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Dialogue Outcomes Report

Disrupting the Recruitment of Youth into Organized Crime in Southeastern Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean

A Multi-Stakeholder Approach

March 24-26, 2026
Rome, Italy

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1.

Introduction

1.1 Context

Youth crime and violence are rising across Southeastern Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean, in the context of organized crime. Data from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) show that organized criminal groups strategically recruit children below the age of criminal liability—often under 14—to avoid detection and prosecution.[1] Youth are exploited as drug and money couriers, lookouts, and low-level dealers and are increasingly involved in serious violence through the emerging trend of "violence as a service."

Social media has become a central tool in the recruitment ecosystem. Criminal groups use online platforms to glamorize criminal lifestyles, normalize violence, and promote false promises of easy money, status, and belonging. These narratives are particularly targeted at vulnerable, marginalized, or bullied youth, increasing their susceptibility to recruitment.

Early involvement in organized crime places young people on a trajectory toward long-term criminality, with severe consequences for individuals, communities, and criminal justice systems. Research indicates that by age 25, a single repeat offender can have, on average, 100 victims and generate €1.7 million in follow-up costs to society. This phenomenon underscores the urgency of investing in prevention.

1 The document's focus is on prevention before the age of criminal responsibility and on the protection of children, not on advocating for any change to that age threshold.

1.2
Technical Training and High-Level Policy Dialogue

Building on their experience in violence prevention and institutional strengthening, the OSCE and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) organized the Technical Training and Policy Dialogue titled “Disrupting Youth Recruitment into Organized Crime,” held March 24–26, 2026, in Rome, Italy. The initiative was aimed at strengthening operational and policy responses to youth recruitment across Southeastern Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean. These regions are increasingly interconnected through organized crime and cocaine trafficking routes. Criminal networks systematically exploit young people for drug trafficking, money laundering, street-level distribution, and violent offenses.

A diverse group of stakeholders participated in the event, including senior authorities from ministries of the interior, security, and justice, as well as front-line practitioners from law enforcement, social services, and child protection systems. Representatives from civil society and the private sector also participated, along with specialists from the OSCE and the IDB.

The event consisted of a practice-oriented training, held on March 24 and 25, which sought to strengthen the capacity of participants to identify at-risk youth, prioritize high-risk cases, and enhance inter-agency cooperation. It also enabled discussion on emerging trends, including social media recruitment, and promoted peer learning through real-case analysis focused on early identification, risk assessment, and tailored interventions addressing drivers such as neglect, domestic violence, substance abuse, and peer influence.

On March 26, a high-level policy dialogue brought together senior officials and practitioners to discuss coordinated responses. Participants highlighted the importance of regional and cross-regional cooperation, particularly considering expanding illicit trafficking routes linking Southeastern Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Key discussions focused on online recruitment, the shared responsibility of digital platforms, and the need to strengthen public–private partnerships and inter-agency cooperation to prevent exploitation. The event also enabled the creation of a cross-regional network to exchange good practices beyond the meeting.

1.3 Substance

This document summarizes the outcomes of the technical workshop and policy dialogue on prevention of youth recruitment. It begins by examining the nature of youth recruitment into organized crime, clarifying key concepts. It highlights the ways that organized criminal groups strategically exploit structural vulnerabilities, including poverty, family violence, abuse and abandonment, social exclusion, and exposure to violence, to draw children and youth into criminal involvement. It then presents case studies and lessons learned, emphasizing promising practices in prevention, early identification, and multi-agency cooperation. It presents evidence-based prevention strategies and methodologies shared in the training, inspired by European early intervention models such as Sweden's *Rätt Kurva* and Germany's *Kurve Kriegen*. Core features highlighted include early risk screening, multidisciplinary team approaches, pedagogical support, quality management systems, and prioritization of high-risk cases to ensure effective caseload management. Finally, the document presents key findings and policy recommendations discussed in the event, stressing the need for strengthened inter-agency cooperation, early intervention systems, and sustained investment in prevention frameworks that protect vulnerable youth and disrupt recruitment by organized crime networks.

1.4 OSCE–IDB Collaboration

The OSCE and the IDB have a strong track record in capacity strengthening on youth crime prevention, community policing, and social reintegration. Their collaboration under Pillar 1 of the IDB's Alliance for Security, Justice and Development—prevention and protection of vulnerable populations—strengthens interregional knowledge exchange and promotes innovative approaches to preventing recruitment of children and adolescents by organized crime.

As the world's largest regional security organization, the OSCE supports its participating states in combating and preventing organized crime and drug trafficking, including youth recruitment into criminal networks. The IDB is a pioneer in advancing crime and violence prevention programs in Latin America and the Caribbean, supporting evidence-based policies through its Citizen Security Division and serving as technical secretariat of the Alliance for Security, Justice, and Development. The Alliance brings together 23 countries and 14 partners across three pillars: (i) protection of vulnerable populations, (ii) strengthening security and justice institutions, and (iii) disruption of illicit financial flows and markets.

Amb. Alena Kupchyna

Coordinator of Activities to Address Transnational Threats, OSCE

Southeastern Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean are deeply interconnected with respect to organized crime, particularly transnational drug trafficking routes and related illicit financial flows. Southeastern Europe has emerged as a key entry point for cocaine trafficked from Latin America into European markets, illustrating how criminal ecosystems in regions around the world are structurally linked.

Behind these global criminal supply chains, data gathered by the OSCE show that young people are being exploited at the local level. About a year ago, the OSCE launched a publication on the role of financial literacy in youth crime prevention to help participating states better understand the vulnerabilities and risk factors underlying youth recruitment.

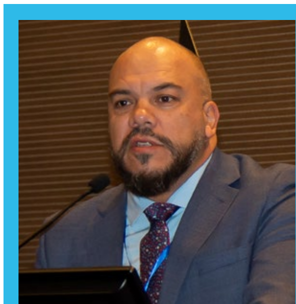
This study found that, across the OSCE area and beyond, organized crime groups deliberately recruit minors, including children below the age of criminal liability, to reduce their operational risks and shield actors from prosecution. Young people are increasingly drawn into criminal structures through false promises of quick money, status, and belonging—often amplified and normalized through social media.

Once recruited, they are induced to commit more serious crimes, including drug trafficking and street-level distribution, money laundering, and violent offenses. Alarmingly, criminal trajectories begin very early, with offenders as young as eight years old.

Research indicates that a single repeat offender can have, on average, up to 100 victims and generate approximately €1.7 million in follow-up societal costs by age 25, underscoring the urgency of investing in prevention. This stark reality makes one thing clear: effective prevention must start early, well before the age of criminal liability, and must take place before young people become deeply entrenched in criminal pathways. To address these issues, our work focuses on strengthening the capacities of front-line practitioners—including police officers, social workers, and child protection officials—to identify young people at risk early on and to work together to address these risk factors before a criminal career takes hold.

Given that what occurs in the OSCE area affects other parts of the world, we believe it is essential to share our experience and knowledge globally. Organized crime does not stop at national borders, nor must the response.

The OSCE is proud to provide a trusted platform for dialogue for participating States and Partners for Cooperation, fostering cooperation to promote security and to prevent and combat organized crime. We are also glad to be able to build bridges with Latin America and the Caribbean through this joint event with the IDB. Collaboration is especially important given the clear need for coordinated cross-regional approaches to prevention.



Eduardo Vergara

Division Chief, Citizen Security Division, IDB

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the recruitment of children and adolescents by organized crime has become a structured, deliberate, and increasingly widespread strategy. Recruitment of youth into organized crime is both a severe form of violence against children and adolescents and a functioning criminal labor market, where vulnerability is exploited to meet the strategic and economic needs of criminal groups.

The OSCE and the IDB share a relatively recent but strong history of cooperation grounded in a common conviction: that preventing youth violence and strengthening community resilience require evidence-based approaches, coordination across institutions, and close engagement with the systems that protect young people in their daily lives.

The criminal landscape today is marked by three simultaneous dynamics: the expansion of transnational criminal organizations into new countries and territories; the fragmentation of local criminal groups, which has generated more volatile environments; and the emergence of new illicit markets that increasingly overlap with licit economic activities. Within this evolving context, organized criminal networks systematically exploit children and adolescents as part of their operational strategies, taking advantage of social vulnerability, institutional gaps, and digital platforms for recruitment.

Youth recruitment into organized crime is therefore a shared transnational challenge which makes cross-regional cooperation essential. What is at stake is not only security, but a broader issue of human development, community resilience, and the protection of fundamental rights.

