties extend across several areas of life, such as family conflict, school exclusion, offending, substance use and negative peer influence.

Evidence regarding MST is positive in some contexts, but not uniform. Studies from the United States have demonstrated both short-term and long-term effectiveness compared to traditional child welfare services. However, European evaluations have produced more mixed results. For example, Norway, which was the first country to implement MST on a national scale in 1999, has seen similar positive outcomes, including reductions in behavioural problems, the prevention of out-of-home placements, and improvements in social skills.[8] On the other hand, studies from Sweden have found that MST does not outperform regular child welfare services. Several factors may explain why MST is not as effective as in the US:

- Legal and social system differences: In Sweden, young offenders are processed primarily through child welfare services with a therapeutic, non-punitive approach. By contrast, young people in the US usually go through the juvenile justice system, which has a punitive focus and poor rehabilitation effects.

- Existing services: Sweden already offers frequent in-home support as part of treatment as a matter of course, whereas in the US, such home-based interventions may be limited outside of MST. This means that traditional care in Sweden is often more comprehensive and has better results than traditional care in the US, which therefore makes MST less distinctly superior.

- Age of criminal responsibility: Sweden sets the age of criminal responsibility at 15, whereas in the United States it varies by state, with 10 being the most common minimum age, and 24 states having no minimum age at all.[9]

- Voluntary vs. mandatory participation: MST participation is voluntary in Sweden, whereas it is often court-mandated in the US.

- Out-of-home placements: these are common in the US, but less frequent in Sweden, where the emphasis is on at-home treatment.

This underlines an important lesson with regard to implementation: MST should not be treated as a programme that can simply be imported and expected to work in the same way everywhere. Its added value depends partly on what it is compared to. In contexts where usual services are limited, MST may represent a major improvement. In contexts where child welfare services already provide intensive, home-based and therapeutic support, the difference may be smaller.

Evidence from the Netherlands provides a more nuanced picture. MST is recognised by the Netherlands Youth Institute as an intervention for young people with serious antisocial behaviour, including aggression, offending, substance use and association with antisocial peers.[10] Dutch research suggests that, compared with usual treatment, MST can be more effective in reducing oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder and some forms of delinquency. It may also improve parental confidence and increase young people's contact with prosocial peers. However, effects are not uniform: studies have found no clear impact on violent offending, and some findings on young people's self-perception are mixed. This reinforces the broader lesson that MST can be valuable, but its effects depend on the outcome measured, the target group and the quality of existing services.

Because MST is intensive, it also requires significant organisational capacity. It depends on trained therapists, strong supervision, manageable caseloads, clear referral pathways and cooperation between youth justice, child protection, schools, health services and community actors. It may therefore be most appropriate for young people with higher levels of need, for whom lighter parenting support or brief intervention is unlikely to be sufficient.

FFT and MST: Comparative overview

Functional Family Therapy and Multisystemic Therapy are both intensive family-based interventions for young people with serious behavioural problems, substance use or other complex needs. Both recognise that young people's behaviour is shaped by family relationships and wider social environments, and both aim to strengthen protective factors around the young person rather than focusing only on individual behaviour.

However, the two approaches differ in scope and intensity (see Table 2 for an overview of the differences between the two programmes). Functional Family Therapy is primarily family-centred and relational. It focuses on improving family communication, strengthening parenting practices and helping families develop practical strategies to manage conflict and behaviour. Although FFT can involve links to schools, community resources and other services, these are usually addressed through the family and in the later generalisation phase. It is therefore particularly relevant where family conflict, weak supervision or communication problems are central to the young person's difficulties.

Multisystemic Therapy takes a broader ecological approach from the outset. It works not only with the family, but also with peer relationships, school engagement, neighbourhood influences and other systems around the young person. It is generally more intensive than FFT, with high therapist availability, small caseloads and intervention across several settings. MST may therefore be more appropriate for young people whose risks are spread across several areas of life, such as family conflict, school exclusion, antisocial peers, offending and substance use.

Because MST is intensive, it also requires significant organisational capacity and financial investment. It depends on trained therapists, strong supervision, manageable caseloads, clear referral pathways and cooperation between youth justice, child protection, schools, health services and community actors. Cost should therefore be considered alongside expected benefits and the quality of existing services. MST may be most appropriate for young people with higher levels of need, for whom lighter parenting support or brief intervention is unlikely to be sufficient.

For the purpose of preventing youth recruitment into organised crime, both models are relevant, but neither should be presented as a direct intervention to combat organised crime. Their value lies in reducing some of the risk factors that can make young people vulnerable to deeper criminal involvement: weak family relationships, negative peer influence, lack of supervision, disengagement from school, substance use and limited prosocial support. FFT may be more suitable where the family is the main entry point for change, while MST may be more suitable where risks are more complex and embedded across several settings.

	Functional Family Therapy	Multisystemic Therapy
Main focus	Family relationships, communication and parenting practices	Family, peers, school, neighbourhood and wider community systems
Target group	Young people with behavioural problems, substance use, delinquency	Young people with serious or persistent behavioural problems, substance use or complex needs across several life domains
Scope	Family-centred, with later links to wider systems	Broader systemic approach from the outset
Intensity	Short-term and structured, usually over several months	More intensive, with round-the-clock therapist availability
Delivery setting	Often delivered in the home or community	Delivered across home, school and community settings

Key strength	Strong focus on engagement, motivation and improving family functioning	Addresses multiple risk factors at the same time, including peers, school and community influences
Implementation needs	Licensed model, trained therapists, fidelity monitoring and family engagement	Highly trained therapists, strong supervision, small caseloads, multi-agency cooperation and clear referral pathways
Prevention relevance	Useful where family conflict or communication problems contribute to vulnerability	Useful where vulnerability is shaped by several interconnected systems (family, peers, school and community)
Main caution	Outcomes depend heavily on engagement and fidelity	Added value depends on local services and implementation quality

Table 2: Comparison between FFT and MST

School-linked initiatives

> *While family-based interventions strengthen the home environment, schools are another key setting for prevention. They are places where young people spend much of their time, build relationships with peers and adults, and where early signs of disengagement, vulnerability or exploitation may become visible.*

School-based approaches should therefore be understood as part of the wider protective ecosystem around the child. They provide structure, routine, learning opportunities and daily contact with trusted adults.[11] They can strengthen social bonds, support emotional development, create a sense of belonging and connect children and families to additional services whenever difficulties arise. In the context of youth recruitment into organised crime, attachment to school can be an important protective factor. Keeping young people connected to education may reduce isolation, strengthen future opportunities and limit the appeal of criminal networks that offer money, status, belonging or identity.

At the same time, schools can also expose young people to risk factors. They are social environments in which peer influence, status, exclusion and belonging are constantly negotiated. Regular contact with antisocial peers, negative role models or deviant peer subcultures[12] can contribute towards the normalisation of harmful behaviour. School disengagement, absenteeism, poor academic performance or exclusion can also weaken a young person's connection to protective institutions and increase the time spent in less supervised settings. Schools should therefore be seen not only as places where risks can be detected, but also as environments where protective and risk factors interact.

This dual role makes school-based prevention complex.[13] Schools are often seen by other partners as crucial actors in preventing youth involvement in organised crime, especially because they may be well placed to notice early signs of vulnerability. Changes in attendance, behaviour, peer relationships, academic performance or wellbeing may indicate that a young person is experiencing difficulties or coming under pressure from criminal peers. However, recognising relevant signals is not always straightforward. Education professionals may be aware of their safeguarding responsibilities, but they do not always have the expertise, confidence or information needed to identify possible recruitment or decide on next steps.[14]

For this reason, the role of schools should be clearly defined. Teachers and school staff should not be expected to investigate organised crime, assess criminal networks or act as law enforcement actors. Their role is to safeguard, support and refer concerns via appropriate pathways. This requires training, clear procedures and access to external support, rather than placing the full responsibility for crime prevention on schools.

School-based prevention should also avoid unnecessary criminalisation. In several countries, schools are increasingly expected to identify "at-risk" pupils and cooperate with authorities as part of wider crime-prevention strategies.[15] While early identification can be valuable, it can also result in too much responsibility being assigned to school staff and in the criminalisation of school life, as a result of which behaviour that might previously have been handled as conflict or educational difficulty is primarily dealt with by means of legal or police-oriented responses. Responding in the form of exclusion or punitive discipline or by proceeding to report the matter to the police too quickly can weaken trust, reinforce stigma and push young people further away from protective institutions.

A more constructive approach is to build on what schools already do well: relationships, learning, belonging and everyday support.[16] School staff often describe prevention not only in terms of risk identification or cooperation with authorities, but also in terms of trust-building, family engagement, inclusion and helping pupils feel connected to school life. These relational and educational activities should not be seen as secondary to crime prevention. They are central to it.

Schools should be embedded in local multi-agency prevention networks. Cooperation with families, social services, youth workers, mental health services, municipalities and police can help ensure that concerns are assessed from different perspectives and that responses are tailored to the young person's situation. In practice, schools can contribute towards prevention by strengthening trusted adult relationships, monitoring unexplained absence and sudden behavioural changes, creating safe channels for pupils to raise concerns, connecting families to support, avoiding unnecessary exclusion and referring concerns via safeguarding pathways. Their role is to help ensure that young people remain visible, supported and connected to protective institutions.

Implementation challenges

Family-based and school-based interventions can strengthen protective environments around young people, but their effectiveness depends heavily upon how they are implemented. Evidence-based programmes cannot simply be copied from one context to another and expected to produce the same results. Their success depends on local welfare systems, referral pathways, professional capacity, family trust, cultural fit and the quality of existing services.

Replication, adaptation and local evidence

Many of the programmes discussed in this section were developed outside Europe. Functional Family Therapy, Family Check-Up and Multisystemic Therapy originated in the United States, while Triple P was developed in Australia. Although these models are designed to be structured and replicable, their effects may differ when transferred into European welfare and education systems.

This is particularly important where "standard care" is already strong. For example, weaker effects of MST in Sweden have partly been explained by the fact that Swedish child welfare services already provide relatively intensive, therapeutic and home-based support. In such contexts, MST may still be useful, but its added value compared with existing services may be smaller than in countries where usual care is less developed. This underlines the need for country-specific or local evaluations before making large-scale investment decisions.

At the same time, adaptation must be balanced with fidelity. Programmes such as FFT and MST depend on trained practitioners, structured methods and model adherence. If they are changed too much, they may lose the elements that made them effective in the first place. The challenge is therefore not to choose between replication and adaptation, but to adapt delivery to local needs while preserving the core components of the intervention.

Reaching and engaging families

A second challenge is ensuring that the families who could benefit most are actually reached. Parents may face practical barriers such as time constraints, transport difficulties, childcare needs, language barriers, lack of digital access or inconvenient session times. These barriers are often more pronounced for families in disadvantaged situations, who may also have the greatest need for support.

Accessibility therefore matters. Programmes can be easier to reach when they are delivered through services already used by families, such as schools, preschools, community organisations, youth services or health-care providers. Flexible delivery times, childcare during sessions, interpretation services, online options and outreach in low-income or culturally diverse neighbourhoods can all help reduce barriers to participation.

Engagement is not only practical, but also emotional. Some parents may feel ashamed, judged or afraid of being labelled as "bad parents". Others may mistrust social services because of previous negative experiences or fear that asking for help could lead to punitive consequences. The language used to present support therefore matters. Framing interventions as "parenting support" or "family support", rather than "therapy" or "parenting training", can help reduce stigma and present participation as a positive step towards family wellbeing.

Specific attention may also be needed to engage fathers. Parenting programmes often reach mothers more easily, while fathers may be less visible in services or less likely to see support as relevant to them. This can reinforce the idea that parenting is primarily the mother's responsibility. Outreach strategies should therefore actively include fathers and other significant caregivers, while recognising that family structures may vary and that trusted adults outside the immediate household may also play a protective role.

Reaching and engaging young people

Engaging young people can be equally difficult. Young people at risk of recruitment may distrust adults, deny that they are in difficulty, fear retaliation or feel loyalty towards peers, partners or family members involved in criminal activity. Some may not see themselves as victims or as being exploited, particularly when criminal networks offer money, status, protection or belonging.

Engagement may be even more difficult when young people feel responsible for protecting their parents or wider family. They may avoid disclosing concerns because they fear consequences for family members, worry about social services becoming involved or feel pressure to remain loyal to relatives who are themselves vulnerable, involved in crime or under threat. Practitioners therefore need to build trust gradually and avoid assuming that silence means absence of risk.

For this reason, engagement should not rely only on formal referrals. Schools, youth workers, social workers, community organisations and credible messengers may all play a role in building trust and keeping young people connected to support. Interventions are more likely to work when young people experience them as relevant, respectful and practical, rather than as punishment or surveillance.

Continuity of support is also important as young people move into adulthood. Some young people may fall into a gap between services when they become too old for child and adolescent services, while not yet being connected to adult mental health, welfare or justice support. This can be particularly risky because vulnerability to recruitment, exploitation or deeper criminal involvement may continue beyond the age of 18, while parental involvement often decreases and school-based support may end. Clear transition pathways are therefore essential, especially for young people with mental health needs, substance use, trauma or ongoing safety concerns. These pathways should involve the young person, their family where appropriate, and professionals from both youth and adult services, so that support does not stop abruptly at a legal or administrative age threshold.

Family-based interventions are not a substitute for specialised mental health care. However, they can help identify unmet needs, reduce stress within the family and connect young people and parents to appropriate support. This is particularly important where behavioural problems are linked to trauma, anxiety, depression, ADHD, substance use or other mental health difficulties.

Referral pathways and multi-agency cooperation

Family-based and school-based prevention depend on clear referral pathways. Schools may notice unexplained absence, changes in behaviour or peer relationships. Youth workers may observe risks in public spaces or online. Social services may know about family stress, housing problems or previous safeguarding concerns. Police may hold information about local recruitment patterns or threats. No single actor is likely to have the full picture.

Multi-agency cooperation is therefore essential, but it is often difficult in practice. Professionals may be unsure what information they can share, when they should refer or how they should act without damaging relationships with families. Schools, for example, may hesitate to share concerns if they fear breaking trust with pupils or parents. At the same time, failure to share relevant information can leave young people without timely support.

Clear protocols are needed on consent, data sharing, safeguarding thresholds and professional responsibilities. These should help practitioners distinguish between signs of vulnerability, welfare concerns and criminal suspicion. They should also avoid placing unrealistic responsibility on schools or frontline workers. Teachers, youth workers and family practitioners should not be expected to investigate organised crime; their role is to notice, support and refer through appropriate channels.