Prevention is most effective when education, child protection, policing, justice, and social services operate as an integrated system. Fragmented responses cannot keep pace with adaptive criminal organizations. Both Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean possess strong but often siloed institutional capacities. Inter-regional dialogue provides an opportunity to connect operational practices, align prevention pathways, and move toward coherent and risk-based intervention models focused on children and adolescents.

European experiences—such as multi-agency early warning systems, structured disengagement pathways, and coordinated school-police-social service approaches for high-risk youth—offer valuable operational insights. At the IDB, we see strong value in adapting these models to the Latin American and Caribbean context, not by replicating them mechanically, but by translating their core principles into environments characterized by higher levels of violence, institutional weakness, and inequality. This exchange is mutually beneficial: Europe contributes tested operational tools, while Latin America and the Caribbean provide complex, real-world environments that enrich global learning. Both regions face distinct but complementary challenges and strengths that make this exchange mutually enriching. The value of cross-regional cooperation lies precisely in the diversity of contexts, approaches, and institutional responses that each brings to the table.

For nearly two decades, the IDB has worked with countries across the region to prevent violence, strengthen security and justice institutions, and protect vulnerable populations. The Bank supports youth centers, community-based prevention programs, child protection systems, and institutional reforms through financing, technical assistance, and policy dialogue. In this partnership, it plays a key role in helping translate evidence into scalable public policies, linking pilot initiatives to national systems and ensuring sustainability over time.

The dialogue and technical training represent a shift from fragmented interventions to integrated prevention trajectories that accompany a young person from early identification to protection and opportunity. They also reflect a broader transition: from reactive responses to evidence-based prevention; from short-term pilots to scalable models; and from ad hoc coordination to interoperable systems linking security, justice, education, health, and social protection. This is where European operational expertise and IDB implementation capacity meet in a complementary and strategic partnership.

This joint OSCE–IDB initiative is not an end in itself. Its value lies in what comes next: joint pilots, stronger institutional linkages, shared diagnostics, interoperable tools, and measurable results. The IDB remains committed to supporting countries that choose to move forward—testing solutions, evaluating impact, and scaling what works. Protecting children and adolescents from recruitment into organized crime is not only a policy responsibility; it is a moral obligation that Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean must shoulder together.

2.

Youth Recruitment

2.1 Definition

One of the main challenges identified in the literature and by public policymakers is the lack of a shared and operational definition of child recruitment in the context of organized crime. Unlike recruitment in armed conflict, which is measured using consolidated international instruments, recruitment by criminal organizations lies at the intersection of child protection, organized crime, trafficking in persons, juvenile justice, and violence prevention, each governed by different legal and policy perspectives.

International law puts forth several authoritative definitions of child recruitment and use, developed primarily in the context of armed conflict[2] and applied to actors such as insurgent or paramilitary groups. These instruments, though foundational for child protection norms, were not designed to address contemporary patterns of recruitment by organized criminal groups, thus creating important conceptual and operational gaps for policymakers. Organized criminal groups do not qualify as armed forces or armed groups under international humanitarian law, which creates a legal and conceptual gap when this definition is applied outside conflict settings.

2 The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) criminalizes the war crime of "conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into national armed forces or using them to participate actively in hostilities." This definition is based on three significant elements that set boundaries to its application. First, it applies only to armed forces and active hostilities; that is, to actors in war contexts. Second, it sets an age threshold at 15, that is below other standards that apply for children under 18. Third, it presumes a context of armed conflict, excluding criminal markets operating in other contexts that could be non-violent but based on fear and criminal control.
The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC, 2000) significantly strengthened child protection standards. It establishes that "Armed groups distinct from the armed forces of a State "should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under the age of 18 years."
The definition in the OPAC raised the age threshold to 18 years and explicitly prohibited both recruitment and use by nonstate armed groups, but it still limits its scope to armed groups as traditionally understood in international humanitarian law; that is, to actors involved in contexts of civil or regular wars. As a result, this definition applies when there are hostilities, which remains difficult to apply to illicit economies such as drug trafficking, extortion, or new recruitment mechanisms like "violencesaservice" that resembles forms of "outsourcing" beyond contexts of war, this is, the use of children to commit crimes but without a formal membership with the organization.
Finally, the Paris Principles (2007) define a child associated with armed forces or armed groups as any person under 18 who is "recruited or used in any capacity," regardless of voluntariness. This definition is influential because it centers on use rather than formal membership of minors. In addition, this definition rejects distinctions between "voluntary" and forced involvement. Also, the Paris Principals frames children primarily as victims of exploitation.

A central finding of the workshop and policy dialogue on child recruitment prevention—and of the technical literature—is that organized crime recruits, uses, and exploits children in ways that could resemble patterns addressed in other violent contexts, but without fitting their legal categories and with new mechanisms or approaches that fall outside those definitions and categories.

Some critical elements should be considered when addressing child recruitment by criminal organizations. First, these organizations can operate in violent settings with few homicides, where criminal groups exercise territorial control or even criminal governance, providing order, goods, and services that are typically the responsibility of the State (IDB, 2024). Recent evidence shows that criminal networks are deliberately and strategically targeting children and youth under the age of criminal liability to avoid identification, detection, and prosecution and to shield high-level members. Criminal organizations use children for a wide range of criminal functions, including but not limited to (i) drug distribution and logistics; (ii) surveillance and intelligence gathering; (iii) extortion, debt collection, and intimidation; (iv) financial facilitation and money laundering; and (v) commission of violent acts under “crime or violenceasaservice” models.

2.2
New Forms of Child Recruitment

The literature increasingly identifies youth recruitment and exploitation for the commission of criminal activities, violence as a service, and crime as a service as a key operational strategy used by organized crime. These concepts help explain how criminal organizations have become more decentralized, flexible, and service oriented, relying on outsourced labor and fragmented operational structures that frequently exploit vulnerable children and adolescents (Europol, 2023; UNODC, 2022).

International organizations and academic studies alike find that youth recruitment and exploitation are no longer limited to sexual or labor exploitation but increasingly include the forced commission of crimes. The Palermo Protocol defines trafficking broadly as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of people for exploitation and, in the case of children, coercion does not need to be proven (United Nations, 2000). Scholars and international agencies increasingly recognize that criminal exploitation—including drug trafficking, theft, online fraud, extortion, forced begging, cyber-enabled scams, and violent crimes—falls within this framework of trafficking in persons (Europol, 2023; UNODC, 2020). Europol, OSCE, and UNODC reports explain that organized crime groups deliberately target minors and vulnerable populations for criminal exploitation because they are easier to manipulate, less likely to cooperate with authorities, and often subject to lower criminal sanctions (Europol, 2023; OSCE, 2025, UNODC, 2022).

The literature on this topic overlaps significantly with research on the recruitment and use of children by criminal organizations. Studies on gangs and organized crime in Latin America and Europe show that children are increasingly recruited as flexible criminal labor to perform specific functions such as surveillance, drug transportation, extortion collection, money transfers, online recruitment, or acts of violence (Lessing, 2021; Muggah and Aguirre, 2018). This operational fragmentation reflects broader crime-as-a-service dynamics, in which criminal organizations outsource specialized criminal functions to loosely connected actors rather than relying exclusively on hierarchical structures (Broadhurst et al., 2023).

The concept of crime as a service initially emerged in the cybercrime literature to describe illicit markets where offenders sell or rent tools, infrastructure, or criminal services to other offenders. However, recent scholarship argues that this logic increasingly extends to physical organized crime economies (Broadhurst et al., 2023). Under crime-as-a-service models, criminal actors can recruit adolescents for low-cost and low-skill criminal tasks without demanding loyalty to the criminal organization. This lowers barriers to participation in organized crime and expands recruitment pools among vulnerable youth (Leukfeldt et al., 2022). Researchers argue that this model is particularly attractive for organized crime groups operating in unstable urban environments because it increases operational flexibility, scalability, and deniability (Lessing, 2021).

Similarly, the literature on violence as a service describes the outsourcing of violent acts—including intimidation, assaults, contract killings, extortion enforcement, and targeted attacks—to external actors who may have only temporary or transactional relationships with criminal organizations. Europol (2023) has warned that digital platforms and encrypted communication tools increasingly facilitate the recruitment of young people into these violence markets. Adolescents exposed to poverty, social exclusion, weak family bonds, or prior violence are especially vulnerable to recruitment into these criminal service economies because violent acts may be framed as quick economic opportunities, pathways to status, or forms of social belonging (Howell and Egley, 2005; Jaitman, 2017).