Access to support may also vary geographically. In remote or sparsely populated areas, there may be fewer specialist organisations, trained practitioners or community-based services able to work with young people and families affected by recruitment risks. This can make early referral harder and may leave schools, social services or police with fewer local partners to involve. Prevention strategies therefore need to consider not only which interventions are effective, but whether they are realistically available across different regions.

In some cases, families may need support across municipal or regional boundaries, for example when a young person is moved for safety reasons or when threats are linked to a neighbourhood environment. This can create gaps if services are organised locally and communication between areas is weak. Prevention systems therefore need mechanisms for continuity of support when families move or when risks extend beyond one municipality.

Resources, training, fidelity and sustainability

Evidence-based interventions require significant organisational capacity. More intensive models such as FFT and MST depend on trained therapists, supervision, fidelity monitoring, manageable caseloads and sustained administrative support. Implementation is not a one-off training exercise. It requires time, leadership, funding, referral agreements and the buy-in of social services, youth justice, schools, mental health services and community partners.

Treatment fidelity is particularly important. Research on FFT shows that positive outcomes depend on therapists adhering closely to the model; when fidelity is weak, effects are reduced or may disappear. Similarly, MST is designed as an intensive intervention with strong supervision and structured delivery across home, school and community settings. These requirements make such programmes demanding to implement, especially in systems already facing staff shortages or high caseloads.

Cost and targeting are therefore important. Intensive interventions should be reserved for young people and for families with higher levels of risk and need, where lighter support is unlikely to be sufficient. This reflects the Risk-Need-Responsivity principle: the level of intervention should match the young person's level of risk and need, and should be adapted to their circumstances, capacities and motivation. Applying intensive programmes to lower-risk young people may offer limited added value and can divert resources away from those who need them most.

Practitioner safety and support should also be considered. Professionals working with families affected by organised crime may face pressure, intimidation or fear, particularly where criminal networks are embedded in local communities. Staff need training not only in programme delivery, but also in safeguarding, risk management, trauma-informed practice, information-sharing procedures and how to access support when they feel unsafe.

Finally, sustainability depends on stable funding and long-term integration into existing services. Short-term pilots can demonstrate promise, but they may fail to create lasting change if referral pathways, training systems, supervision and funding disappear after the project ends. Family-based and school-based prevention should therefore be embedded within wider prevention strategies rather than treated as isolated programmes.

Category	Challenge	Solution
Implementation	Programmes may not transfer easily across contexts	• Adapt to local context • Preserve core components • Evaluate nationally or locally
Parent participation	Time, transport, childcare or access barriers	• Offer flexible times • Provide childcare • Use schools, preschools or community settings to engage parents
Parent participation	Lower participation among disadvantaged or minority families	• Identify group-specific barriers • Use targeted outreach • Provide interpreters and translated materials
Parent participation	Mistrust, stigma or fear of judgement	• Use non-stigmatising language Present support as family wellbeing • Build trust gradually
Parent participation	Fathers and other caregivers underrepresented	• Actively include fathers and other significant caregivers
Parent participation	Families unaware of available support	• Use awareness campaigns • Share information through schools, social services and health services
Youth participation	Distrust, denial, fear of retaliation or loyalty to peers/ family	• Use trusted adults, youth workers or credible messengers • Create safe routes into support
Youth participation	Service gap when moving into adulthood	• Plan transitions between child and adult services • Avoid abrupt loss of support at 18
Referral and cooperation	Actors each hold only part of the picture	• Create clear referral pathways • Clarify roles • Use proportionate information sharing.
Referral and cooperation	Limited services in remote areas	• Use regional cooperation, outreach, mobile or hybrid delivery
Resources	Intensive interventions require time, funding and staff.	• Secure long-term funding • Ensure stakeholder buy-in • Target high-need cases
Training	Low treatment fidelity	• Provide ongoing training, supervision and fidelity monitoring
Practitioner safety	Pressure, intimidation or fear among professionals.	• Provide risk-management training • Ensure access to support

Table 3: Challenges and solutions to offer family-based support

European practice examples

The following examples illustrate how family- and school-based prevention can be organised in different European contexts. They do not represent a single model to replicate, nor are they all specifically designed to prevent recruitment into organised crime. Instead, they show different ways of strengthening the protective environments around young people before risks become more entrenched.

Prevention can be organised around the everyday settings in which young people live, learn and build relationships: the home, the school, local services and the wider community. The examples underline that no single actor holds the full picture. Families, schools, social services, youth workers, police and community actors may all contribute to identifying concerns, building trust and keeping young people connected to support.

Sozialpädagogische Familienhilfe in Germany

Sozialpädagogische Familienhilfe (SPFH), or socio-pedagogical family assistance, is a form of family support within the German youth welfare system. It is intended to support families in their parenting responsibilities, everyday problems, conflicts and crises, as well as in their contact with public authorities and institutions.[17] The support is usually longer-term and requires the active cooperation of the family.

SPFH is mainly used for families facing several overlapping difficulties, such as poverty, housing problems, unemployment, health issues, conflict, educational difficulties or limited access to services. The intervention does not focus only on the behaviour of one child. Instead, it works with the family as a whole and takes account of the family's wider social network, resources and living conditions.[18]

A key feature of SPFH is its outreach approach. Professionals usually work with families in their own homes, sometimes over several months or longer. This allows them to support parents and children with practical routines, parenting challenges, communication, conflict resolution and contact with schools, welfare offices or other services. The aim is not to take over family responsibilities, but to provide "help for self-help" by strengthening the family's own capacity to cope.[19]

The Anchor model in Finland

Finland's Anchor model is a multidisciplinary early intervention approach for children and adolescents who have committed, or are suspected of committing, an offence, have used drugs or substances, need multi-professional support or are at risk of radicalisation into violent extremism.[20] Locally, Anchor teams may also work on cases of domestic or intimate partner violence involving families or partners.

Anchor work is carried out by multi-professional teams, typically bringing together police, social services, health services and youth services.[21] The model is voluntary and works through the consent of the young person and family, including for the exchange of information between authorities. Each professional remains within their own legal and professional role: the police may deal with the offence or investigation, social services assess support needs, health professionals consider health, substance use or psychosocial needs, and youth workers can support leisure-time activities and connection to services.

Parents and guardians play a key role in Anchor work because they are central to building and supporting the young person's wellbeing. The model recognises that the young person's behaviour may be linked to underlying difficulties in the family or wider environment. For this reason, Anchor work also aims to identify whether parents need assistance or support, so that help can be provided not only in response to the young person's behaviour, but also to address the factors contributing to it.[22]

A useful feature of Anchor is its structured but rapid process. The aim is to meet the young person and their guardian as soon as possible, ideally within one to two weeks. The team then carries out a multi-professional assessment of the young person's and family's life situation, including support needs and the offence or incident in question. This is followed by rapid intervention, guidance towards other services where needed, and follow-up by the Anchor team, including future planning with the young person.

Anchor shows how early intervention can move beyond a single-agency response. A young person may first come to attention through an offence, substance use, family concern, a problem at school or a wellbeing issue, but the response does not remain limited to that entry point. By

combining different professional perspectives, Anchor can build a fuller picture of the young person's situation and identify needs or risks that might not be visible to one actor alone.

The model also recognises the importance of meeting young people where they are. Anchor teams may be present at local events or places frequented by young people, helping adolescents get to know the professionals before a crisis occurs. This makes Anchor relevant not only as an early intervention model, but also as an example of how multi-agency work can become more accessible and less distant from young people's everyday lives.

School-linked multi-agency cooperation in Denmark and Sweden

Denmark's SSP model is a long-standing form of local cooperation between schools, social services and police. It is based on the idea that these three actors all have close knowledge of children and young people in their local area, but that none of them can prevent youth crime alone. SSP cooperation can operate at different levels, from general prevention for all young people to more targeted action for groups or individuals showing signs of risk. Schools are therefore not treated as isolated crime-prevention actors, but as part of a wider local network that can identify concerns, involve families and connect young people to support.

A similar logic can be seen in Sweden through SSPF cooperation, which brings together schools, social services, police and leisure-time services.[23] The inclusion of leisure-time services is important because risks do not only appear in the classroom. Peer pressure, grooming, conflict, status-seeking and exposure to criminal networks may also occur after school, in public spaces or during leisure time. SSPF was developed to identify children and young people who are at risk of entering, or are already in the early stages of, a criminal lifestyle.[24]

The core objective of SSPF is early intervention. By combining information and expertise from different sectors, partners can build a more complete picture of the young person's situation and provide coordinated support before problems escalate. The model can be used when early warning signs appear, such as school absenteeism, behavioural difficulties, substance use, association with delinquent peers or exposure to criminal environments.

A key feature of SSPF is its structured and consent-based cooperation. With the consent of the young person and their guardians, schools, social services, police and leisure-time services can exchange relevant information and jointly develop an action plan tailored to the young person's needs. This helps partners coordinate support across different areas of the young person's life, including school, family, leisure time and contact with services.

Sweden's Social Intervention Groups, or SIG, represent a more intensive form of coordinated support. While SSPF is used for young people at risk or in the early stages of a criminal pathway, SIG is aimed at young people aged 13 to 20 who are at high risk of persistent offending and need support from several agencies at the same time. SIG is led and coordinated by social services and is based on the Risk-Need-Responsivity principle: the intensity of support should match the young person's risk level, interventions should target the factors driving offending, and support should be adapted to the young person's abilities, motivation and circumstances.

Together, SSP, SSPF and SIG show how school-linked prevention can be organised as a continuum. Schools may help identify concerns such as absence, behavioural changes, peer conflict or disengagement, but responses are coordinated with other actors. For lesser or emerging concerns, multi-agency cooperation can help connect the young person and family to support. Where risks are higher and more entrenched, models such as SIG can coordinate more intensive interventions across home, school and leisure settings. This avoids placing unrealistic responsibility on schools while ensuring that their knowledge of the young person is included in wider prevention work.

ADAMAS and Credible Messengers in the Netherlands

Not all young people at risk of recruitment can be reached through family or school alone. Some may have strained family relationships, be disengaged from education or distrust formal services. In such cases, trusted adults from the wider community can play an important bridging role by reconnecting young people to support, families, schools and institutions.

ADAMAS is an Amsterdam-based network of Credible Messengers, established in 2021.[25] Credible Messengers are people rooted in local neighbourhoods who can positively influence young people with multiple risk factors, promote prosocial behaviour and help prevent involvement in the drug trade.[26] The model is based on the idea that some young people are difficult for formal services to reach because they feel unheard, disappointed, angry or distrustful of institutions.

The added value of Credible Messengers lies in their ability to build trust through lived experience and personal connection. They know the street, understand the pressures young people face and can act as trusted adults who listen without judgement, while also challenging young people when needed. Their role is not to replace families, schools or professional services, but to bridge the gap between them.

ADAMAS combines informal credibility with training and network development. Credible Messengers follow a four-month training pathway focused on personal development, relationships, neighbourhood dynamics and wider systems. The network also organises meetings with partners and supports youth activities. This helps Credible Messengers professionalise their role while maintaining the trust and flexibility that make them credible to young people.

One example is a summer programme organised by Credible Messengers for boys aged 15 to 20 who had been involved in youth crime and for whom regular youth or sports work was not sufficiently suitable.[27] The programme offered meaningful daytime activities during the school holidays, including music, shared meals, mentoring and contact with positive role models. This is relevant to school-based prevention because school holidays can create periods of reduced structure and supervision, especially for young people already disconnected from mainstream support.

ADAMAS offers a useful example of how credible adults with lived experience can strengthen trust, provide belonging and help young people reconnect with protective systems. It should therefore be understood not as a family-based or school-based intervention in itself, but as a complementary approach that can support young people when family, school or formal services struggle to reach them.

Conclusion

Families and schools are two of the most important protective environments in a young person's life. Families can provide stability, supervision, emotional support and a sense of belonging. Schools can provide structure, trusted adults, learning opportunities, positive peer relationships and access to wider support services. In the context of youth recruitment into organised crime, both settings can strengthen the everyday relationships and routines that make young people less vulnerable to negative peer influence, exploitation or the appeal of criminal networks.

Family-based interventions can help reduce behavioural problems, improve communication, strengthen parenting confidence and support more stable family relationships. However, their value should not be assessed only through reductions in offending. Positive change also means improved family functioning, better emotional wellbeing, stronger supervision, reduced conflict, increased school engagement or improved access to services. These outcomes may look different across families, communities and welfare systems, which makes local adaptation and evaluation essential.

Schools also play a central preventive role. They are often among the first places where signs of vulnerability become visible, such as unexplained absence, disengagement, behavioural changes, peer conflict or declining performance. At the same time, they are protective environments in their own right. Keeping young people connected to education can help reduce isolation, maintain contact with trusted adults and preserve future opportunities. School-based prevention should therefore build on the educational and relational role of schools, rather than turning them into law-enforcement actors.

Both family and school-based approaches need to be accessible, non-stigmatising and adapted to local realities. Families may face barriers such as time constraints, financial pressure, language barriers, mistrust of institutions or fear of being judged. Young people may distrust adults, feel loyalty towards peers or family members involved in crime or avoid support because they do not see themselves as vulnerable. Schools and family services therefore need clear referral pathways, culturally sensitive communication and support from actors who can build trust over time.

Implementation also matters. Evidence-based programmes cannot simply be transferred from one country to another and expected to work in the same way. Their impact depends on the quality of existing services, professional training, family engagement, funding and the wider legal and welfare context. In many European countries, existing youth and family services may already provide relatively intensive support, which can affect whether imported programmes show additional value. This underlines the need for local evaluation, careful targeting and adaptation without losing the core components of the intervention.

Finally, neither families nor schools can prevent youth recruitment into organised crime alone. Families may be overwhelmed or themselves affected by crime, violence or exclusion. Schools may notice concerns but lack the mandate, information or resources to respond fully. Effective prevention therefore requires multi-agency cooperation between families, schools, social services, youth workers, health services, municipalities, police and community organisations. The aim is not to shift responsibility onto families or schools, but to ensure that young people remain supported and connected to protective factors.

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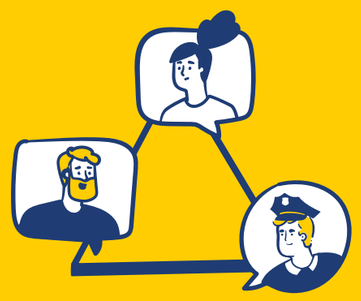
Summary

Family and school are among the most important environments in a young person's development and can play a decisive role in preventing involvement in organised crime. Supportive family relationships, positive school engagement and early identification of difficulties can strengthen protective factors and reduce vulnerability. This section looked at interventions that work with families, schools and young people to address risk factors, strengthen protective relationships and provided support before involvement in organised crime becomes more established.

TOOLKIT YOUTH RECRUITMENT INTO ORGANISED CRIME

Part 04
Focused deterrence to prevent organised crime

EUCPN
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK



Focused deterrence aims to identify people susceptible for or already involved in serious crime and offer them local support to exit their situation.

Introduction

The focused deterrence (FD) approach builds on the fact that the majority of serious violence results from a small group of people. Because they themselves are often victims of violence or challenging socio-economic circumstances, their criminal involvement can be caused by exploitation or self-protection. In addition, the type and severity of violence differ depending on the dynamic of the individuals and the groups they belong to. FD aims to identify people susceptible for or already involved in serious crime and offer them local support to exit their situation. The strategy was developed in the United States but has already been replicated in several European countries.[1]

Focused deterrence is also labelled as 'pulling levers' referring to the local mechanisms (levers) that are used to reach out to young people and prevent further re-offending.[2] Another commonly used metaphor is the 'carrot and stick'. As a reward, support is offered for good behaviour (the carrot) and punishment (the stick) is received for continued violence.

Focused deterrence uses three strategies that are needed for a successful initiative:

- Deterrence: the police identify high-risk individuals and warn them that continuing to commit crime and violence will result in a swift and certain punishment.
- Offering support through direct communication: all high-risk individuals receive the same message ("the violence must stop; you are important and valued citizens in the community") in combination with access to social services and exit programmes.
- Community engagement: the community is involved in order to express the need to stop the violence and encourage reintegration into society. This is achieved by utilising moral voices from within the community (e.g. schools, religious leaders, local businesses or advocates for victims). In some cases, reformed former group members get involved in order to enhance the efforts of the authorities.

The strategy can be used for both individuals (typically 14 years and older) or groups involved in serious violence. Implementation occurs through a multi-agency partnership consisting of law enforcement, judiciary actors (i.e. youth services and probation), social workers and community stakeholders.[3] While FD is originally designed to prevent violence, it can also have positive effects on youth recruitment.

How focused deterrence works

The following eight steps show the progress of preparing, implementing and monitoring the FD process.

Preparation & identification	
1. Determine if there is a problem containing serious crime (i.e. violence) that involves young people and whether FD is applicable	• FD should be used for significant and persistent cases of violence (e.g. violent conflicts between criminal groups). • Analyse what is causing the violence through crime data and community insights. • Suggested benchmark: 50 police-recorded cases of serious violence per 100,000 in the population for at least 2 consecutive years. However, FD can also be used as a preventive strategy to tackle active criminal groups before serious violence starts to soar. • Assess the availability and effectiveness of existing prevention initiatives. What already exists becomes the starting point for added initiatives. • Identify potential gaps, e.g. are the prevention initiatives well-organised and serving the diverse communities and neighbourhoods in the area?
2. Establish a multi-agency intervention group	• Identify the most relevant stakeholders in the local context & create a dedicated & committed team. In some countries the public prosecutor was not included, while Sweden, for example, invited a local politician. • Potential stakeholders include law enforcement, public prosecutor, social services, religious leaders and the local community. • Create information-sharing agreements between all relevant partners. • FD requires long-term implementation – ensure sufficient resources for an efficient and sustainable delivery. • Allow at least 6 months planning for: the delivery plan, cooperation mechanisms and essential training. • Create an overview of the resources, capacity and skills of the staff in order to shape the intervention.
3. Identify the target group of the intervention	• The majority of violence is driven by a small group of people; they are the FD target group. • Use crime data and community insights to identify this group. • Define eligibility criteria for the initiative (e.g. only young people or also influential group members that are exploiting young people?) For example, look at age, residency and the type, amount and severity of offences, etc. • Avoid net-widening and over-criminalisation by targeting those that only commit minor offences. FD only targets the most persistent offenders. For other perpetrators different prevention strategies should be used.
Implementation	
4. Involve families and the local community in the development and delivery of FD	• Ensure the initiative is aligned with the community's needs and values. • Make sure community stakeholders have a role to play in the delivery. • Include time to disseminate information (e.g. on the goals, methods and expectations). • Offer opportunities for cooperation: → the community can support the target group → they can give and/or collect feedback on the implementation of the initiative.
5. Use clear and frequent deterrent communication	• Organise a call-in meeting with the target group (and their families) and the community. → Emphasise the need to stop the violence to ensure the safety of the gang members and residents. → Use clear and consistent communication. → Highlight available support services to help desist → Communicate the legal consequences for continued violence. • Find the desired communication methods: → a group meeting to avoid stigmatisation. → physical & tailored one-to-one conversations can be added to obtain more engagement. → written letters and flyers (provides a formal record). • Tailor messages to the target group (based on age and cultural differences). • Plan and rehearse the first contact (i.e. where it occurs and led by whom).
6. Prepare swift, certain and proportionate consequences for re-offending Coordinated by law enforcement	• Establish and enforce sanctions in case the violence continues. • Ensure fair, transparent and tailored sanctions that are proportionate to the offences. • Ensure the target group is aware of the swift responses. • In some cases: include targeted disruption (e.g. signal and stop cars for regular checks). • The disruption can be combined with another reference to support channels (e.g. when the car is pulled over, remind passengers of social services). • Combine police-led sanctions with disruptions: → police presence & surveillance → swift arrests and prosecution for minor offences → probation supervision (curfew or electronic tags) → tenancy enforcement (property inspections to search for illegal goods) • Consider the role of all stakeholders in the delivery of consequences.
7. Provide timely and appropriate support for those that want to stop offending Coordinated by social services and community stakeholders.	• The team continues developing relationships with the target group. • Address the root causes of violence through support by social services and the community. • Provide key services (e.g. education, stable housing or treatment for substance use). • Use social workers (or a case manager) for tailored support and mentoring. • Establish effective referral systems amongst stakeholders.
Monitoring	
8. Track the progress of individuals and monitor the delivery of the activities	• Monitor the implementation, the (potential) progress of target group and the results of the activities (e.g. improved safety in the neighbourhood). • Allow for adaptation of activities or outreach based on the feedback. • Create accountability of the stakeholders to ensure that everyone plays their part. • Create indicators to measure activities & outcomes. → number of sanctions and support activities executed. → number of offences before vs. after the initiative. → results of risk-assessments. • Conduct a pre- and post-measurement to compare the results. • Identify which data is collected by which stakeholder.

Table 1: Focused Deterrence Practice Guidance (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025, 9-10).

A unique element of the FD strategy are the call-in meetings that are organised with the purpose of sharing the deterrent message. Even though the FD strategy is translated within many programmes in various countries, the call-in meetings remain central to the approach. Depending on the national context, the content and format of the meeting changes. For instance, the Swedish GVI initiative organises tailored face-to-face meetings (Custom Notifications) with high-risk individuals that allow for interactive communication.

How these meetings are organised differs in the various FD programmes. The Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) in Glasgow, for example, broadens the scope of a call-in meeting. Their events aim to share the deterrent message as well as inform residents and professionals about the programme, the new policing strategy and planned activities. It, therefore, becomes an event on a larger scale in which multiple speakers (e.g. the police, ex-gang members and those affected by violence) have their say.[4]

Additionally, the location and organisation of a call-in meeting matter. In the original American CIRV programme, the meetings were organised in a courtroom. Yet, the CIRV in Glasgow found that a neutral venue that allows varied

seating can avoid the participants feeling directly targeted and stigmatised. The discussions should not last too long, 10 minutes per actor should suffice to deliver the message.

The participants and outreach methods for a call-in meeting also varies. They are generally targeted at those already involved in organised crime but can also be extended to minors at risk. Schools and community associations can support this identification process. The original CIRV programme in the United States made use of religious leaders in the community to spread the word. This technique, however, did not work in the Glasgow programme. They created a music video tailored to the young target group they wanted to reach.

Why focused deterrence works

Compared to some other prevention initiatives, FD is currently used in several countries across the world and has been regularly evaluated. Nevertheless, the majority of evaluations originate from the United States, meaning that we have to be cautious in generalising these findings to the European setting. The overall effect of these evaluations identified a 33% decrease in offending compared to the control group. The largest effect occurs in violence between conflicting groups and in violence against high-risk individuals.[5]

The reason why FD can be effective is due to the correct implementation of the deterrence-mechanism. This prevention mechanism deters potential offenders from crime through the threat of punishment.[6] Deterrence is often used unsuccessfully, for instance in the case of traffic fines that only arrive months after the speeding has taken place. Yet, the risk of facing certain, swift and proportional punishment can discourage further offending, particularly for young offenders who might not consider or understand the legal consequences of their behaviour.

Furthermore, FD works due to its combination of deterrence, the provision of support and the inclusion of the community. Including pro-social opportunities provides a pathway out of crime for those that want to get out. Seeing how many young people are coerced or groomed into organised crime, this is an essential component that enables individuals to exit the situation. The fact that families, community leaders or ex-gang members are also involved creates another layer of cohesion and social control.

The cost of focused deterrence

The cost of implementing a focused deterrence initiative will be high, considering the time needed to identify the target group, coordinate the activities and stakeholders, train the staff and establish cooperation with other service providers. As a reference, the Northamptonshire CIRV (Community Initiative to Reduce Violence) project cost an average of £720,000 per year (approximately £1,190 per participant).

In contrast, multiple studies have shown the high cost of incarceration compared to its low reintegration rates. The Netherlands, for example, pays on average 400 million euros per year for punishments (including both incarceration and community service). This comes down to 21,000 euros for each sanctioned offence and 45 to 259 euros per taxpayer on a yearly basis.[7] When comparing these high costs for punishments that also have high recidivism rates, it becomes clear that more value can be gained by investing these funds in preventive initiatives, such as FD.

Moreover, various crime prevention strategies have shown that effective prevention measures require a long-term effort in terms of resources and staff engagement. By way of illustration, 'Fast Track' is an early-development initiative aimed at young children and their families that focuses on teaching pro-social skills, yet later in life it can also have a positive effect on other anti-social behaviours such as substance use or school dropout.[8] Therefore, while the cost of prevention programmes may be high, the effects obtained endure both in the short and long-term.

To find out more, read the EUCPN Mythbuster 'Getting smart on crime with a holistic approach': https://eucpn.org/document/eucpn-mythbuster-getting-smart-on-crime-with-a-holistic-approach

A criticism linked to FD is whether the strategy is applicable for all those involved in organised crime. It presumes that when the likelihood of punishment is increasing, perpetrators will choose to make use of the support mechanisms provided. Yet, in practice, (young) people involved in criminal networks are often dealing with complex issues, including substance abuse and threats or exploitation from criminal networks. These circumstances can make it feel impossible to escape or to make different choices. That is the reason why focused deterrence includes a large variety of stakeholders that regularly convey the message of support and reintegration. By organising multiple call-ins and offering a wide array of support, people may become more inclined to participate.

Implementation challenges

Due to FD being a large-scale strategy, there are various challenges to consider before implementing it.

Adapt FD initiatives to fit the local context

Before replicating existing initiatives, the local situation needs to be analysed to identify what type of crime is caused by which groups. Subsequently, the provision of support and sanctions need to be tailored to the relevant community stakeholders and the legislative mechanisms available. It may be the case that some preventive actions are already taking place that can be strengthened or included in a larger systematic approach.

To illustrate, the CIRV project was first created in Cincinnati and then replicated in Glasgow. Both cities showed similar socio-economic risk factors that fuelled gang violence, one of which related to the fact that these are post-industrial cities facing economic difficulties and high unemployment. Despite these similarities, Glasgow identified differences in their target group compared to the American gangs, namely that Glasgow had to contend with a more disorganised group of young and local members (aged 12 to mid-20s) mainly using knives and bottles instead of guns. Additionally, alcohol abuse was only identified as a contributing factor in Glasgow. This resulted in different outreach activities for the target group.[9]

Complex approach including various stakeholders

Focused deterrence requires close collaboration between several stakeholders: law enforcement, judicial partners, social services and community stakeholders. This type of cooperation with multiple partners requires clarity with regard to the strategy to be adopted, its aims and the way it is implemented (i.e. by ensuring an adequate balance between deterrence and support). A clear plan is required to counter potential issues, such as information sharing or high staff turnovers. Consistent communication (through regular meetings) and skilled leadership are needed to ensure strong working relationships and continuous support from all community partners.[10]

Moreover, social services and community stakeholders may experience distrust towards authorities or be hesitant to share information, which would be detrimental to an effective implementation.[11] To avoid this challenge, law enforcement needs to be very clear as to why FD is being implemented and what positive effects can be expected from the activities.

Another pitfall has to do with the fact that law enforcement often lacks the resources, motivation or access to community stakeholders.[12] Embedding the FD strategy within existing prevention policies could facilitate a low-threshold implementation and enable the existing knowledge and resources of each stakeholder to be used.

Finding the balance between offering support and using deterrence

The FD strategy is entirely dependent on the effective delivery of the deterrent message in combination with support services. To achieve this, a clear plan should state which messages are to be delivered by which actors. That way, the roles are equally divided and community stakeholders will not feel left out of the call-in meetings.

Practical considerations include choosing neutral territory, especially when dealing with rival groups or organising smaller meetings without mixing different groups. Finally, organising separate meetings for minors and adults will help tailor the message appropriately.

Potential dangers include that the police consider this approach as being soft on crime and difficult to embed in existing police work. Likewise, the management level might not support the change in approach or the additional stakeholders that need to be accommodated.[13]

Reaching the target group and including them in the programme

The proposed call-in meetings can be experienced as intimidating for the young people concerned or their family members. This is why including trusted community stakeholders in the meetings is key to encourage participation. Additionally, there is a higher chance of success when the participants relate to the practitioners. For this reason, police officers should avoid wearing their uniforms and the initial meetings should occur in a neutral environment, such as a community centre.