The literature further suggests that these emerging criminal models intensify the exploitation of children because they align closely with the incentives identified in child recruitment research. Organized crime groups perceive minors as operationally advantageous: they are more replaceable, easier to coerce, and often benefit from more lenient juvenile justice frameworks (Europol, 2023; UNODC, 2022). Digital technologies facilitate anonymous recruitment, social media grooming, and the normalization of criminal lifestyles among adolescents. As a result, recruitment increasingly occurs through online networks, gaming platforms, encrypted applications, and peer-to-peer digital interactions rather than exclusively through traditional territorial gangs (Broadhurst et al., 2023; Europol, 2023).

This emerging evidence has important policy implications. Several studies argue that children involved in criminal activities should not automatically be treated exclusively as offenders, since many may simultaneously be victims of trafficking, coercion, exploitation, or organized criminal control (United Nations, 2000; UNODC, 2020). Consequently, the literature increasingly calls for integrated approaches combining child protection, anti-trafficking frameworks, violence prevention, cybercrime prevention, and responses to transnational organized crime.

2.3
Risk Factors[3]

The literature on child recruitment by criminal organizations increasingly conceptualizes recruitment as the outcome of the interaction between structural vulnerabilities affecting children and adolescents and the strategic incentives of criminal organizations to recruit minors. The literature review distinguishes between supply-side determinants associated with children's vulnerability and demand-side determinants linked to the operational needs of organized crime groups (Arias, 2017; Atuesta and Pérez-Dávila, 2018; UNICEF, 2023).

From the standpoint of child vulnerability, academic evidence identifies poverty, inequality, school exclusion, exposure to violence, weak family structures, and limited opportunities for upward social mobility as key determinants of recruitment. Research from Latin America shows that children growing up in contexts characterized by territorial criminal control, high homicide rates, and institutional fragility face a substantially higher likelihood of becoming involved in gangs, extortion schemes, micro-trafficking, or other criminal economies (Jaiman, 2017; Muggah and Aguirre, 2018; UNODC, 2018). Studies also emphasize that criminal organizations often emerge in areas where the state is unable to provide security, social protection, or legitimate economic opportunities, allowing illegal actors to occupy governance and social functions within communities (Arias, 2017; Lessing, 2021).

3 This section is based on Sviatschi and Alarcon-Barrera (forthcoming). The authors review and analyze qualitative and quantitative literature to identify and organize the main factors that increase the risk of recruitment and use of children by criminal organizations. In addition, the technical note aims to identify successful interventions and strategies to prevent this phenomenon and to inform the design and implementation of public policy.

Risk factors

Individual level	Parents/guardians Family	Social Environment	Institutional Level
• Substance use or abuse • Abuse or abandonment • Problematic behavior at school • Problematic self-image • Low frustration tolerance • Lack of daily structure	• Financially heavily burdened • Domestic violence • Low educational level of parents • Delinquency • Mental illness (one or both parents) • Very young parents • Disfuntional relationships • Substance abuse, including alcohol	• Delinquent peer group • Social Exclusion/ Rejection by peers • Frequent relocations • Normalization of criminal culture • Crime-Ridden residential environment • Rejection or ignorance of local values	• Perception of high levels of impunity • Lack of safe public spaces for children • Lack of educational services

Source: Authors' elaboration based on *Rätt Kurva* model presentation and Sviatschi and Alarcon-Barrera (forthcoming).

At the individual and family levels, the literature identifies childhood exposure to violence, neglect, abuse, and family disintegration as particularly significant risk factors. Widom's "cycle of violence" theory demonstrates that childhood victimization substantially increases the probability of later violent and delinquent behavior (Widom, 1989). Similarly, Currie and Tekin (2012) show that child maltreatment is strongly associated with future criminal involvement and antisocial behavior. Intergenerational transmission dynamics are also relevant: studies on organized crime families and gang membership find that exposure to criminal norms and behaviors within the household normalizes participation in illicit activities and facilitates recruitment pathways (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Thornberry et al., 2003).

OSCE evidence demonstrates that financial illiteracy represents another significant risk factor that increases young people's vulnerability to being recruited into organized crime groups (OSCE, 2025). Factors such as lack of budgeting and saving skills, exposure to debt traps, household financial stress, and the allure of quick money contribute to this vulnerability. Youth with limited financial literacy are less equipped to manage economic pressures, recognize predatory recruitment practices, or resist the social and financial incentives of criminal activity. OSCE data also indicate significant gender disparities. Young women face unique vulnerabilities due to lower financial literacy and societal expectations that reinforce their financial dependence (OSCE, 2025). These factors expose them to exploitation, particularly through debt bondage and manipulative tactics by organized crime groups.

Educational exclusion is another major determinant. The literature consistently finds that school attendance operates as a protective factor against crime and recruitment. Lochner and Moretti (2004) demonstrate that education reduces criminal behavior by increasing future opportunities for legal employment and reducing engagement in risky environments. Evidence from Latin America also finds that school dropouts and weak school attachment increase the likelihood of youth involvement in gangs and organized criminal activity, particularly in marginalized urban settings (Jaitman, 2017; Muggah and Aguirre, 2018).

The review also highlights the importance of psychosocial and social determinants. Hirschi's social bond theory argues that weak attachment to family, school, and social institutions reduces informal social controls and increases delinquency risks (Hirschi, 1969). Research on gangs and youth violence shows that peer influence, neighborhood violence, drug use, and the normalization of criminal lifestyles contribute significantly to recruitment processes (Howell and Egley, 2005; Pyrooz and Decker, 2011).

From the demand side, criminal organizations recruit minors because they provide operational and strategic advantages. Studies show that children are often perceived as more obedient, easier to manipulate, and less likely to attract law enforcement attention (UNICEF, 2023; UNODC, 2018). Criminal groups also exploit the fact that juvenile justice systems frequently impose lower penalties on minors, reducing operational risks for organizations. Economic theories of crime suggest that recruitment intensifies where illicit markets generate high returns relative to the limited legal opportunities available to youth (Becker, 1968; Levitt and Venkatesh, 2000). The perspectives shared by government officials and public policymakers strongly reinforced these findings.

“Recruitment is increasingly driven by emotional disconnection, weakened family bonds, and adolescents’ search for identity and belonging. Hooligan groups, gambling networks, popular culture, and social media create environments that glorify violence, fast wealth, and criminal status, while organized crime groups exploit young people’s need for recognition and social mobility.”

Željko Brkić, PhD

Assistant Director of Police, Chief of Staff, Serbian Police

“Recruitment dynamics are closely associated with poverty, generalized violence, family disintegration, low parental supervision, and unequal access to opportunities. Therefore, children exposed to economic vulnerability, emotional abuse, or abandonment face higher risks of getting involved in violent or criminal contexts. There is a growing role of technology and social media in facilitating recruitment and shaping aspirational models linked to criminal success.”

Chandrai Estévez

Viceminister of Violence Prevention on Vulnerable Populations, Ministry of Interior and Police of the Dominican Republic

“There is an increasingly transnational nature of recruitment dynamics, particularly in the Balkans and Latin America. Three major recruitment pathways are observed: social media outreach that presents crime as a source of status and easy income; family-based induction into criminal activities; and the opportunistic targeting of vulnerable youth in unstable environments. Criminal networks deliberately recruit minors because they face lower criminal sanctions and can be more easily manipulated by organized groups.”

Giovanni Russo

Legal Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Italy

2.4
Key Trends of Child Recruitment: Children as a Target of Organized Crime

Participants in the OSCE–IDB policy dialogue and training emphasized that in recent years, organized crime groups have increasingly turned young people—with a focus on children and adolescents—into a central strategic target of their operations. They highlighted that this phenomenon reflects deliberate, systematic, and forward-looking recruitment and exploitation strategies designed to secure immediate operational advantages while ensuring the long-term reproduction and resilience of criminal organizations.

“The path forward cannot rely on security responses alone; it requires cooperation among law enforcement, schools, and social services.”

Cons. Thomas Botzios

Director of the Department of the Adriatic and Balkans, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Italy

> “When organized crime recruits and exploits minors, it is not only committing a crime against the law, but a crime against the future and security of communities. Youth recruitment should be understood as a form of strategic criminal investment in human capital, aimed simultaneously at operational efficiency today and organizational continuity tomorrow.”