Another technique is, at first, to focus on a target group that can be compelled to participate, for instance through probation.[14]

Using the administrative approach to strengthen deterrence

> A key element of focused deterrence is the deterrent effect. The administrative approach can function as a complementary tool that reinforces deterrence and local coordination by enabling fast responses outside of the criminal justice system.
> Administrative measures can contribute towards tackling organised crime by enabling swift and targeted responses. Area bans, for example, can be given to people that have committed criminal offences or caused public-order disturbances. The aim of this is to protect public safety and it is often used as a means of addressing hooliganism and religious extremism. Nevertheless, its purpose could be extended in order to combat members of organised networks that are approaching young people in specific neighbourhoods.[15]

An opposite example from the Netherlands is the use of 'area ban warnings' for groups of young people that commit offences such as nuisance or vandalism. If they then continue these activities, they receive an actual area ban. The police play an important role in enforcing the area ban in the Netherlands. They have to verify compliance with existing bans, but they often do not have the time to do so systematically. This likely reduces the impact of such bans, in view of the fact that deterrence works when sanctions are swift and certain.[16]

Although the administrative approach can strengthen deterrence by securing immediate and concrete consequences for criminal behaviour, it is important that alternative support and desistance pathways remain accessible for young people. In this example, it means that area bans are combined with other measures, including social outreach and improved parental monitoring.

More information about the administrative approach:
https://administrativeapproach.eu/publications/toolkit-administrativeapproach

Good practices in the EU

The implementation of FD varies depending on the country or even region in which it is replicated. The changes include the target group, the type of crime being addressed, the number and type of community stakeholders that are included or the way in which the call-ins are organised.

Group Violence Intervention and Ceasefire Malmö (Sluta Skjut)

The Group Violence Intervention (GVI) is likely the most widely known application of the FD strategy. It originated in Operation Ceasefire in Boston in the 1990s when the police, prosecutors, probation officers and community stakeholders cooperated to reach out to violent gang members. They offered suitable alternatives to the gang lifestyle, while the police increased suppression for the continued violence.

In 2018, Malmö (Sweden) replicated this programme creating 'Ceasefire Malmö' (or Sluta Skjut). It served to tackle serious group-related violence that was rising all across Sweden. In the long term, the city aims to also increase the feeling of safety amongst its citizens. Currently, GVI has been implemented in the UK (in Glasgow and London), Sweden (in Gothenburg, Örebro, Huddinge, Järfälla and Upplands-Bro and Uppsala), Copenhagen and Rotterdam. With regard to reducing violence, the results have been either positive or mixed, mainly because the evaluations were not designed to clearly show whether GVI caused the observed changes in violence.[17]

In Malmö, GVI consists of a partnership between law enforcement, social services, prison and probation services and community stakeholders.[18] They carry out the call-ins in the case of members of violent groups. This happens in two forms:

- Call-ins are formal face-to-face meetings between the GVI partners (e.g. police and the municipality), community stakeholders and representatives of the criminal group that is causing violence.

- Custom notifications are flexible messages that are delivered either by means of a home or street visit. These messages are personalised in a more detailed way, based on recent or anticipated violence. They were created during the COVID-19 pandemic as an alternative, at a time when large gatherings were forbidden.

Regardless of the means through which the messages are conveyed, they always include two focus points. First, is a warning that the continued violence is unacceptable and will result in sanctions for the entire group. Second, is the emphasis on support that is available from the community for those that want to exit the group. During the call-ins, the involvement of community stakeholders is crucial. They are teachers, religious leaders or local business owners that serve as 'moral voices' and share their concern about the violence. They can also be influential people (e.g. family members or friends) that are close to the offenders and may be able to affect their behaviour.[19]

An example of a call-in meeting introduction by the police

It is no coincidence that you are here. […] You belong in some form to a violent group in Malmö. A group that makes it difficult for yourselves, for others, and for the citizens in Malmö. You can't change the past, but you can decide what your future will look like. I know you live in great insecurity. You wear a bullet-proof vest, and you are constantly exposed. We have police officers who work with mapping people and groups like you. So, we know who you hang out with, we know who you are. Take our message now: if someone in your group commits lethal violence, or shootings, we will focus on you and your entire group. From now on, it will be difficult to be the most violent group in Malmö. You will be arrested, searched, seized, and we will wire-tap your phones. […].

All groups in Malmö will get the same message. The people I meet are individuals like you. They tell me and my colleagues that they are very afraid and worried about being killed. They are afraid that they might be forced to kill someone. […]

It can be difficult to find your way in the society system with all the paperwork, but from now on it will be easy. You will get all the help possible if you are willing to make a change. There is more, and better help, than you may think. All I ask of you is that you take your finger off the trigger. I want you, who are sitting here, to take all the help that is available. I don't want you to die.

(Transcribed from the first rehearsal of a call-in meeting in Malmö City, 2019).[20]

Since its implementation, Ceasefire has been evaluated positively. This is partly due to an already established collaboration between law enforcement and social services. Practitioners experienced many benefits from the call-ins, such as better coherence and improved strategic communication. Whilst it took more time than expected to prepare the call-ins, they found it a good approach to directly reach and communicate with the target group. Additionally, they reported a better understanding of the individuals involved in violence.[21]

Nevertheless, the police experienced difficulties in finding community stakeholders that were willing and capable of participating in the programme as well as identifying their role. This is an issue, considering that the strategy requires equal collaboration. Additionally, it showed that individuals often moved between different groups, making it difficult to identify which criminal group executed the violence and should bear the criminal consequences.[22]

Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV)

The Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) is another FD programme modelled on the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence and Boston Operation Ceasefire. CIRV establishes a multi-agency approach to reduce violence amongst suspected or known gang members as well as people susceptible of recruitment in criminal gangs. It involves a partnership between police, social services, education, housing and community services and partners that delivers the message to existing street gangs that the violence must stop. Those that want to stop their violent activities receive support (e.g. careers advice or a former gang member as a mentor) and those that do not will receive sentences.[23]

A specific feature of CIRV is the use of a Navigator. This is a case manager (someone from the CIRV team or the police)

that builds trust and identifies the areas for support that are needed, such as accommodation, work, wellbeing and practical life skills.

CIRV was created in Cincinnati before being replicated in Glasgow (2009) and Northamptonshire (2019). In Glasgow, the programme focuses on young people being caught and those that show the urge to change. Intelligence gathering and a gang violence analysis of the gang culture uncovered the existence of 55 street gangs with a total of 600 to 700 members. During the first two years, around 400 members engaged with the project. In Northamptonshire, the programme targets young people at risk of becoming involved in gangs, rather than those already taking part in criminal activity. The programme is guided by active listening to the recipient and developing trust in order to facilitate behaviour change.[24]

The European versions made some changes to the call-in meetings used in the original programme. In Cincinnati, the meetings were mandatory for participants through their probation scheme. In Glasgow, however, law enforcement did not want to limit the programme to people in the criminal justice system. It therefore opted to create voluntary 'self-referral sessions' open to anyone linked to organised crime groups.[25]

The evaluation of the Glasgow initiative shows an average 46% violence reduction of those engaged in CIRV. This is a 22% larger decrease in violence than other gang members participating on other existing services in the city. CIRV also proved effective in terms of knives and weapons carrying with a 59% decrease. However, the evaluation of the Northamptonshire project only showed indications of a positive effect without being able to make a causal claim.[26]

FD as part of a holistic approach

FD is a strategy that ideally should be implemented in combination with other prevention strategies, such as community-oriented policing and youth diversion. A holistic approach of this type offers multiple opportunities and pathways to those involved in crime and therefore increases the chances of achieving a positive result.

A strategy with several commonalities is the use of diversion and exit programmes. They aim is to avoid young people having to undergo court proceedings and to create disengagement from organised crime. This operates by placing children first and focusing on their welfare and personal development by means of alternative reintegration opportunities. An essential component of FD is offering support. That support should also consist of diversion and exit programmes in which young people who have committed crimes are encouraged to understand the impact of their behaviour, develop pro-social skills and practise alternative responses. These programmes can be offered by social workers and judicial officers to all those who wish to leave the organised crime group.

Another relevant approach is community-oriented policing (COP). COP goes beyond traditional law enforcement practices by building trust and cooperation between police and the community. It relies on maintaining close, continuous and meaningful contact with locals. Such an approach is relevant for FD considering the important role of both law enforcement and the community. As they deliver the deterrent messages and offers of support, they should cooperate closely to convey clear messages and set up call-in meetings.

An example of a holistic programme is Prevention with Authority (PmG), which aims to prevent young people (aged 8 to 27) becoming involved in organised crime or to prevent them progressing further into a criminal career. It seeks to improve opportunities and future prospects as well as set boundaries for those displaying criminal behaviour. The national strategy is currently being implemented in 47 municipalities in the Netherlands that either have a high risk or high presence of crime.

PmG has four goals, including: making young people more resilient to crime, combining preventive and repressive measures, using effective evidence-based measures and ensuring long-term and structural investment from all involved partners. The programme is wider than merely an FD strategy. It creates (or enhances) local partnerships between the municipality, (community) police, judicial partners, social services, schools and the young people (and their families). They are offered a person-centred approach in the form of customised and local support, depending on their involvement in organised crime. This entails that a minor who is vulnerable to recruitment will receive different support compared to a minor who is already playing an influential role in a criminal network.[27] As a result, PmG consists of a wide array of activities, some of which will follow the FD strategy, while in some locations or for some children focused deterrence may not be applicable.

Recently, a report was published that questions the effectiveness of PmG. It highlights the programme's 250 different approaches, some of which have little to no evidence-based foundation. It is recommended that PmG should better identify all initiatives that form part of the programme in order to examine which initiatives are effective and what approaches are currently still missing.[28]

How to measure the effects?

FD initiatives are based on a strong theoretical basis (by combining swift and proportionate punishment with the provision of support by social services and the community), meaning that they are likely to be effective when implemented correctly. Nevertheless, while various applications of the focused deterrence strategy have been found to be moderately effective at reducing crime, little is known about its long-term impact.[29]

Currently, FD programmes generally use basic pre- and post-measurements of crime statistics to evaluate the effects. Even though this can provide insights on the potential crime reduction, it does not verify whether the initiative was responsible for this reduction or, more specifically, which FD mechanisms (i.e. the deterrent messages or the community involvement) may have caused that effect. To achieve this understanding, more elaborate evaluation designs are needed, such as the inclusion of a control group for comparison. Another possibility is to include content analyses of the deterrent messages and offender meetings in the evaluations to identify the best messaging and outreach techniques for each context. Similarly, surveys and questionnaires that assess citizens' feelings of safety, sense of inclusion or policy legitimacy could be used to collect additional data on the inclusion of community stakeholders as well as the holistic impact of the FD programme.[30]

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Summary

Focused deterrence tackles organised crime by focusing on the small group of people that causes the majority of serious violence. By using deterrent messages, offering support and including community stakeholders, high-risk individuals are held responsible for their actions and are encouraged to stop the violence. This section focused on the techniques that are required to correctly implement a focused deterrence initiative, such as reaching the target group through call-in meetings and finding the balance between support and deterrence. It concludes with practical examples and lessons from several European good practices.

TOOLKIT YOUTH RECRUITMENT INTO ORGANISED CRIME

Part 05
Online recruitment, online prevention

EUCPN
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK

Gangs and criminal networks now use online platforms to extend their reach, mask their operations and target specific demographics.

Introduction

In the digital age, online social media and communication platforms have dramatically transformed the landscape of organised crime. What once required face-to-face meetings and careful planning now occurs rapidly and covertly in digital spaces. One of the most concerning developments is the increasing use of social media and online communication by criminal organisations to recruit young people. This trend has significant implications for society, law enforcement and for the wellbeing of vulnerable young people. Understanding how online platforms facilitate recruitment – and how to prevent it – is crucial to preventing this evolving threat.

Organised crime has adapted to technological advancements much like legitimate enterprises. Gangs and criminal networks now use online platforms to extend their reach, mask their operations and target specific demographics. This digital transformation enables recruiters to bypass traditional social constraints and reach young people directly in their homes, schools and private lives – often without parents or guardians noticing.

Reach and encryption: the driving forces of online recruitment

The online recruitment of young people into organised crime has raised growing concerns in the past few years. What is even more worrying is the fact that recruitment is increasingly shifting to social media and instant messaging services, or at least has a strong online component.[1]

For recruiters, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Facebook, and encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal provide a balance between reach and risk minimisation. They can reach bigger audiences as the online platforms they exploit are widely used by young people. They can also target specific groups. Groomers, for instance, can scan social media for vulnerable individuals, whereas other recruiters might look specifically for adherents of a subculture that normalises violence.

Paradoxically, while online means of communication offer enhanced visibility to recruiters, they also offer higher levels of anonymity than offline recruitment efforts. Finding out who is behind a recruitment attempt or where this person is located can be difficult, and if it can be done, it will often require the cooperation of the platform. Messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal, but also the messaging functions in social media platforms such as Facebook Messenger or Instagram Direct Messenger usually offer end-to-end encryption.

The mechanisms of online recruitment

There are several reasons why online communication and social media exacerbate the risk of criminal recruitment or exploitation, regardless of the predisposition to risk and protective factors (see section 1: problem analysis of this Toolkit). The following mechanisms are not exclusive to the online world, but are likely to be more influential in the online sphere than offline.

Social validation and identity seeking

Adolescents are in a critical age of identity formation. Recruiters exploit this by offering a sense of belonging, purpose or status. Through flashy content – luxury cars, money, designer clothes – criminal influencers glamorise the lifestyle associated with organised crime. Such messages have a bigger potential reach online.

In some cases, recruiters use gamification strategies to attract and reward young people for criminal activities, which they frame as missions or challenges. As in games or a competition, recruiters foster a sense of accomplishment in those that complete certain jobs, in many cases rewarding young people for doing a job. In young people, such positive reinforcement could be more influential than the realisation that they are crossing normative barriers – if they have that realisation at all.

Economic vulnerability

Young people in economically disadvantaged areas are often targeted with promises of fast money. Recruiters may offer gifts, small amounts of cash or protection in exchange for minor tasks, which later escalate to more serious offences. This mechanism has historically played a major role in criminal recruitment, but is amplified online, as social media increase the chance of a match between recruiter and job seeker. Recruitment messaging often uses phrases like “quick cash” or “easy money” or even “job opportunity” or “business”. At the same time, they ignore the illegal nature of the work or at least downplay it, for instance through the use of emojis.

Lack of supervision

Young people spend increasing amounts of unsupervised time online, exposing them to all kinds or online risks. This unmonitored access allows criminal recruiters to initiate and develop relationships with minimal risk of detection.

Manipulation and grooming

Criminals employ psychological tactics similar to those used in sexual exploitation. Initially, the language they use is often chosen carefully to build trust, loyalty and a sense of belonging. In a next phase, the journey of travel switches to isolating victims from their support networks, normalising criminal behaviour and ultimately turning the young person into willing participants. Groomers will often choose victims based on pre-existing risk factors. For instance, people with mental health problems or addictions may be easier to groom and exploit. In addition to criminal exploitation, victims may be subject to other forms of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation.