Federico Perrone Capano

Deputy National Prosecutor in the Fight Against the Mafia, Italy

Evidence shared by practitioners at the OSCE–IDB event indicated that from an operational standpoint, young people offer criminal groups a set of functional advantages: legal age thresholds provide a degree of deniability and lower penal exposure, while social and institutional vulnerabilities allow criminal networks to recruit young people initially into low-profile roles and progressively escalate their responsibilities. Importantly, this progression no longer stops at peripheral functions. Practitioners indicated that minors and young adults are increasingly assigned central and high-risk roles, including the custody of weapons and cash, debt collection, coordination of microtrafficking activities, management of payments and communications, and direct participation in violent acts.

They also agreed that the effectiveness of these recruitment strategies is closely linked to the exploitation of structural, social, economic, and emotional vulnerabilities. Organized crime groups actively manipulate young people’s aspirations for belonging, recognition, status, and visibility. In contexts where criminal presence is socially normalized—such as territories affected by the mafia or neighborhoods with entrenched illicit economies—criminal values are transmitted early and become embedded in local imaginaries. As the speakers emphasized, generational replacement within criminal organizations is not spontaneous but planned, supported by grooming processes that involve testing loyalty, gradually increasing responsibilities, and creating dependency through money, fear, and threats.

Digital environments have become a critical accelerator of these dynamics. Social media platforms and encrypted messaging services are now core tools for recruitment, coordination, and control. Evidence collected by the OSCE and the IDB during the event finds that criminal groups use emojis, hashtags, codes, and visual narratives to conceal communication while normalizing criminal lifestyles. At the same time, the rapid expansion of online drug markets—particularly for synthetic substances—has increased both consumption among younger populations and the involvement of minors in distribution and logistics. Youth are no longer limited to supportive roles; they increasingly act as operational coordinators of deliveries, payments, and communications in digital criminal ecosystems.

Physical spaces also play an important strategic role. Nightclubs and nightlife venues have emerged as hubs for recruitment, visibility, and confrontation, where criminal identities are performed through ostentation, competition, and violence, often amplified through social media. Perrone's analysis further highlights how some foreign organized crime groups have deliberately developed recognizable online "brands" centered on money, power, and violence, specifically designed to attract young people in highly competitive digital cultures, where belonging is expressed through visibility and status.

These trends pose complex policy challenges. Recruited minors are simultaneously victims and perpetrators, a dual condition that requires differentiated responses. Recognizing this overlap does not justify criminal conduct but rather informs the appropriate nature of interventions. Experts warn that purely repressive approaches risk entrenching criminal identities, while purely protective responses may leave recruitment structures intact. Effective strategies therefore require integrated approaches that combine targeted criminal investigations—focused on adult recruiters and higher-level structures—with prevention, protection, and credible exit pathways for young people.

Ultimately, preventing youth recruitment by organized crime requires redefining success. As the experts emphasized, effectiveness should not be measured solely by arrests or asset seizures, but by the extent to which policies and interventions make recruitment more difficult and deny access to new generations. Weakening the recruitment base of organized crime is one of the most sustainable ways to reduce its long-term power and social impact.

Recruitment and Roles by Gender Dynamics

Gender shapes both the likelihood and the form of child recruitment into criminal and armed groups. Although boys are generally recruited in greater numbers—reflected in higher homicide rates among males aged 15 to 18—there has been a growing involvement of girls and adolescent women, particularly for purposes of sexual exploitation (IACHR, 2023). Their participation is often underestimated due to their concentration in less visible roles and reliance on indicators that capture primarily lethal violence. Gender norms and stereotypes play a central role in these dynamics, influencing how children are targeted, recruited, and used, and reinforcing that responses to organized crime are not gender neutral (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad, and Gómez Hernández, 2017).

As Kapur and Thompson (2021) argue, socio-cultural expectations linked to gender shape recruitment, determine roles and responsibilities, and influence outcomes for children associated with armed groups. Girls are primarily recruited to perform tasks aligned with traditional gender norms, such as caring, cooking, washing, and preparing or packaging drugs (Reinserta, 2022; UNICEF, 2025). They may also be used as drug couriers ("mules") and are frequently subjected to sexual and gender-based violence, including coercion into sexual relationships with members of these groups and trafficking for sexual exploitation (IACHR, 2015; UNICEF, 2025).

Evidence also shows that child recruitment can overlap with systems resembling human trafficking, in which both boys and girls perform roles directly and indirectly related to criminal or conflict activities while being subjected to exploitation and coercion with little autonomy (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad, and Gómez Hernández, 2017). However, these dynamics are not gender neutral: while boys are more visible in direct violent roles, girls face distinct and often hidden forms of victimization tied to gendered expectations.

These patterns reflect broader structural conditions. As Roteta and Vitale (2026) argue, criminal organizations reproduce patriarchal social and cultural systems, replicating unequal power relations and embedding violence within their internal hierarchies. Within these spaces, gender norms are rigidly enforced, privileging hegemonic forms of masculinity while subordinating femininity and marginalizing diverse gender identities. Consequently, misogyny, homophobia, and contempt toward gender diversity become central elements in the construction of masculinity within these groups (Núñez González and Núñez Noriega, 2019; Núñez Noriega and Espinosa Cid, 2017). Overall, gender not only affects who is recruited, but fundamentally shapes the roles children occupy, the risks they face, and how their experiences are rendered visible or invisible.

"There is a connection between domestic violence, gender-based violence, and recruitment vulnerability. Trauma, chronic exposure to violence, and weak institutional responses increase children's susceptibility to criminal exploitation. Trauma-informed and victim-centered institutional responses capable of breaking cycles of violence before recruitment occurs are key. There is a connection between gender-based violence and youth involvement in organized crime. Children that were exposed to domestic violence suffer trauma and develop vulnerabilities that can be exploited by criminal groups in their recruitment strategies. Strong trauma-informed and victim-centered institutional responses are key to break cycles of violence and prevent youth recruitment in criminal activities."

Merima Abdic

Project Officer, OSCE Secretariat

2.5 Key Trends in Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean

Recent evidence from Europe points to a profound transformation in the recruitment of minors by criminal organizations, driven by digitalization and the consolidation of violence-as-a-service models. As highlighted by Europol's Operational Task Force GRIMM, recruitment has shifted from localized, relationship-based processes to fast, remote, and transactional dynamics, where young people are recruited for specific criminal tasks rather than long-term membership in criminal groups.

This shift reflects a move from crime as a local and territorial phenomenon to one with national and international reach. The objective is to mobilize minors for discrete acts of violence or criminal services. Open social media platforms—such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat—serve as the entry point, while encrypted applications like Telegram and Signal are used for coordination of criminal activities. Algorithms amplify exposure, allowing minors to move from no prior contact with organized crime to active participation in a violent offense within hours. This dramatically expands the recruitment pool while minimizing risk for criminal leadership.

"A defining feature of the current European trend is the instrumental use of recruited minors. Young recruits are used as one-off executors—often for shootings, armed attacks, or enforcement tasks—without any intention of integration or protection. Minors thus function as a buffer layer between criminal instigators and the act itself, benefiting criminal groups by reducing traceability and legal exposure. There is often no escape plan or follow-up support, reinforcing the expendable nature of child recruits within these systems."

Andreas Franke

Europol's Operational Task Force GRIMM

"Youth recruitment in Europe is not a single event, but a cumulative process shaped by a "stack" of vulnerabilities across individual, social, and structural domains. Trauma, mental health challenges, substance use, peer influence, family ties to criminality, weak social control, and the presence of illicit opportunities combine and reinforce one another over time, gradually normalizing risk and criminal engagement among young people."

Teodora Groshkova

European Union Drugs Agency

Experts underline the central role of digital grooming and gamification. Recruitment messages often frame criminal acts as "missions," using emojis, stickers, coded language, and challenge-based tasks to derealize violence and lower psychological barriers. Proof-of-crime requirements—videos or images shared back into recruitment channels—serve both as a mechanism of control and as content that sustains the online recruitment ecosystem. Practitioners attending the OSCE–IDB policy dialogue and training have emphasized that encrypted and selfdestructing communication further complicates detection and intervention.

Structurally, European recruitment follows a digitalized hierarchy, involving remote instigators, senior recruiters managing online ecosystems, junior recruiters (often young themselves) disseminating content, local enablers providing logistics, and minors acting as perpetrators. Despite strong welfare and juvenile justice systems in Europe, minors involved in these dynamics are frequently simultaneously victims and offenders, a dual condition that challenges purely punitive approaches and risks reinforcing criminal identity if not paired with prevention and exit strategies.

Overall, the European trend illustrates how organized crime has adapted to digital environments to scale recruitment, accelerate engagement, and externalize risk onto minors. While the scale of violence differs from other regions, the strategic logic mirrors the pattern described in the previous section: criminal organizations deliberately invest in youth as low-cost, low-risk instruments to sustain their operations and insulate leadership from accountability.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, child recruitment by criminal organizations occurs on a much larger scale and is deeply embedded in territorial control, illicit markets, and chronic violence. Recruitment in Latin America and the Caribbean is often continuous, socially embedded, and geographically concentrated, particularly in areas under partial or full criminal territorial control or where institutional constraints limit effective state presence.

A central trend is the integration of minors into illicit labor markets. Practitioners from Latin America and the Caribbean reported that children and adolescents are recruited for a wide range of roles—lookouts, couriers, microtraffickers, extortion collectors, armed enforcers, and contract killers. They shared that recruitment increasingly begins at younger ages and extends beyond highly vulnerable profiles to include the average youth living in gang-controlled territories, where criminal organizations function as dominant employers.

Territorial control is crucial. In neighborhoods, rural areas, ports, border areas, coca-growing regions, and illegal mining zones, criminal groups systematically recruit minors to secure surveillance, enforce order, and maintain control. In these contexts, recruitment is a mechanism of governance, reinforcing loyalty, silence, and intergenerational continuity.

The literature highlights a strong link between economic incentives and recruitment. In settings marked by poverty, weak labor markets, and limited access to education, criminal organizations offer immediate income, status, and protection that often surpass legal alternatives. Adolescents' decisions are shaped by biased risk perceptions, short-time horizons, and overestimation of criminal returns—factors that criminal groups actively exploit.

Violence and recruitment are mutually reinforcing. High competition between criminal groups increases demand for expendable labor, drawing minors into armed roles as replacements for killed or imprisoned members. At the same time, juvenile recruitment contributes to persistently high homicide rates among young males, particularly those aged 15–29, reinforcing regional cycles of violence.

Another trend in LAC is the role of forced and coercive recruitment, which especially affects migrants, indigenous populations, and children in contexts of weak state presence. Threats, debt bondage, and family coercion are frequently documented, blurring the line between voluntary and forced participation.

Institutional weakness magnifies these trends. Perceived impunity, the limited capacity to investigate, and juvenile justice systems that are either overly punitive or ineffective create incentives for criminal organizations to rely on minors. Overcrowded and poorly governed prisons act as incubators of criminal capital, strengthening networks that continue to recruit inside and outside detention facilities.

3.

Case Studies, Lessons Learned, and Promising Practices

IDB

The promising practices and lessons learned have been organized into four thematic categories. In many cases, a promising practice or lesson learned could fit into more than one category, given the cross-cutting nature of the issues discussed. However, for the purpose of clarity and structure, they have been placed under the category that most strongly reflects their predominant theme or primary focus.

3.1. Digital Recruitment and Emerging Criminal Dynamics

Lessons learned from Europol highlight that youth recruitment into organized crime has undergone a fundamental transformation driven by digitalization. It has shifted from gradual, trust-based processes to rapid, large-scale, and task-oriented recruitment systems. A central insight is that social media platforms have become a crucial recruitment infrastructure, allowing criminal networks to reach many young people simultaneously. Digital recruitment is immediate and transactional, enabling youth with no prior exposure to organized crime to become involved in serious offenses within hours. Another key lesson is that online recruitment is often aimed not at long-term integration into criminal networks, but at outsourcing specific criminal tasks. Young people are disposable—used once or a few times and then discarded—reflecting a highly exploitative and efficient model of crime as a service. The analysis also underscores the role of algorithms and online behavior in amplifying exposure to criminal content. Youth do not need to actively seek out these networks; platform dynamics can progressively expose them to recruitment content, normalizing violence and lowering barriers to entry.

An important lesson is that recruitment operates through a structured and hierarchical system, involving different roles—from instigators and recruiters to facilitators and perpetrators—designed to create distance between those planning the crimes and those committing them, complicating investigations. At the same time, financial flows tend to be less layered, making them a critical entry point for identifying higher-level actors. The intervention also highlights the use of coercion, control, and reputational mechanisms, including identity verification, threats, and the creation of debt, to ensure compliance and reduce the risk of withdrawal. The requirement to document and share crimes—especially in Sweden—reinforces the system by generating new content that feeds recruitment dynamics. Finally, a broader lesson is that young people operate in a borderless, continuous digital environment, where identity is fluid and exposure to risk is constant. This challenges traditional prevention approaches rooted in physical spaces and underscores the need to rethink interventions in line with where youth interact and socialize.

Another key challenge identified is that law enforcement in one country alone cannot effectively address online recruitment. Recruitment activities operate across borders and jurisdictions. This underscores the need for stronger cross-border cooperation, including enhanced intelligence sharing, joint investigations, and multi-country operational cooperation among law enforcement authorities. At the same time, effective responses require strengthened public–private partnerships with technology companies, social media platforms, and communication service providers, where recruitment, grooming, and the dissemination of instructions for criminal activities increasingly take place.

"You can go from not ever having been in touch with criminal organized crime to being on a mission and assignment within hours."

Andreas Franke

Europol's Operational Task Force GRIMM

Lessons learned from Montenegro highlight that youth recruitment into organized crime must be understood within a broader context of evolving and transnational criminal dynamics, where organized crime continues to expand globally and adapt to different political, socio-economic, and technological environments. Montenegro relies on tools such as the Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) to analyze trends, identify high-risk criminal groups, and support institutional responses, particularly to drug trafficking, which remains the dominant criminal activity and is closely linked to international networks. Structural vulnerabilities create enabling conditions for recruitment, including inequality, underdevelopment, weak institutional capacity, and gaps in education and social protection systems. These are compounded by insufficient human resources in police and social services, as well as limited parental capacity to respond to rapid technological change. Together, these factors increase young people's exposure to organized criminal groups.

Montenegro also highlights the growing importance of digital recruitment, with criminal networks increasingly using social media, messaging applications, and video games to engage minors. Emerging modalities such as QR codes and geolocation-based "dead drop" systems illustrate how technology is being used to facilitate drug sales and recruitment while maintaining anonymity. The use of encrypted communication and cryptocurrencies further complicates monitoring, investigation, and enforcement. Another key point is that minors are often used as low-risk and disposable actors, recruited at increasingly younger ages to perform tasks such as drug distribution or courier activities. This benefits criminal groups because children face lighter legal consequences. Finally, the intervention emphasizes that effective prevention must be systemic, long-term, and multidisciplinary, combining early identification, education, socio-economic support, institutional coordination, and youth empowerment. It places strong emphasis on education as a central pillar of prevention, both to build resilience and to promote a culture of legality.

"A quote by Frederick Douglass, 'It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men,' highlights the importance of education in preventing the global and regional challenges we face."

Dragana Kažanegra Stanišić

State Secretary, Ministry of Interior, Montenegro

3.2. Multisectoral and Interinstitutional Coordination

Lessons learned from Argentina highlight that youth recruitment into organized crime is closely linked to limited state presence, low perceived authority, and weak deterrence. Together, these factors create fertile ground for criminal organizations to expand. When the state fails to effectively reach vulnerable communities, criminal groups step in, providing support, resources, and a sense of belonging, thereby attracting young people who lack opportunities and social protection. A central element is the role of perception and social identity among youth. In contexts where criminal actors are seen as successful, influential, and socially recognized—often amplified through social media—young people become more inclined to engage with these groups. This dynamic is reinforced by personal vulnerabilities such as lack of family support, social exclusion, and limited prospects, which increase susceptibility to recruitment. Another key insight is that low or non-existent costs for criminal organizations historically facilitated recruitment, particularly due to legal gaps—such as age thresholds for criminal responsibility—that allowed minors to be used without consequences. In response, Argentina has focused on raising the cost of recruitment through legal and policy reforms, including anti-mafia legislation, changes to juvenile criminal responsibility, and measures to reduce impunity. Argentina also highlights the importance of strong, coordinated state action. Measures such as increased police presence, strengthened legal frameworks, enhanced criminal investigations, and improved prison controls (especially limiting communication from incarcerated leaders) have been critical in disrupting criminal networks. A notable example that has led to significant reductions in violence is the "Plan Bandera" in Rosario, which combined intelligence-led policing, inter-agency coordination, and targeted territorial interventions. Effective responses must combine short-term, decisive actions with sustained, long-term strategies, supported by political will and institutional coordination. While prevention and structural approaches are essential, immediate measures to disrupt recruitment and violence are also necessary in high-risk contexts.