Gaming and streaming platforms

Beyond mainstream social media, online games and streaming platforms like Twitch and Discord are also used for communication and recruitment. These platforms offer semi-private chat environments where criminals can operate undetected. In certain cases, specific, violence-promoting subcultures have emerged on certain gaming platforms, allowing recruiters to target a specific audience. A feature of online subcultures is the use of specific slang, emojis and coded phrases. Criminal recruiters adopt this languages, which offers them the double advantage that it is appealing to, and approachable for, their young audience. At the same time, it helps to obscure the actual message. In some cases, online games are used as a training ground for particular forms of violence.[2]

Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Preventing the online recruitment of young people into organised crime requires a multifaceted approach involving education, technology, community support and law enforcement. It cannot be emphasised enough that the types of intervention described elsewhere in this Toolkit are effective at preventing both offline and online recruitment. These interventions address risk and protective factors that affect children’s vulnerability to recruitment both in the offline and online spheres.

However, there are a number of strategies specifically aimed at preventing young people being recruited online. The first is to enhance children’s digital literacy.

Young people should be taught to recognise manipulation, grooming tactics and fake online personas.

- Schools could incorporate digital safety and critical thinking – especially in relation to life online – into their curricula.
- Parents should be aware of the platforms their children use, the risks they are exposed to, and how to have open conversations about online safety.
- Children should have real-world alternatives to seeking belonging or excitement online. Positive role models and structured activities can keep young people from seeking identity or excitement online. Youth centres and community programmes give people safe, constructive environments to express themselves and build relationships.
- Platform accountability: online platforms must take responsibility for monitoring and removing content that glamorises or facilitates organised crime. They should also provide easy ways for users to report suspicious or criminal behaviour, especially for minors.

Should we keep children offline?

The focus of prevention should be on minimising harms and improving risk awareness. Risk avoidance is not the answer to online recruitment. Some exposure to risk is even beneficial, because it helps build resilience. Exposure to risks is part of a normal learning process. In view of this, policy measures or practical interventions that blindly aim at reducing online risks for minors may not be as effective as measures and interventions aimed at reducing specific online harm. This is supported by empirical research.

Risks are also the co-agents of opportunities. Online, children find opportunities for learning, for participation and civic engagement, for creativity, and for social connection.[3] Recently, the EUKidsOnline consortium, which has researched children's online risks and safety since 2008, issued a statement on the need to protect children online rather than exclude them.[4]

Online risks and harms, and what parents and teachers can do

The internet provides children with countless ways to learn, connect and build digital skills, but it also presents risks to their safety and wellbeing. Families need to understand these challenges and how to manage them.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the risks that children and young people online may be exposed to. Two things are important here. It is important that not all risks lead to harms. The likelihood of an incidence of exposure to online risks resulting in negative impacts is influenced by the child's age, personality and experience, but also by how well the online platforms manage these risks and protect minors against them.

Content risk:	Conduct risks:	Contact risks:	Consumer risks:
Hateful, harmful, illegal content and disinformation	Hateful, harmful, illegal and user-generated problematic behaviour	Hateful, farmful, illegal and other problematic encounters	Marketing and commercial profiling risks, financial risks

Cross-cutting risks:

Additional privacy, safety and security risks
Risks on health and wellbeing
Advanced technology risks
Misuse risks

Figure 1: The 5C typology of online risks to children (OECD 2022) distinguishes between risk emanating from online content and contacts, risk related to behaviours that minors may adopt online and risks that minors can face as consumers. Cross-cutting risks intersect multiple of these categories. For instance, criminal recruiters could actively contact potential victims ("recruits"), spread content that glorifies crime and stimulate delinquent behaviour in minors.

Better Internet for Kids (BIK), the European initiative that strives to create a better internet for Europe's children and young people, has high-quality resources for children and their families on how to mitigate and navigate online risks.[5]

The BIK Learning Corner does not mention the online recruitment of minors into organised crime as a specific type of online harm. This may be indicative of the fact that this is something that parents and educators may not be sufficiently aware of. Nevertheless, the BIK guidelines for parents are also applicable to online recruitment. They identify a number of things that parents could or should do in order to keep their children save online:[6]

- **Help your child build a support system:** Parents should encourage their child to know who they can turn to if something goes wrong online. Younger children may rely on parents, a teacher or another trusted adult. Teens should also turn to trusted adults but may lean on friends or helplines too. They should be reminded that asking for help is the first step to solving problems.

- **Use the available safety tools:** Together with their child, parents should explore safety settings of the online platforms on which they are active. This includes privacy settings and content filters, as well as ways to block, mute or report users or content.

- **Transparent supervision:** Since not all online content is suitable for children, supervision is important. With younger kids, this may mean watching what they do or using monitoring tools. To older children it should be explained how their activity is monitored and this should be adjusted as they grow, so it feels supportive rather than intrusive.

- **Talk regularly about life online:** Instead of trying to cover all risks at once, parents should find ongoing chances to discuss their child's online experiences. "What if…?" questions and scenarios can help them think through possible challenges and responses.

- **Know where to get support:** Just as children need to know where to seek help, so do parents. They should know where to turn in case of problems – such as the child's school, local services or the national Safer Internet Centre.

For teachers, the same principles apply.[7] Lessons on online safety should aim at creating a safe space for discussing online activities, risks, and harms. Teenagers may often feel reluctant to discuss their online activities. Therefore, it can be useful to use other cases – e.g. starting from a news story – to discuss particular online risks.

Improving children's online safety and resilience, particularly in relation to attempts by organised crime groups to recruit young people, requires approaches that are engaging, evidence-informed and supported by meaningful dialogue. Serious games can be an effective and enjoyable way to introduce these topics, allowing children to explore realistic scenarios and practise decision-making in a safe environment. However, such games should be used primarily as a catalyst for facilitated group discussions, reflection and open dialogue rather than as standalone interventions. Teachers and other educators should be appropriately trained and provided with the resources needed to guide these conversations, respond to questions and contextualise key learning points. Care must also be taken in the design and delivery of educational materials to avoid inadvertently normalising, glamorising or promoting risky behaviours; activities should focus on building critical thinking, resilience and awareness of manipulation tactics while reinforcing positive alternatives and sources of support.[8]

Unfortunately, there are no evidence-based serious games addressing the issue of online youth recruitment into organised crime specifically. The RAYUELA game[9] developed by the EU-Funded Rayuela project provides a good example of research-based design for online serious games for children, including complementary training and support materials to provide teachers with the resources to implement them in class. The Portuguese implementation, Missão Cibersegura, shows how mobilising the educational sector catalysed the game's use and impact. However, it does not address the issue of organised crime recruitment specifically, although sections on online grooming may be useful for that as well.

"Hosselaar",[10] a Dutch-designed and Dutch-language classroom-based game for children centres gameplay on the experience of the youth drug offender, with a plot twist at the end aimed at warning participants of the dangers and risks of organised drug crime. The developers claim positive outcomes, but there are still inherent risks of negative side effects, on the one hand because the game could inadvertently promote drug crime by demonstrating how it works (and how it easy it is), and on the other hand, as a result of the fear-based messaging at the end.[11]

Other serious games that target the issue of youth recruitment make use of similar game narratives may avoid this risk as they are designed for professionals working with children, rather than the children themselves. An example from the UK is Change Your Game[12]: a VR-based game complemented by additional support materials. In the Netherlands, "Onder mijn ogen" (Right before my eyes)[13] also targets teachers.

The aim of both games is to better detect and respond to signs of involvement of young people in the illicit drug trade. The Dutch Centre of Expertise Veiligheid en Veerkracht (Centre of Expertise Safety and Resilience) conducted an impact evaluation of the latter, concluding that the small positive effects did not last beyond six months after the intervention.[14] This reveals a weakness of all prevention efforts that centre on raising awareness: the actual impact, especially in the long term, is often insubstantial compared to preventive actions that address the root causes of criminality more directly.

Some other games centre gameplay on the experience of the youth drug offender. Both the Dutch classroom-based game "Hosselaar" and British virtual reality game "Change Your Game" follow this path, followed by a plot twist aimed at warning participants of the dangers and risks of organised drug crime.

Rayeula, a fun way to fight cybercrime

> *Missão Cibersegura is a nationwide cybercrime prevention initiative led by Portugal's Polícia Judiciária (PJ) that aims to strengthen digital literacy and online safety among children and young people. Launched in 2024, the programme builds directly on the results of the EU-funded Horizon RAYUELA project, which developed a serious educational videogame designed to help children and adolescents understand and navigate online risks. Rather than relying on traditional awareness-raising campaigns, Missão Cibersegura uses gamification and interactive learning to engage young people in topics such as cyberbullying, online grooming, hate speech, disinformation and other online harms.*

One of the initiative's greatest strengths is its ability to reach children through a format that is both accessible and appealing. The RAYUELA game presents realistic online scenarios and encourages players to learn through decision-making and reflection, making cybersecurity education more engaging than conventional classroom approaches. The programme has also achieved significant national reach through partnerships with schools and educational authorities, helping to bring digital safety education to large numbers of young people across Portugal.

A second key strength is the way Missão Cibersegura mobilises teachers and the wider educational community. Educators receive training, pedagogical materials, implementation guides and ongoing support, enabling them to integrate the programme into school activities. This focus on empowering teachers helps ensure sustainability and allows prevention messages to be reinforced beyond the game itself.

Although Missão Cibersegura was not specifically designed to prevent the online recruitment or radicalisation of young people, it helps children respond more effectively to online grooming attempts. It also offers valuable lessons for similar games focusing online recruitment. Its research-based design, strong cooperation between law enforcement and education actors and the successful combination of digital tools with teacher-led interventions demonstrate how prevention initiatives can achieve scale and credibility. As highlighted by the European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN), the programme's exceptional reach and strong engagement with schools make it a promising model that could be adapted to address other online risks, including the online recruitment of vulnerable young people.

Missão Cibersegura won the second prize in the European Crime Prevention Award 2025 on the prevention online individual fraud, organised by the EUCPN.

RAYUELA
a fun way to fight cybercrime

Hosselaar

> *Hosselaar[15] is a serious game designed to raise awareness among young people aged 12–16 about the risks and consequences of becoming involved in drug-related crime. This game from the Netherlands was developed by Gamificationers in collaboration with youth workers, prevention specialists, and individuals with lived experience, and also made available for use in the Flemish educational system (Belgium). The game seeks to address the growing social problem of the increasing recruitment of adolescents into criminal networks associated with the drug trade.*

The game is designed to immerse players in the world of a "hosselaar" (a slang term roughly equivalent to a hustler or street dealer). Played in pairs within a classroom setting under the supervision of teachers and youth workers, participants progress through seven levels that simulate the choices, temptations and pressures associated with criminal involvement. Using a combination of videos, physical game materials and localised scenarios based on recognisable locations, players experience how seemingly small decisions can gradually draw young people into criminal activities. Topics covered include the attraction of status and expensive clothing, drug distribution, identifying vulnerable victims, social media recruitment tactics and the realities of dealing with criminal organisations and law enforcement.

A distinctive feature of Hosselaar is its narrative "plot twist". While players initially appear to be succeeding by earning money and advancing through the game, the final video presents the testimony of a former offender who describes the severe personal consequences of becoming involved in drug crime. The game's central message is clear: involvement in organised drug crime is not a pathway to success, but rather to victimisation, loss and long-term harm.

What online platforms should do: The Digital Services Act

What is the DSA?

The Digital Services Act (DSA), adopted in October 2022 and fully applicable from February 2024, is one of the European Union's cornerstone pieces of digital regulation.[16] It aims to create a safer, fairer and more transparent online environment, primarily by holding online intermediaries accountable for the content they host and how they moderate it.

One of the most important focuses of the DSA is protecting users, especially children and minors, from harmful online content. It does that in various ways. A ban on targeted and personalised advertisements for children means online platforms cannot use children's data for commercial goals. Platforms must also ensure that their design, functionality and default settings are safe for children if children use the platform. This aligns with the principle of "safety by design", which means that platforms need to think about child users before the product is launched, not after harm has occurred. This includes age-appropriate privacy settings, understandable terms and explanations and avoiding manipulative designs that encourage children to spend more time or share more data.

Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) must additionally conduct structured risk assessments to identify systemic risks on their services, including those that can impact the mental health and safety of children. Consequently, they have to take concrete mitigation measures such as content moderation or access restriction for underage users.

All online platforms are required to work with trusted flaggers and child safety experts when addressing risks. Trusted flaggers are entities officially designated by a Digital Services Coordinator (DSC) in an EU Member State. They can be NGOs, industry associations, child protection agencies, consumer organisations or other reputable bodies with expertise in identifying illegal content. They are granted this status based on expertise, independence and proven track record.

Significant emphasis is placed on content moderation, and all online platforms are required to prioritise reports made by the trusted flaggers and the harmful and illegal content should be removed quickly. This framework ensures harmful content targeting or involving children – such as grooming, exploitation or harassment—can be rapidly taken down.

The DSA is enforced by national Digital Services Coordinators in each EU Member State, and the European Commission oversees compliance for VLOPs. Penalties for non-compliance are steep – fines can reach up to 6% of a platform's global annual turnover and repeated violations may lead to suspension of services in the EU.

Platforms, intermediaries and VLOPs: What is what in the DSA?

Online Platforms are intermediary services that host user content and disseminate it to the public. This means that users of the platforms can upload or share content, and that that content can be made available to a broad audience. Common examples include social media platforms, video-sharing platforms, online marketplaces, app stores and collaborative platforms.

Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) are online platforms that reach more than 45 million active monthly users in the EU. A few well-known examples, as designated by the European Commission, include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Amazon, Apple App Store and Google Play. While search engines are not considered online platforms, Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs) with more than 45 million active monthly users in the EU are subject to most of the rules that apply to VLOPs.

Non-Platform Intermediaries are intermediary services that to not qualify as online platforms. The first of three categories are services that transmit data without altering or storing it, such as internet service providers and VPNs. The second category is services that temporarily store data to make transmission more efficient, such as content delivery networks and proxy servers. The third type is hosting services, which store user data but not make it publicly available. This category includes web hosting and cloud storage services.

Each category has different obligations. Non-Platform Intermediaries have limited obligations, most importantly compliance with regulations and removing illegal content when notified. Online platforms are subject to much wider range of obligations related to content moderation and transparency. This includes a ban on targeted ads to minors, notice-and action mechanisms for illegal content and cooperation with trusted flaggers. VLOPs and VLOSEs, finally, are subject to the same obligations as platforms and are additionally required to conduct or participate in independent audits and annual systemic risk assessment, and provide data access and algorithmic transparency to regulators and researchers.

The DSA and criminal recruitment of young people

The DSA can play a substantial role in limiting the possibilities for the recruitment of minors into organised crime and, in fact, the criminal recruitment of minors was one of the concerns that motivated the drafting and adoption of the DSA. The European Commission's Guidelines on measures to ensure a high level of privacy, safety and security for minors online, pursuant to the DSA, explicitly state that the risks for minors as referred to in the DSA include contact risks related to "those seeking to recruit minors into criminal gangs or promote violence".[17] In all of the instances in which the DSA refers to "illegal content", that would also include content related to criminal recruitment or criminal exploitation, including "content depicting illicit drug trafficking". After all, the DSA itself does not define what constitutes illegal content, but other EU or national law does.

key provision in the DSA is paragraph 1 of article 28 on the online protection of minors. It states that "online platforms accessible to minors shall put in place appropriate and proportionate measures to ensure a high level of privacy, safety, and security of minors, on their service." It is important to note, here, that providers of online platforms should comply with this provision, unless they implement effective measures to prevent minors from accessing their service. For instance, stating in the terms and conditions that minors are not allowed to use the platform and permitting user age self-declaration are not considered effective ways of preventing minors from accessing a platform. More advanced age verification technologies should be implemented.

Besides the likelihood of minors accessing an online platform, the platform providers should take into account the "actual or potential impact on the privacy, safety and security of minors that the online platform may pose or give rise to, based on the 5C typology of online risks to children".[18] The effectiveness of the risk mitigation should also be taken into account, including ways of monitoring the effectiveness of the measures. In other words, the obligation is not just to put measures in place, but to effectively ensure a high level of safety and security.

With respect to recommender systems for minors, the implication of the DSA is such that these systems cannot amplify any sort of content that can have a negative impact on the safety and security of minors. Such content ranges from the promotion of unrealistic beauty standards to challenges to engage in dangerous activities, and includes content that glamorises organised crime or content that invites young people to commit crimes.

In conclusion, the Digital Services Act a landmark piece of legislation aimed at creating a safer and more transparent internet, including protecting children from online recruitment into organised crime. Importantly, it reshapes the responsibilities of online platforms small and large, holding them accountable for keeping children safe online. It strongly promotes security and safety by design, imposing a clear duty on online platforms to prioritise user safety, protect minors and be transparent about how digital systems operate.

Limits to what the DSA can do for the prevention of criminal recruitment

There are also limits to what the DSA can do in terms of preventing the criminal recruitment of young people into organised crime.

First, most of the relevant obligations in the DSA are imposed on online platforms, and significant parts of the recruitment process do not use or happen on online platforms. Evidence strongly suggests that the online recruitment process unfolds in two stages. The first stage primarily happens in a (semi-) public online setting that qualifies as an online platform under the DSA. What we may see in this stage is content that glorifies organised crime, the illicit drug trade or violence, as well as content that suggests that one is looking for, or at least open to, "hiring" new recruits.

In the second stage, activities shift to private communication channels, which are not considered online platforms under the DSA, and are therefore not subject to the same obligations. This is the stage in which the nature of the job to be done (criminal offence), specific instructions and the modalities of the remuneration are discussed. Furthermore, the end-to-end encryption that these communication applications offer, makes it practically impossible for anyone, even the providers, to automatically detect illegal or risk-heavy content or behaviour.

Another limitation relates to enforcement, or more precisely to the effectiveness and speediness with which the DSA is enforced. VLOPs have a lot at stake and are likely to defend themselves against any allegations of incompliance with DSA, a process that can take time. For smaller platforms, the problem is that there are so many that carrying out effective enforcement on all of them appears to be a major challenge. They change ownership, new ones are constantly being created, and unpopular ones go out of business.

Conclusion

The role of online social media and communication in the recruitment of young people into organised crime is both complex and concerning. These digital platforms offer unprecedented access and anonymity for criminals seeking to exploit vulnerable young people. As organised crime adapts to the digital world, so too must our strategies for prevention and intervention.

Tackling this issue requires a coordinated, proactive effort across all sectors of society – from tech companies and educators to parents and policymakers. Empowering young people with knowledge, providing safe alternatives and holding platforms accountable are key to disrupting the digital pathways into organised crime.

The DSA is milestone piece of legislation, mobilising online platforms to help protect minors, including the recruitment into organised crime. However, it is worth keeping in mind that strong social skills, resilience and support networks and legal opportunities are perhaps the most important factors that will keep young people out of organised crime. Parents, the educational system and policymakers bear considerable responsibility in this regard.

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Summary
Digital environments have created new opportunities for organised crime groups to reach and recruit young people. Through social media, messaging services, gaming platforms and other online spaces, criminal networks can identify potential recruits, establish contact and exploit vulnerabilities. Online environments can also facilitate the promotion and normalisation of criminal lifestyles, while making recruitment less visible to parents, educators and other professionals.

This section examined the role of online platforms in the recruitment of young people into organised crime and explores ways to prevent and respond to online criminal exploitation. It highlighted the importance of cooperation between policymakers, educators, families, law enforcement, technology companies and other relevant actors to strengthen resilience, promote digital safety and protect young people from criminal influence.

TOOLKIT YOUTH RECRUITMENT INTO ORGANISED CRIME

Part 06
Diversion and exit support

EUCPN
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK

Diversion and exit programmes offer two complementary answers. Both recognise that young people's involvement in crime is not fixed, and that timely, proportionate and supportive interventions can redirect their trajectory.

Introduction

Instead of asking how young offenders should be punished, a more useful question is how criminal careers can be prevented or interrupted. Diversion and exit programmes offer two complementary answers. Both recognise that young people's involvement in crime is not fixed, and that timely, proportionate and supportive interventions can redirect their trajectory.

Diversion and exit support intervene at different stages of a young person's involvement in crime. Diversion aims to prevent deeper involvement with justice following an offence, often by redirecting young people away from formal prosecution and towards community-based, educational or restorative measures. Exit programmes, by contrast, support young people who are already embedded in criminal networks, gangs or organised crime groups and who need structured help to disengage safely. Together, they show that accountability, safeguarding and reintegration are not opposing goals, but mutually reinforcing ones.

This is particularly important in the context of youth recruitment into organised crime, where the wrong response can deepen rather than reduce vulnerability. Unnecessary criminal justice involvement may reinforce stigma, disrupt education or family ties and expose young people to more experienced offenders. At the same time, a response that is too light may fail to address coercion, exploitation, debt, violence or dependency on criminal networks. The challenge is therefore to find the right level of response: one that addresses harmful behaviour and prevents reoffending, while still supporting development, reintegration and credible alternatives to criminal careers.

Diversion

At the heart of diversion is the principle that children are children first, before they are offenders. This "children first" approach places the welfare, development and long-term prospects of young people at the centre of any response to delinquent behaviour. Across Europe, this is reflected in the growing emphasis on child-friendly justice: systems that are educative rather than punitive and that place the best interests of the child at their core. According to the Council of Europe, justice for children should be "accessible, age appropriate, speedy, diligent, adapted to and focused on the needs and rights of the child."[1] This includes encouraging alternatives to formal court proceedings, such as diversion measures, in order to protect children in conflict with the law from the potentially harmful effects of traditional criminal justice processing.

There is no single definition of diversion, but it is generally understood as the process of removing a child or young person from formal criminal justice proceedings and redirecting them towards community-based organisations, social services, educational measures or restorative programmes. Diversion is sometimes perceived as being "soft on crime", but this is a misconception. It does not ignore offending or remove accountability. Rather, it offers an alternative to formal prosecution that addresses the underlying causes of behaviour, reduces the risk of stigmatisation and avoids the long-term harm of a criminal record. Diversion can be applied at different stages, from first police contact to pre-trial or even court proceedings, although early diversion is particularly important because further contact with formal justice is associated with a higher risk of reoffending.[2]

Diversion should not be viewed as a standalone justice measure. It builds on many of the preventive approaches discussed throughout this toolkit. Diversion programmes are most effective when they strengthen protective factors, involve families, reconnect young people with education and community life and are delivered through multi-agency partnerships. In this sense, diversion not only responds to offending; it can also help prevent pathways into organised crime by addressing vulnerabilities before criminal involvement becomes more entrenched.

International legal framework

Diversion is firmly established in international and European juvenile justice standards. Although national diversion schemes differ across Member States, they are guided by a number of shared principles that emphasise education, rehabilitation and reintegration over punishment.

The concept of diversion in juvenile justice is not new. In 1985, the United Nations introduced the idea through the Beijing Rules, formally known as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice. These rules advocate for diverting juvenile offenders from formal trial processes. Specifically, they state:

> *"Consideration shall be given, wherever appropriate, to dealing with juvenile offenders without resorting to formal trial."*[3]

Furthermore, the UN emphasises the importance of consent in diversionary measures:

> *"Any diversion involving referral to appropriate community or other services shall require the consent of the juvenile, or her or his parents or guardian, provided that such decision to refer a case shall be subject to review by a competent authority, upon application."*

At the European level, the Council of Europe has promoted diversion as a cornerstone of child-friendly justice. Rather than relying primarily on punitive responses, it advocates multidisciplinary interventions that address the underlying causes of offending.[4] Diversion is therefore seen not simply as a way to avoid prosecution, but as an opportunity to reduce reoffending by strengthening protective factors and supporting children's development.

The Council of Europe also recognises that maturity does not automatically coincide with the age of legal majority. It therefore recommends that, where appropriate, young adults up to the age of 21 should have access to juvenile justice measures, including diversion.[5] It further highlights the need for tailored responses for groups with specific needs, including girls and young women and children from minority backgrounds.

Across these international instruments, several common principles emerge. Juvenile justice should prioritise prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration while taking into account the needs of victims. Deprivation of liberty should remain a measure of last resort and be used only for the shortest, appropriate period. Together, these principles provide the legal and ethical foundation for diversion programmes across Europe, even though their practical implementation varies between national justice systems.

Why diversion works

Diversion builds on many of the prevention approaches discussed throughout this toolkit. Rather than focusing solely on the offence committed, it seeks to address the underlying factors that contributed to the behaviour. By strengthening protective factors, involving families, reconnecting young people with education and positive peers and avoiding unnecessary criminalisation, diversion aims to change a young person's trajectory before criminal involvement becomes entrenched.

Research shows that diversion generally leads to lower rates of reoffending than formal justice processing.[6] This effect has been observed across different offences, justice systems and diversion models. Diversion has been shown to reduce both the prevalence and severity of future offending and is particularly effective when implemented early. Research also suggests that younger children, especially those under the age of 14, benefit most from diversionary interventions, while girls often experience better outcomes through diversion than through formal sanctions.

Several criminological theories help explain these findings. Labelling theory argues that formal contact with the criminal justice system can reinforce a young person's identification as an offender. Being processed through the justice system may shape how young people see themselves and how they are perceived by others, increasing the likelihood of continued offending. Diversion seeks to avoid this by responding outside formal judicial proceedings wherever appropriate.

Differential association theory highlights another potential risk of formal justice involvement. Contact with more experienced offenders may expose young people to criminal norms, attitudes and social networks, increasing opportunities for further offending. By keeping children out of the formal justice system whenever possible, diversion reduces this exposure.

Finally, diversion recognises that most young people naturally stop offending as they grow older. Often referred to as natural desistance, this reflects the well-established pattern that offending tends to peak during adolescence and decline in early adulthood. Diversion can support this trajectory by strengthening protective factors throughout the life course. Positive relationships with family, engagement in education, stable employment and supportive peer networks can act as turning points that encourage young people to move away from crime. Diversion seeks to reinforce these protective factors, rather than disrupting them through unnecessary criminal justice involvement.

At the heart of diversion lies the principle of maximum diversion, minimum intervention. Children should receive the least intrusive response necessary, with formal justice measures reserved for situations where less restrictive alternatives are insufficient. For many first-time and low-risk young offenders, a limited diversionary response may be more appropriate than formal prosecution or intensive intervention, allowing families, schools and communities to continue supporting positive behavioural change.[7] Diversion should therefore not be understood as "doing less", but as responding differently: holding young people accountable while maximising opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration.

Diversion in practice

Diversion is not a single intervention but a flexible approach that can be adapted to the child's needs, to the seriousness of the offence and to the stage of the justice process. It exists along a continuum ranging from minimal intervention to structured rehabilitation programmes.

At one end of this continuum lies true diversion, where authorities decide not to impose any formal sanction beyond a warning, reprimand or caution because family, school or community support is considered sufficient to address the behaviour. At the other end of the continuum are intensive diversion programmes combining educational, therapeutic, restorative or vocational interventions delivered over a longer period.

Diversion can be understood by means of three complementary dimensions.

Stage of intervention

- Early (pre-court): police warnings, cautions or reprimands delivered at first contact with the authorities.
- Pre-trial: prosecution is replaced by alternative measures following an assessment of the child's circumstances.
- Pre-custody: alternatives to detention, such as community service or structured rehabilitation programmes.

Intensity

- Minimal: warning, caution or informal monitoring without referral.
- Moderate: referral to counselling, mentoring, educational or community services.
- Intensive: structured programmes involving therapeutic support, life skills training, vocational education or restorative interventions with active monitoring.

Method of delivery

- Informal: managed directly by police or community actors.
- Formal: coordinated through youth justice services with referrals to specialist organisations.
- Restorative: incorporating victim-offender mediation, family group conferencing or reparative activities. The different types of diversion can be effective when they are proportionate to the child's circumstances, responsive to local needs and supported by appropriate services. The guiding principle is therefore not to identify one "best" programme, but to match the intervention to the young person's level of risk, needs and strengths.

Restorative justice

> *Restorative justice is sometimes incorporated into diversion programmes across Europe. While diversion primarily seeks to avoid unnecessary involvement in the formal justice system, restorative justice focuses on repairing the harm caused by offending and rebuilding relationships between the young person, the victim and the wider community.*

Rather than relying exclusively on punishment, restorative approaches encourage young people to acknowledge the consequences of their behaviour, take responsibility for the harm caused and actively contribute towards repairing it.

A young person referred to diversion following a minor offence may, for example, participate in mediation with the victim, apologise, repair damaged property or complete community work as part of the intervention. These measures combine accountability with education and reintegration rather than punishment alone.