"We must understand that when the State is absent, it becomes fertile ground for criminal organizations."

Federico Angelini

Undersecretary for Federal Intervention, Ministry of Security, Argentina

Lessons learned from the prevention strategies implemented by the Ministry of Interior and Police of the Dominican Republic highlight that effectively addressing youth recruitment into organized crime requires a comprehensive, multi-actor, and sustained public policy approach rather than isolated interventions. A key insight is that prevention depends on strong inter-institutional cooperation, combining government agencies, civil society, and community actors to expand access to cultural, sports, and healthy leisure opportunities, which are seen as essential protective factors for youth development. Another promising practice is the establishment of territorially focused prevention and citizen security centers that integrate vocational orientation, technical training, and labor insertion programs, helping young people build viable life projects and reducing their vulnerability to criminal recruitment driven by economic exclusion and lack of opportunity. These centers also provide community mediation services and psychosocial support, including emotional management and strengthening of family and community support networks, recognizing that resilience is built not only individually but also collectively.

The Ministry's approach further includes specialized police units—such as those focused on children and adolescents, cybercrime, trafficking, gender-based violence, and community policing—working in an interoperable manner to ensure that both preventive and operational responses are coordinated and effective. One particularly innovative practice is the Points of Life initiative, which creates safe spaces in public and private settings where trained personnel can provide immediate assistance and rapidly connect individuals at risk to protection and security services, especially in cases of violence against women and other urgent vulnerabilities. A central lesson learned is that prevention must be understood as a continuous process embedded in public policy, requiring sustained implementation, institutional coordination, and long-term commitment, as fragmented or short-term interventions tend to be unsustainable and fail to produce lasting impact.

"Prevention of youth recruitment into organized crime requires sustained, multi-actor public policy approaches that integrate inter-institutional cooperation, community-based services, and long-term support systems, rather than isolated or short-term interventions."

Chandrai Estévez

Viceminister of Violence Prevention on Vulnerable Populations, Ministry of Interior and Police of the Dominican Republic

The Falcone Borsellino Program, led by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation through the Central European Initiative, is a legal diplomacy and international cooperation program aimed at strengthening the prevention and fight against organized crime, corruption, trafficking, and illicit flows. Originally developed for Latin America and the Caribbean, the program was expanded to the Western Balkans and Central Europe in recognition of the region's role as a key corridor for transnational organized crime. The program is structured around four main pillars: (i) capacity building through training of judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement actors; (ii) institutional strengthening to reinforce anti-corruption and criminal justice responses; (iii) enhanced law enforcement cooperation, including legal harmonization and cross-border collaboration; and (iv) consensus-building through the engagement of civil society, academia, and the private sector to promote a broader culture of legality.

A key lesson learned from the program is that preventing the recruitment of children and youth into organized crime requires integrated and transnational responses that address both criminal dynamics and social vulnerabilities. Through regional needs assessments and analysis of trafficking and organized crime trends, the program identified the growing recruitment of minors into trafficking, narcotics distribution, and other criminal activities, often through social media outreach, family-based induction, or the exploitation of vulnerable environments. Promising practices include evidence-based programming, partnerships with academic institutions to research recruitment dynamics, and the adaptation of Italy's anti-mafia experience to emerging recruitment challenges. The program also demonstrates the importance of combining security and justice responses with prevention, awareness raising, and multi-stakeholder cooperation to strengthen resilience and reduce the vulnerabilities that criminal organizations exploit.

"Preventing the recruitment of children and youth into organized crime requires integrated and transnational responses that combine capacity building, institutional strengthening—including effective penitentiary systems based on inmate classification, separation mechanisms, penitentiary intelligence, and dedicated social reintegration pathways to prevent proselytism, radicalization, and recruitment in prisons—cross-border cooperation, and engagement with civil society, academia, and the private sector to promote a culture of legality."

Giovanni Tartaglia Polcini

Legal Diplomacy, Falcone and Borsellino Programme, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Italy

Lessons learned from the Falcone Borsellino Program, as presented by Giovanni Tartaglia Polcini, highlight that preventing the recruitment of young people into organized crime requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both institutional responses and underlying social and cultural drivers. A key lesson is that the penitentiary system must be strengthened to prevent prisons from becoming spaces for criminal recruitment, radicalization, and training. This includes ensuring clear classification and separation of young offenders to avoid contamination by organized criminal groups, while also expanding the use of alternatives to detention that support rehabilitation and social reintegration rather than reinforcing criminal trajectories. Another good practice is the promotion of a culture of legality as a central pillar of prevention, inspired by figures such as Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, and translated into education and social pedagogy that actively dismantles the false narratives and "myths" of organized crime. The program emphasizes the importance of providing young people with positive role models and real-life examples of lawful success, reinforcing aspiration-based prevention approaches.

Another lesson learned is that international cooperation frameworks must be adapted to explicitly include youth vulnerability and recruitment dynamics in capacity-building strategies, as reflected in recent multilateral agreements developed under Italy's G7 leadership. The program also underscores the growing importance of addressing digital recruitment strategies and the diversification of criminal markets, which require more agile, cross-regional responses. Overall, the experience shows that effective prevention depends on combining legal and institutional tools with education, cultural change, and international cooperation to offer young people credible alternatives, strengthen resilience, and reduce the appeal of organized crime as a perceived pathway for identity, status, or opportunity.

"Preventing youth recruitment into organized crime requires combining strong institutional measures—such as penitentiary safeguards and alternative sentencing—with a broader cultural strategy that offers young people positive role models, credible alternatives, and a culture of legality that dismantles the false myths of organized crime."

Giovanni Russo

Legal Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Italy

Lessons learned from the experience shared by Europol through its Operational Task Force highlight that effectively countering the recruitment of young people into organized crime requires moving beyond a purely law enforcement approach toward a multidimensional and highly coordinated response. A central insight is that enforcement alone—while necessary—is insufficient to address a rapidly evolving, digitally driven phenomenon. Instead, Europol's model demonstrates the value of combining operations (arrests and investigations), prevention (awareness), and disruption with equal priority, creating a more comprehensive and proactive response.

A key lesson is that information exchange must occur rapidly and in real time. Recruitment processes increasingly take place online and evolve quickly, requiring institutions to develop agile mechanisms to share information not only across law enforcement agencies, but also with social services, schools, and other relevant actors. This reflects a broader shift toward multisectoral collaboration, where prevention and response are distributed across systems. Another promising practice is the establishment of multidisciplinary teams that analyze recruitment not only as individual criminal cases, but as a broader pattern or problem. By integrating expertise from cybercrime, serious organized crime, prevention, data analysis, and social services, these teams are better equipped to understand the full scope of the phenomenon and identify more effective intervention points. This approach underscores the need to move from reactive, case-by-case responses toward strategic, intelligence-led prevention frameworks.

Europol's experience also highlights the importance of developing concrete tools for early detection in digital environments. Initiatives such as shared indicators, simplified guidance (fact sheets), and technological tools capable of identifying recruitment patterns—including the use of coded language and emojis—demonstrate how institutions can strengthen their ability to detect risks before they escalate. Closely related is the use of integrated data analysis, where information from multiple countries and sources is combined to identify patterns that would otherwise remain invisible, reinforcing the value of cross-border cooperation. Finally, a broader lesson is that transparency and engagement with external actors, including media and social media platforms, can significantly shift the landscape. By raising awareness and actively engaging with the platforms where recruitment occurs, Europol has elevated the issue on the political and public agenda, fostering greater accountability and collaboration with the private sector.

Lessons learned from Brazil highlight that preventing youth recruitment into organized crime requires a territory-based, multidimensional, and coordinated public policy approach, adapted to large-scale and highly unequal contexts. Brazil's "Growing Up in Peace" national strategy, developed in partnership with UNODC, is built on a comprehensive prevention system that combines early risk identification, protection of rights, and strong interinstitutional coordination. A central element is the recognition that one-size-fits-all approaches are ineffective, particularly in a country marked by significant socio-economic disparities. The strategy integrates multiple institutions and includes 46 actions focused on prevention, coordinated responses, and the promotion of children's and adolescents' rights. Key programs combine universal prevention (life skills, school and family interventions) with targeted support for high-risk youth, including professional training, psychosocial support, and pathways to economic inclusion. Financial incentives further enable young people to remain in education rather than entering illicit economies. Another key lesson is the importance of territorialization and local partnerships, working with civil society and community actors to strengthen local prevention systems and ensure context-specific interventions. This allows for the integration of education, community engagement, and institutional coordination. Brazil also highlights the role of legal and regulatory frameworks in addressing emerging risks, particularly in digital environments. New legislation introduces stricter age verification, parental controls, and mechanisms to report harmful online content, reflecting the growing importance of protecting youth in digital spaces. A particularly innovative practice is the development of a Vulnerability to Organized Crime Index of Indigenous Territories, which identifies risk factors linked to organized crime through a multidimensional framework (including income, education, violence, and illicit activities). This tool enables targeted, evidence-based interventions, better resource allocation, and continuous monitoring, shifting the focus from blaming communities to addressing structural vulnerabilities.

"This vulnerability index is more than just a measurement tool—it is a strategic instrument for proactive, informed, and equitable public policy."

Larissa Cristina Margarido

Technical Advisor, National Secretariat for Drug Policies and Asset Management, Ministry of Justice and Public Security, Brazil

Lessons learned from the work of the OSCE highlight that the rapid rise of human trafficking for forced criminality represents a growing and under-recognized form of exploitation, particularly affecting children and adolescents. Evidence shows a sharp increase in victims, rising from 1 percent in 2021 to 17 percent in recent data, with boys predominantly exploited for drug production and distribution, forced fraud, and street-level criminality, while girls are increasingly subject to poly-exploitation, combining sexual exploitation with coercion into theft and other crimes. A key lesson learned is that traffickers systematically target children in situations of heightened vulnerability, including unaccompanied minors, children in institutional care, those belonging to minority groups, and children with disabilities, demonstrating the need for highly targeted and inclusive prevention strategies. Emerging trends also show the expansion of forced fraud and cyber-enabled scam operations across the OSCE region, mirroring patterns previously observed in other parts of the world, and increasingly involving cross-border recruitment and digital exploitation.

Good practices identified by the OSCE emphasize the importance of strengthening early identification mechanisms through multi-stakeholder cooperation, including partnerships between law enforcement, civil society, and social services. Innovative approaches include the development of specialized expert groups on the criminal exploitation of minors, the creation of practical toolkits and indicators for frontline practitioners, and the integration of survivor-informed perspectives into policy and training. The use of technology and open-source intelligence tools to detect potential victims, combined with proactive outreach by social services, has also proven effective. Finally, cross-sectoral collaboration, including partnerships with healthcare providers and private sector actors, has been essential in identifying hidden victims and raising awareness of emerging trafficking modalities. Overall, the experience demonstrates that addressing forced criminality requires adaptive, data-driven, and partnership-based responses that keep pace with rapidly evolving criminal tactics.

"Effectively addressing trafficking for forced criminality requires strengthened multi-stakeholder partnerships, early identification tools, and coordinated action between criminal justice system, social services, civil society, and the private sector to detect victims, support intervention, and prevent exploitation."

Valentina Lopez-Yanes

Project Officer, OSCE Secretariat

Lessons learned from the experience shared by the Ministry of Public Security of Panama highlight that preventing youth recruitment into organized crime requires a comprehensive, multisectoral, and prevention-centered approach that places strong emphasis on education, opportunity creation, and community engagement. A key insight is that organized crime invests heavily in recruiting young people. Therefore, it is essential for states to prioritize prevention as a strategic and cost-effective response, which requires fewer resources than reactive security measures while generating higher long-term impact. The Panamanian experience demonstrates the value of inter-institutional coordination, where security, education, social development, labor, and health institutions work together with local governments, schools, and private sector actors to address risk factors holistically. A practice highlighted is the partnerships with the private sector, including programs that facilitate first employment experiences for youth who lack prior job exposure, thereby reducing their vulnerability to recruitment by criminal networks. Another lesson learned is the importance of territorial presence and localized prevention strategies through regional offices and technical coordination bodies that enable tailored responses adapted to community realities. Public awareness campaigns, community outreach, and participation in employment fairs have also proven effective in engaging at-risk youth and increasing trust in prevention institutions. Finally, a key takeaway is that prevention must be understood as a long-term, institutionalized public policy supported by broad alliances, including business associations and civil society, to ensure sustainability, legitimacy, and reach in addressing the structural drivers of youth vulnerability to organized crime.

> "Preventing youth recruitment into organized crime requires shifting from reactive security responses to a comprehensive prevention model that integrates education, employment opportunities, and inter-institutional cooperation to address the root causes of vulnerability."
>
> **Luis Zegarro**
>
> Director of Public Safety and Prevention Policies,
> Ministry of Public Security of Panama

3.3. Early Prevention, Education, and Reintegration

Lessons learned from the programs of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia, in cooperation with the OSCE, highlight that effective prevention of youth recruitment into organized crime requires addressing the underlying need for belonging, identity, and positive life perspectives among young people. A key insight is that alienation, lack of social integration, and the search for meaning can make children and adolescents particularly vulnerable to criminal networks that offer a distorted sense of status, recognition, and belonging. In response, Serbia has developed a comprehensive, multisectoral prevention approach that combines education, community engagement, and security measures.

A flagship initiative, "Together Safe through Unity," implemented in primary schools since 2023, demonstrates a good practice of early, large-scale prevention through structured workshops that equip children with skills to recognize violence in both physical and digital environments, respond to risks, and adopt safe behaviors. The program's scale—reaching hundreds of thousands of students and involving extensive educational materials—shows the value of sustained, systemic prevention embedded in the school system. Complementary initiatives such as the "Čuvam te" platform provide an accessible reporting and support mechanism for young people, reinforcing institutional responsiveness and cross-sector coordination. The annual Safe Graduation campaign further illustrates targeted, life-stage-specific prevention by addressing risks linked to youth celebrations, substance use, and unsafe behaviors.

A broader lesson learned is that organized crime exploits complexity and paradox, including cases where even individuals from stable socioeconomic backgrounds are drawn into criminal networks. This underscores that prevention cannot rely solely on socioeconomic indicators; it must also address psychosocial factors, aspirations, and social belonging. Overall, the Serbian experience shows that multilayered, education-centered, and cross-sectoral strategies—supported by police, schools, and social systems—are essential to building resilience and reducing youth vulnerability to organized crime recruitment.

"Preventing youth recruitment into organized crime requires addressing the fundamental need for belonging, meaning, and positive life perspectives, as alienation and lack of integration can make young people vulnerable to criminal networks offering identity and recognition."

Željko Brkić

Assistant Police Director – Chief of Staff to the Director of Police, Police Directorate, Serbia

Lessons learned from Albania's Ministry of Justice highlight the importance of placing protection, prevention, and reintegration of children and youth at the center of public policy, through a comprehensive and coordinated institutional approach. The government has prioritized a model that combines education, awareness-raising, and strong inter-institutional cooperation. The Center for the Prevention of Crime among Children and Youth plays a key operational role in implementing concrete programs and campaigns.

A central element of the intervention is the emphasis on reintegration as a critical pillar of prevention. Albania's experience shows that structured support—such as access to education, vocational training, internships, employment opportunities, and even small business grants—can effectively redirect young people away from criminal pathways. The active involvement of formerly justice-involved youth in awareness campaigns further reinforces prevention efforts by providing credible peer-to-peer messages and demonstrating that reintegration is possible. Another key component is the use of education and communication as preventive tools. Through large-scale educational campaigns in schools and the development of accessible materials—including audiovisual content explaining the justice process—young people are better informed about legal consequences, rights, and responsibilities. Efforts to ensure inclusivity, such as translating materials into sign language, further strengthen the reach and effectiveness of these interventions.

The intervention also highlights the growing challenge of digital environments, with evidence showing that a significant number of youth-involved criminal cases are linked to the negative influence of social media. In response, Albania has implemented targeted awareness initiatives to educate young people on online risks and organized crime recruitment. Campaigns such as “S’ka shkurt” (“There are no shortcuts”) and storytelling approaches—like films based on real cases—illustrate the value of using real-life experiences to counter harmful narratives and promote positive role models. Looking forward, Albania is strengthening prevention through systemic and long-term measures, such as integrating legal education into the national school curriculum. These efforts are supported by a broader policy framework, including intersectoral strategies on child protection, victims’ protection, and organized crime, and are sustained through strong collaboration with civil society, public institutions, and international partners.

“This initiative (“S’ka shkurt) has highlighted success stories of children and young people who have gone through the justice system and are now positive role models, demonstrating that change is always possible.”