Although restorative justice and diversion are distinct concepts, they are highly complementary. Diversion determines how a young person is dealt with by avoiding unnecessary formal proceedings, while restorative justice shapes how accountability is achieved. Together, they support rehabilitation, strengthen community ties and reduce the likelihood of future offending.

Key benefits of youth diversion

Beyond reducing reoffending, diversion offers significant benefits for young people, communities and justice systems. By responding to offending in a proportionate and child-centred manner, it promotes rehabilitation while avoiding many of the harmful consequences associated with formal justice processing.

Improved wellbeing and development. Diversion facilitates access to mental health care, family support, education, mentoring and vocational programmes. By maintaining links with school, employment and positive social networks, it supports healthy adolescent development and strengthens protective factors.

Reduced stigmatisation. Avoiding formal court proceedings and criminal records limits the long-term social consequences of offending. Young people are less likely to be labelled as offenders and better able to remain engaged with their families, schools and communities.

More efficient justice systems. Diverting appropriate cases away from the courts reduces pressure on police, prosecutors and judges, allowing justice systems to focus resources on more serious offences. It is also more cost-effective than traditional justice processing, generating both immediate savings and long-term benefits through lower rates of reoffending.

A more child-friendly response. Diversion recognises that children are still developing and should be held accountable in ways that support, rather than undermine, their future prospects. By combining accountability with rehabilitation, it offers a more constructive response that benefits both young people and society.

Principles for effective diversion

1. Safeguard children's rights and legal protections

Diversion should never come at the expense of children's rights. Participation must be voluntary and based on informed consent from the child and, where appropriate, their parents or legal guardian. Children should understand the purpose of diversion, the procedures involved, and the possible outcomes before agreeing to participate.

Successful completion of a diversion programme should result in the case being closed without creating a criminal record. Any information collected should be used only for legitimate administrative or evaluation purposes and should not prejudice the child in future proceedings. Where diversion requires the child to acknowledge responsibility for their behaviour, this should not amount to a formal admission of guilt that could later be used against them in court.

2. Ensure diversion is proportionate, accessible and inclusive

Diversion should be available to the widest possible range of children who can benefit from it while avoiding unnecessary justice involvement. Eligibility criteria should not be so restrictive that children are excluded solely because of their age, history of offending or family circumstances. At the same time, diversion should not widen the reach of the justice system by involving children who would otherwise not have entered formal proceedings, for example when they are below the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

The principle of maximum diversion, minimum intervention should guide decision-making. Responses should always be proportionate to the seriousness of the offence and the child's level of risk, with formal justice measures being reserved for situations where less restrictive alternatives are insufficient.

3. Tailor interventions to each child's needs

Not every diversion programme is suitable for every child. Effective interventions are developmentally appropriate, proportionate and based on an assessment of the child's individual circumstances, including family situation, education, mental health, disabilities, substance use and exposure to criminal exploitation.

Diversion should address the underlying causes of offending rather than focusing solely on the offence itself. Generic or overly punitive conditions are unlikely to produce lasting behavioural change.[8] Instead, interventions should strengthen protective factors, support positive development and remain relevant to the child's needs and stage of development.

4. Embed diversion within multi-agency collaboration

Diversion is most effective when delivered through coordinated partnerships involving police, prosecutors, social services, schools, youth workers, health professionals and community organisations. Clear referral pathways, shared objectives and regular communication help to ensure that children receive timely and appropriate support.

Feedback mechanisms are equally important. Police officers and other referring professionals should receive information on children's engagement and progress, which will help to build confidence in diversion and reinforce a culture in which successful diversion is recognised as a positive outcome rather than as a missed prosecution.

5. Involve children and families throughout the process

Children should be active participants in decisions affecting them. Diversion programmes should provide clear, age-appropriate information and create opportunities for children to express their views, concerns and preferences. When children understand the process and feel listened to, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with the intervention.

Families also play an important role in supporting positive change. Parents and caregivers should be involved whenever this is in the child's best interests, although a lack of family support should not automatically prevent access to diversion. Where necessary, additional family support services should be offered alongside the diversion programme.

6. Invest in long-term implementation

Effective diversion requires long-term investment. Programmes should be adequately resourced, supported by trained professionals and subject to regular monitoring and evaluation.[9] Police officers, prosecutors, judges, social workers and other practitioners should receive training in child development, child-friendly justice and communication with young people.

Continuous evaluation makes it possible to identify what works, to adapt to changing needs and to ensure that diversion remains both effective and consistent. Programmes should monitor who is offered diversion, who accepts it, who completes it and who is excluded, in order to identify disparities linked to gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability or family background.

Sustainable investment in diversion ultimately benefits children, communities and justice systems alike by reducing unnecessary criminalisation and promoting long-term rehabilitation.

Mapping of European practices

Approaches to diversion vary significantly across Europe, reflecting different legal traditions, institutional structures and levels of emphasis on rehabilitation.

Diversion is most often used for low-level offences committed by juveniles under 18, but in some countries, the scope is broader. For example, under Dutch adolescent criminal law, courts may apply juvenile criminal law and juvenile sanctions to young adults aged 18 to 22.[10] Countries also differ in how diversion is initiated, who makes the decision and which offences are eligible. Some systems emphasise police-led warnings or non-intervention for petty offences, while others rely on prosecutors, youth court judges, community-based projects, educational measures or victim-offender mediation.

This diversity illustrates both the flexibility and the limits of diversion as a concept. It can be adapted to national legal traditions, institutional arrangements and the resources available, while still serving the common aim of avoiding unnecessary formal justice involvement. At the same time, differences in eligibility, referral pathways and available support can create uneven access for children and young people across Europe. The examples below therefore do not present a single model to replicate, but show how diversion can be organised in different ways while remaining grounded in child-friendly, proportionate and rehabilitative justice.

Ireland's Youth Diversion Programme[11]

Ireland's diversion system is established under the Children Act 2001. Any child aged 12 to 18 who commits an offence or engages in anti-social behaviour must be considered for diversion, provided that they accept responsibility. The main response is a caution, issued by An Garda Síochána, which aims to prevent further offending without bringing the child into formal court proceedings.

Once a child is deemed suitable, they are assigned a Juvenile Liaison Officer (JLO), a specially trained police officer responsible for youth justice and diversion. JLOs usually work in plain clothes, which can make them more approachable for young people and their families. The JLO issues the caution and may place the child under supervision, monitoring progress and helping them follow an agreed plan to reduce reoffending. In more serious or complex cases, a diversion conference may be organised, involving the child, family members, victims and relevant professionals. This provides a more structured and restorative process to promote accountability, repair harm and agree on support measures.

> In 2026, the total budget for youth justice services in Ireland reached €43 million, a 22% increase from the previous year.[12]
>
> In recent years, around 8,000 children are referred to diversion programmes annually. These children are most commonly assigned to diversion for theft and related offences (31%). Around 74% of referrals are male. In 2023, approximately 1,200 children (8%) were deemed unsuitable for diversion.[13]

Children with additional needs can be referred to Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs), community-based prevention initiatives that provide more intensive support. These projects help young people remain connected to education, family and community, while offering positive activities, mentoring and tailored interventions. At present, there are over 100 youth diversion programmes across Ireland, with full nationwide coverage. Several NGOs deliver these programmes: for example, Foróige operates 30 projects in 16 counties (out of 26 in the Republic of Ireland), supporting 2,270 young people.[14] Other providers include Youth Work Ireland and Crosscare.

Ireland has also expanded the preventive role of youth diversion. Youth Diversion Projects can now support children aged 8 to 11 who are identified as being at risk of future offending. Since these children are below the minimum age of criminal responsibility and cannot formally be diverted from prosecution, these measures function as early intervention rather than diversion. They follow the same logic of providing support before criminal behaviour becomes entrenched.

The Irish model highlights some practical challenges. Access to diversion depends on the child accepting responsibility, but this may be difficult for young people who distrust the justice system, do not understand the

benefits of diversion or fear that acceptance may later be used against them. This can disproportionately affect children from disadvantaged communities or families with negative experiences of state authorities. Ireland therefore illustrates both the strengths of a nationwide diversion system and the importance of ensuring that diversion remains accessible, understandable and trusted by the children who need it most.

Foróige – A Life of Choices[15]

A Life of Choices is an evidence-based youth justice programme developed by Foróige for use in Youth Diversion Projects in Ireland. First published in 2012 and revised in 2016, it targets young people aged 12 to 17 who are considered to be at moderate to high risk of offending or reoffending. The programme is delivered in community settings by trained youth justice professionals and combines youth work methods, experiential learning and structured group activities.

Rather than focusing only on the offence committed, *A Life of Choices* seeks to address some of the underlying factors that contribute towards offending behaviour. Young people's needs are identified through an assessment tool, which helps practitioners select the most relevant parts of the programme. Its content covers issues such as communication, peer influence, problem-solving, anger management, conflict resolution, decision-making, victim empathy and motivation to change. It can also be adapted to specific risks or behaviours, including theft, public order offences, weapons, drug-related crime, gang involvement, school attachment and employment readiness.

The strength of the programme lies in its practical and flexible structure. Young people are encouraged to reflect on their choices, understand the impact of their behaviour, develop pro-social skills and practise alternative responses in a safe environment. An external evaluation by the University of Galway found that practitioners considered the programme valuable, well-structured and useful in helping young people reflect on their behaviour, manage anger, improve communication and recognise that they have choices. The programme was also formally recognised by the Irish Youth Justice Accreditation Panel as an excellent example of evidence-based practice.

Diversion in Germany

Germany's juvenile justice system places strong emphasis on education, rehabilitation and minimum intervention. Under the Youth Courts Act (*Jugendgerichtsgesetz*), formal sanctions should only be used when necessary, and petty offences should preferably be addressed without formal punishment.

Unlike in Ireland, police officers in Germany cannot directly offer diversion. Their role is mainly to investigate and refer the case onwards, while the decision to divert lies primarily with the public prosecutor. In line with the principle of minimum intervention, proceedings may be discontinued when the offence is minor, there is no public interest in prosecution, or the behaviour is considered typical adolescent misconduct. Where some response is needed, the prosecutor may dismiss the case after the young person has completed an educational or social measure, repaired the harm caused, performed community service or taken part in victim-offender mediation (Täter-Opfer-Ausgleich). If charges have already been filed, the juvenile court judge may also dismiss the case, usually in consultation with the prosecutor. The aim is to hold the young person accountable where necessary, while avoiding the harmful effects of unnecessary formal justice involvement.

The Youth Court Assistance Service (*Jugendgerichtshilfe, JGH*) plays an important role in this process. It provides socio-educational expertise to prosecutors and courts, assesses the young person's social background and development needs and helps determine whether youth welfare support could replace formal prosecution. It may also coordinate or supervise educational measures, community service, mediation or aftercare. In practice, these services are delivered by local youth welfare offices or independent youth organisations, with arrangements varying across Germany's federal states.

Diversion is widely used in Germany. More than two thirds of juvenile and young adult cases are diverted before trial,[16] while only a very small proportion result in youth imprisonment.[17]

Halt and STOP: adapting diversion models across contexts

The Dutch Halt programme[18] illustrates how diversion can be used to respond to minor youth offending without resorting to formal prosecution. Halt, short for *Het Alternatief* ("The Alternative"), was first developed in 1981 in response to juvenile vandalism and later became part of the Dutch juvenile justice system. It targets young people aged 12 to 17 who commit minor offences, such as vandalism or petty theft.

Young people can be referred to Halt by the police or the public prosecutor. Participation is voluntary, and parental consent is required for children under 16. If the young person refuses to participate or does not complete the programme, the case can be forwarded to the public prosecutor. A Halt intervention can only be offered twice, which underlines its focus on early intervention rather than repeated diversion without consequence.

The programme aims to help young people understand the impact of their behaviour and prevent reoffending. It can last up to 100 days and include up to 20 hours of activities. It starts with an assessment of the young person's situation, which therefore allows the intervention to be tailored to their risk level and their individual needs, in line with the Risk-Need-Responsivity principle. Depending on this assessment, the programme may include educational sessions, social skills training, parental involvement, and restorative elements such as apologising to the victim or compensating for damages. When completed successfully, the young person avoids prosecution and does not receive a criminal record, although the police retain a record of the referral for five years.

> *Annually, approximately 9,500 juveniles are referred to Halt, making it a cornerstone of the Dutch juvenile justice system.*

The STOP programme in Croatia shows how such a model can be transferred and adapted to another national context.[19] Implemented in Zagreb between 2012 and 2016, STOP was inspired by Halt and was intended to offer diversion measures to first-time young offenders. Like Halt, the programme was voluntary and required the young person to take responsibility for the offence. It also included assessment, community-based activities, recreational activities and social skills training. Examples of activities included helping other children, people with disabilities or Red Cross social stores.

The experience of STOP highlights both the potential and the limits of transferring prevention models. Around 100 young people participated during its initial implementation, and the programme reportedly received positive feedback from participants and parents. It also gained recognition, having received the Croatian Grand Security Award in 2014 for Best NGO Project for Community Safety. However, its expansion remained limited, partly due to a lack of sustained support. Initiatives such as Halt can inspire practice elsewhere, but successful transfer requires long-term institutional backing, local partnerships and adaptation to the receiving country's legal and organisational context.

Exit support and disengagement

> *While diversion seeks to avoid unnecessary formal justice involvement, exit programmes support young people who are already involved in criminal networks, gangs or organised crime groups. Their purpose is to help young people disengage from the criminal environment, rebuild their identity and develop realistic alternatives outside crime.*

Exit support is increasingly relevant in the context of youth recruitment into organised crime. Examples from Sweden and Denmark show that exit services are increasingly encountering younger gang defectors, sometimes as young as 15, with complex needs and high levels of vulnerability.[20] Some have been exposed to serious violence, including shootings, explosions or contract killings, while others experience trauma, PTSD, substance use, debt, social exclusion or weak ties to mainstream institutions. This presents new challenges for practitioners, as traditional exit programmes were often designed for older and more clearly established gang members.

Effective exit support needs to do more than remove a young person from a criminal environment. It must help replace the functions that the criminal network may have provided, including income, protection, belonging

or identity. Protective factors such as prosocial involvement, strong social support, positive relationships with adults, commitment to school or work and trust in authorities can all help to reduce continued involvement in crime.[21]

Exit programmes often combine practical, social and psychological support. They may include safety planning, relocation, housing, education or employment assistance, counselling, substance use treatment, debt support, and long-term follow-up. In several European contexts, they are delivered through partnerships between law enforcement, social services, municipalities and, in some cases, civil society organisations.[22]

Why leaving organised crime is difficult

Leaving organised crime can be difficult because criminal networks often provide more than income. They may offer belonging, identity, status and protection. Some former members describe the group as a "family".[23] For young people who have grown up around criminal peers, or who have been recruited through family, friendship or neighbourhood ties, leaving may mean breaking with an entire social world. In neighbourhoods where criminal and non-criminal relationships are closely connected, disengagement can involve distancing oneself not only from harmful networks, but also from childhood friends, relatives, familiar places and important sources of identity.[24]

Many of the factors that make young people vulnerable to recruitment can also become barriers to leaving.[25] The practical and psychological factors can be significant obstacles. Young people leaving criminal networks may lack stable housing, legitimate income, educational qualifications, employment experience, practical skills or trusted adults outside the criminal environment. Some may struggle with trauma, anxiety or substance use. Others may face stigma from the wider community, where they continue to be seen as offenders even after trying to leave. This can make reintegration harder and increase feelings of loneliness and social exclusion.[26]

Without realistic alternatives, the criminal network may remain one of the few available sources of income, protection and recognition.

Safety risks are another major barrier. A young person who wants to leave may be perceived as a threat, especially if they hold information about the group, have unpaid debts or are seen as betraying the network. Fear of reprisals, violence or pressure to return can prevent young people from seeking help. Once they leave, they may also lose the protection previously provided by the group and become vulnerable to former associates, rival groups or other enemies.

Debt can further tie young people to criminal networks. This may include formal debts, but also informal debts to the criminal organisation. In some drug markets, young people may be made to "owe" money to the group, for example after drugs or cash are lost, stolen or seized. Such debt can then be used alongside violence and intimidation to keep them involved. This form of debt bondage makes leaving particularly difficult, because the young person may feel trapped by obligations they cannot realistically repay.[27]

Relocation may sometimes be necessary for safety, but it can also intensify the feeling of instability and loneliness. This makes the exit process one of the most vulnerable stages in the journey out of organised crime. Leaving is not simply a matter of individual choice. It depends on whether the young person has safety, support and credible alternatives.

At the same time, there are moments that can create openings for change. Young people may want to leave because they are tired of the criminal lifestyle, have experienced violence or threats, become disillusioned with the group or start to feel that the costs outweigh the benefits. Family responsibilities, such as becoming a parent, forming a stable relationship or wanting to protect relatives from harm, can also motivate disengagement.[28] Exit support should be able to recognise and build on these moments, while providing the practical and emotional support needed to make leaving possible.

Principles for effective exit support

> *The journey out of organised crime can be understood as a gradual reversal of the journey in. Young people may be drawn in through vulnerabilities, financial incentives, peer networks, grooming, exploitation or debt bondage. Leaving requires more than removing them from the criminal environment. It requires replacing the functions that the criminal network fulfilled.*

Effective exit support should therefore be tailored to the young person's needs, risks and circumstances. A standardised response is unlikely to be sufficient, especially when young people face multiple and overlapping problems. Individual support plans should combine practical assistance with psychosocial support and safety measures.

Where recruitment is shaped by accumulated risk factors, exit support should strengthen protective factors, such as school or work attachment, prosocial activities and supportive relationships. Where young people are drawn in through exploitation, coercion or dependency, practitioners need to create routes to disengagement based on safety, stability and a renewed sense of agency. Similarly, where criminal networks provide protection, income or status, exit programmes need to help young people build positive support networks and alternatives that offer safety, stability, and a sense of belonging outside of crime.

- **Exit support should be based on voluntary participation and motivation to change.** Leaving a criminal network cannot simply be imposed on a young person. While pressure from the justice system, family or practitioners may create an opening, sustained disengagement requires some level of personal motivation. This motivation may be fragile, inconsistent or shaped by fear, fatigue, family responsibilities or disillusionment with the criminal lifestyle. Young people involved in criminal networks may also distrust authorities, especially if they have experienced discrimination or repeated contact with the justice system. Practitioners should therefore focus on building trust and helping the young person see that a realistic life outside crime is possible.
- **Safety and protection must be prioritised.** Exit support should include safety planning, risk assessment and, where necessary, emergency housing, relocation or protection from retaliation. However, protection should not be limited to physical safety. Relocation or separation from the criminal environment can also create loneliness, isolation and uncertainty. Safety measures must therefore be accompanied by continued support to help the young person build new social ties and avoid becoming isolated. Safety planning should also consider continued digital contact, online pressure or threats through social media.

Mental health and trauma support should be available.

- **Exit work should reduce dependency on the criminal network by creating realistic alternatives.** Criminal networks may provide income, protection, status, belonging, housing, access to goods or practical support that the young person cannot easily replace. Some young people may also be tied to the network through debt, obligations to older offenders or coercive control. A credible exit route therefore requires more than encouraging the young person to leave. Support should identify what the young person depends on the network for and help replace these dependencies gradually through legal income alternatives, education, vocational training, employment support, apprenticeships, debt counselling, help with administrative procedures, stable housing and protection from coercion.

- **Support should focus on identity change, belonging and positive relationships.**[29] Leaving organised crime requires the young person to develop a new identity outside the criminal network. This can be difficult when criminal involvement has provided recognition, status or a sense of purpose. The young person may enter a transitional phase, no longer belonging to the criminal group but not yet feeling accepted in mainstream society. Exit programmes should therefore help young people build new sources of meaning, belonging and recognition through education, work, sport,[30] cultural activities, community engagement, mentoring, family relationships and positive peer networks. These new relationships can help replace the social function previously fulfilled by the criminal network, although this may be particularly difficult when the young person has been relocated to a new area.[31]

- **Long-term mentoring or case management is often needed.** Disengagement is rarely linear. Young people may return to old peers, experience renewed pressure, lose motivation or struggle with the practical and emotional consequences of leaving. Short interventions are unlikely to be sufficient for those deeply embedded in criminal networks. Long-term mentoring or case management can provide continuity, help coordinate services and offer a stable relationship with a trusted adult over years. Mentors or practitioners with credibility, including similar background or experience, can help young people imagine a future outside crime.[32]

- **Mental health and trauma support should be available.** Young people involved in criminal networks may have experienced violence, trauma or family instability. Exit support should include access to mental health care, substance use treatment and trauma-informed support, while recognising that young people may initially be reluctant to engage with formal services. Where programmes require participants to refrain from drugs or criminal activity, this should be accompanied by realistic support to help them meet these expectations.[33]

- **Family support should be assessed carefully.** Families may be an important protective factor, especially when they provide emotional support, structure and encouragement to pursue education or employment. However, family relationships may also be strained, unsafe or linked to the criminal environment. Exit work should assess family dynamics carefully and, where appropriate, support the rebuilding of positive relationships with parents, siblings, partners or other trusted adults.

> *Families are an important protective factor*

- **Multi-agency coordination is essential.** No single agency can provide effective exit support alone. Young people may need help with safety, housing, schooling, employment, health, mental health, finances, and justice. Effective exit work requires cooperation between police, probation services, municipalities, youth services, schools, employment services, NGOs, psychologists and community organisations. Clear roles, information-sharing procedures and sustained coordination are needed to avoid fragmented support.

Pre-exit support: creating openings for change

> *Exit support should not only begin once a young person has made a clear decision to leave. In many cases, young people may be uncertain, afraid, loyal to peers, dependent on criminal income, or unable to imagine a life outside the network. Early intervention and pre-exit support can help create the conditions for disengagement before a full exit is possible.*

This may involve building trust, reducing harm, addressing immediate needs, supporting family members, identifying moments of doubt or disillusionment, and offering credible alternatives. Practitioners should be attentive to windows of opportunity, as they may create openings for change.

For young people, pre-exit support should be particularly child-sensitive. Some may be both offenders and victims of exploitation. Others may have been groomed, coerced, threatened or made dependent on the criminal network. Responses should therefore avoid treating exit simply as an individual choice. The ability to leave depends on whether the young person has safety, support, trust and realistic alternatives.

Exit support in practice: Sweden and Denmark

Sweden and Denmark illustrate how exit support can become part of a broader preventive strategy against criminal networks. Since the early 2010s, both countries have developed exit programmes targeting individuals who want to disengage from criminal networks.[34] While the organisational models differ, the help offered is broadly similar. It may include police risk assessment, relocation where there is an acute threat, housing, counselling, rehabilitation, employment support and individual support plans. Participants are often required to sign an agreement to refrain from crime and substance use during the programme.[35]

The two countries differ in how exit support is organised. Sweden's approach is more decentralised and locally managed, with municipalities playing a central role. This can allow support to be adapted to local contexts, but may also create variation in availability and capacity, particularly between larger cities and smaller municipalities. It can also create practical difficulties when a person needs support outside their municipality of residence.[36] Denmark, by contrast, operates within a national framework, with local implementation supported by central coordination.

In Sweden, there is no age limit: people under 18 can also receive defector support[37] and can be relocated with family members.[38] This is particularly relevant in the context of youth recruitment, as it recognises that children and young people may already be embedded in criminal environments and may need structured support to leave safely. Reporting criminal associates is not a requirement, and this can therefore help reduce barriers to seeking support.

Municipal social services have the main responsibility for providing support in Sweden, while the police contribute by identifying potential defectors, conducting threat and risk assessments, taking protective measures and following up cases together with municipal social services. Other agencies, such as the Prison and Probation Service and the National Board of Institutional Care, may also play a role by identifying and motivating potential defectors in detention or institutional care.[39] This illustrates how exit support requires coordinated action across welfare, justice and protection actors.

Denmark illustrates how national coordination and local implementation can be combined in exit support. National anti-gang policy provides an overarching framework, but the practical work is carried out locally by municipalities, police and other relevant services.[40] This model can help create consistency across the country, while still allowing local actors to adapt support to the needs of the individual and the local criminal context.

The way exit support is delivered can vary between cities. In some areas, the police take a leading role together with social services and employment actors, whilst in others, the municipality's crime prevention structures coordinate the work with the support of the police. This reflects an important feature of exit programmes: even when a national framework exists, successful implementation depends on local relationships, available expertise and the capacity of services to work together around the individual.[41]

The Danish model also shows that national coordination does not remove all local challenges. Smaller municipalities may have less experience with gang-related cases, but may still need to support individuals who have been relocated from larger cities. This underlines the importance of ensuring that exit support is not concentrated only in major urban areas, and that local professionals have access to guidance, resources and specialised knowledge when needed.

Taken together, the experiences in Sweden and Denmark show that exit support requires both specialised capacity and local adaptability, particularly as younger people with complex needs become more visible in criminal networks.

Conclusion

Preventing youth recruitment into organised crime requires responses that are proportionate to the young person's level of vulnerability and involvement. Recruitment is not inevitable; involvement is not fixed and disengagement is possible. However, each stage of the pathway into organised crime requires a different type of intervention.

This toolkit has shown that young people may become involved in organised crime through a variety of pathways. Some are gradually socialised into criminal networks through family, peers or neighbourhood exposure. Others are actively recruited, groomed, coerced or exploited. Some may seek out criminal opportunities themselves, attracted by money, status, protection or belonging. These pathways often overlap, and involvement can escalate quickly once young people are exposed to more experienced offenders, criminal markets or violent networks.

Prevention, diversion and exit support should therefore be understood as complementary rather than competing strategies. Prevention seeks to reduce vulnerability before involvement occurs, by strengthening protective factors around children, families, schools and communities. When young people come into contact with the justice system, diversion provides a proportionate response by avoiding unnecessary criminalisation while addressing the factors that contributed to offending. Exit programmes support those who are already embedded in criminal networks and need structured help to leave safely.

Diversion programmes across Europe demonstrate that it is possible to address juvenile offending in a way that is both rehabilitative and protective of children's rights. By offering tailored alternatives to formal justice processing, diversion can reduce stigmatisation, avoid the long-term consequences of criminal records and keep young people connected to education, family and community. It can also interrupt pathways into organised crime by limiting unnecessary exposure to the justice system and to more experienced offenders who may pull young people deeper into criminal networks.

At the same time, diversion alone is not sufficient for young people who are already embedded in organised crime or tied to criminal networks. For them, leaving is rarely a single decision or one-off intervention. Disengagement is often a long-term process involving setbacks, rebuilding relationships and creating realistic alternatives to criminal lifestyles. Exit support must therefore address offending behaviour, safety, housing, education, employment, mental health, family relationships, debt, trauma and belonging.

Across both diversion and exit work, several common principles emerge. Responses should be voluntary where possible, proportionate, developmentally appropriate, child-sensitive and designed to foster accountability rather than punishment. They should be tailored to individual needs and risks, while recognising that young people may be both offenders and victims of exploitation. Effective support also requires sustained multi-agency cooperation between police, municipalities, youth services, schools, social workers, probation services, mental health professionals, families and community organisations.

Ultimately, the prevention of youth recruitment into organised crime is about creating credible pathways away from crime. It requires early prevention for those at risk, diversion for those who offend and exit support for those already embedded in criminal networks. These approaches are united by the same objective: to reduce harm, strengthen protective factors, support accountability and offer young people realistic alternatives to criminal careers. In doing so, they contribute towards safer communities and towards fairer and more humane responses to children and young people affected by organised crime.

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Summary

Once young people come into contact with the justice system or become involved in criminal networks, prevention does not end. Responses that avoid unnecessary criminalisation, interrupt further involvement and support young people in moving towards a different path can be crucial to preventing longer-term offending. This section examined diversion and alternatives to justice, as well as exit support for young people already involved in organised crime, with a focus on reducing harm, strengthening protective factors and supporting sustainable disengagement.

FACTSHEET

Youth recruitment into organised crime

Effective prevention requires understanding who is at risk, how recruitment occurs, and which individual, family, social, and environmental factors increase young people's vulnerability to criminal involvement.

The toolkit provides practical guidance, checklists and EU examples to support the development, implementation and evaluation of prevention initiatives.

Community-oriented interventions:

building trust and cooperation between police, young people and communities.

Family-based and school-based approaches:

strengthening parenting, family relationships and protective factors.

Focused deterrence:

combining targeted enforcement with support and clear communication to prevent serious violence and criminal involvement.

Online prevention:

addressing recruitment, exploitation and the influence of criminal content in digital environments.

Youth diversion schemes:

preventing further offending by offering alternatives to formal criminal justice responses.

Preventing youth involvement in organised crime means creating legitimate pathways to belonging, identity, recognition and purpose - not just disrupting recruitment.

Read the toolkit: https://eucpn.org/toolkit-organisedcrime

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