Elona Hoxha

Deputy Minister of Justice, Ministry of Justice, Albania

Effective prevention of youth recruitment into organized crime depends fundamentally on targeted identification of high-risk cases, early intervention, and strong inter-agency cooperation. A central insight is that timing is critical: interventions must take place at a very young age—before children reach the age of criminal responsibility—when behavior is still possible to change and social interventions can have a greater impact.

Another key element is the need to prioritize high-risk cases. While youth crime is often widespread and relatively minor, research shows that a small proportion of individuals (approximately 6–10 percent) are responsible for a disproportionate share of offenses. Given limited resources, it is essential to identify and focus on these high-risk individuals early, rather than attempting to address all cases equally.

A critical lesson is that effective identification requires information sharing across institutions. Collaboration between police, social services, schools, and other actors is necessary to understand risk factors and build a comprehensive assessment of each case. However, this cooperation is often difficult due to institutional silos, lack of coordination, and even mutual distrust between sectors.

The intervention also emphasizes that strengthening prevention efforts requires practical collaboration mechanisms, such as joint trainings, shared methodologies, and working on real cases across professions. Bringing together different stakeholders—both within countries and across regions—allows for the exchange of perspectives and improves the quality of responses. Finally, Ursuleack highlights the importance of international and cross-regional cooperation, noting that countries face similar challenges and can benefit from sharing solutions and best practices. Platforms that facilitate this exchange, as well as multi-stakeholder forums and regional initiatives, are key to advancing effective prevention strategies.

"You need to identify and prioritize the small number of high-risk youth who are most likely to become repeat and serious offenders. Research shows that just 6–10 percent of juveniles account for up to 50 percent of recorded offenses, making targeted prevention essential in the context of limited resources."

Christopher Ursuleack

Criminologist and expert on youth crime prevention

Lessons learned from the work of the Guardia di Finanza highlight that preventing youth vulnerability to recruitment into organized and financial crime requires sustained investment in education, early prevention, and strong collaboration between security institutions and the education sector. A key insight is that since young people represent a strategic target for organized crime groups, which actively invest in recruitment processes, prevention must be equally proactive, engaging students early and consistently with clear, accessible messaging on legality, risks, and future opportunities. A central good practice is the formalization of cooperation between the Guardia di Finanza and the Italian Ministry of Education through memoranda of understanding that institutionalize "education for legality" and financial crime prevention as part of school-based outreach. This framework enables structured, nationwide engagement through territorial commands that adapt activities to local contexts while maintaining a coherent national strategy.

Another lesson learned is the importance of direct engagement with students of different ages through interactive school meetings that explain the work of law enforcement while highlighting the social and economic harms of organized and financial crime, particularly as criminal organizations increasingly operate within financial systems. The initiative also underscores the value of multi-agency collaboration at the local level, where police, educational institutions, and other authorities jointly organize activities, strengthening trust and legitimacy among young audiences. Institutional communication, including traditional and digital media, is another key tool to reinforce prevention messages and raise awareness about the risks of criminal infiltration. Finally, a promising practice is the emphasis on visible cooperation among different authorities during outreach activities, which reinforces the credibility of the message and demonstrates a unified institutional response. Overall, the experience shows that adaptable, locally implemented, and education-centered prevention strategies are essential for building resilience among young people and reducing their vulnerability to recruitment by organized crime.

> "Preventing youth vulnerability to organized and financial crime requires sustained investment in education for legality, early engagement with students, and strong cooperation between law enforcement, schools, and local authorities to proactively counter the recruitment strategies of organized crime."

Magg. Matteo Boarelli

Guardia di Finanza, Italy

Johan Sone and Catharina Tornqvist

Swedish Police

Spotlight session on successful inter-agency cooperation

Early Intervention through a Multi-Stakeholder Approach

Lessons learned from the Swedish experience with the *Rätt Kurva* initiative highlight that preventing youth recruitment into organized crime requires a shift toward earlier, more targeted, and multisectoral interventions, focused on children at highest risk. The Swedish Police emphasize that traditional methods are no longer sufficient, as criminal actors have become more sophisticated, requiring institutions to adapt and engage a broader set of actors.

A central element of the model is early identification and prioritization of high-risk children, particularly between ages 8 and 15. Using a structured screening tool based on police data, cases are selected by combining objective indicators (such as age, number of offenses, victimization, and missing reports) with qualitative insights from police, social services, and schools. This allows authorities to focus limited resources on a small group of children most likely to develop persistent criminal trajectories.

Another key component is multi-agency collaboration, where police, social services, and education authorities jointly assess cases and take shared decisions. Since no single institution holds the full picture, coordinated action is essential. The program is voluntary and relies on building trust with families through sustained engagement. A defining feature of *Rätt Kurva* is its highly individualized and family-centered approach. Interventions are tailored to both the child and the family, recognizing that underlying issues often extend beyond individual behavior. Action plans may include educational support, mental health services, leisure activities, and parental support, alongside efforts to strengthen children's talents and sense of belonging outside criminal environments.

An innovative aspect is the integration of private sector and civil society support, enabling access to additional resources beyond public services. The intervention is intensive and long-term, with continuous adjustments based on the child's development. Overall, the model shows that effective prevention requires early targeting, individualized support, strong coordination, and whole-of-society engagement.

"Rätt Kurva aims to strengthen children's self-esteem and inner motivation, helping them find belonging and value in alternatives to criminal life."

"It's all about finding the right kids at the right moment with the right resources."

"We need to change the conditions for the family, because usually the kids are the symptoms of a problem. They are not really the root cause."

"This is not a question about being repressive or working with preventive measures. Both things must work together."

3.4
Gender, Structural Vulnerabilities, and Trauma-Informed Approaches

Lessons learned from the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) highlight the critical role of the Agency in providing scientifically grounded evidence, threat analysis, and policy support to better understand and respond to youth recruitment into drug-related organized crime. As Europe's hub for drug-related expertise, the Agency contributes to strategic frameworks, early warning, and coordinated responses across EU member states, integrating both public health and security perspectives. A central insight is that youth recruitment is driven by a "vulnerability stack," where multiple risk factors accumulate across individual, social, and structural levels. These include trauma, mental health challenges, substance use, weak parental supervision, family ties to crime, poverty, and the presence of illicit opportunities. Importantly, recruitment is not a one-time event but a cumulative and reinforcing process, where repeated exposure and interaction normalize criminal behavior and deepen involvement over time.

The intervention also emphasizes the growing importance of digital recruitment, which has significantly transformed the scale and nature of the phenomenon. Criminal networks increasingly rely on encrypted messaging applications, anonymous communication, and gamified interactions to recruit and retain young people. These tools allow recruiters to target vulnerable individuals, operate anonymously, and expand rapidly, while also making detection and monitoring more difficult for authorities. Another key lesson is that young people are increasingly used as disposable and low-cost actors, performing a wide range of operational roles within criminal networks—from logistics and surveillance to drug trafficking—while shielding higher-level actors. Their involvement is facilitated by both their legal status and their vulnerability, making them attractive for criminal organizations. Finally, the EUDA highlights a major gap in current responses: interventions remain fragmented and insufficiently evaluated, limiting their effectiveness and scalability. In response, it is advancing a promising practice by developing a multimodal, ecological framework, which promotes integrated, cross-sectoral strategies focused on both disrupting recruitment pathways and addressing root causes, while strengthening long-term community resilience through collaboration among law enforcement, policymakers, researchers, and communities.

"Recruitment is not a single event; it occurs as a cumulative process driven by individual and social factors, with exploitation of vulnerable people continuing to fuel organized drug crime."

Teodora Groshkova

Principal Scientific Analyst, European Union Drugs Agency

Lessons learned from the work and research of the OSCE in Europe show a strong interconnection between gender-based violence (GBV), domestic violence, and recruitment into organized crime, particularly among children and youth exposed to violence in the household. Children who witness or experience abuse, neglect, or chronic violence often suffer long-term impacts with respect to emotional regulation, stress responses, mental health, their ability to build healthy relationships, and a sense of security. Organized crime groups exploit these vulnerabilities. OSCE also finds a significant victim-offender overlap, as many youth who perpetrate crime have histories of early exposure to domestic violence.

Therefore, a key lesson learned is that preventing recruitment into organized crime requires addressing GBV and domestic violence as core prevention and protection issues, rather than treating them separately from security and crime prevention policies. Promising practices promoted by the OSCE include holistic and trauma-informed approaches that recognize the long-term effects of violence on children and families; strengthening the capacities of police officers, first responders, and criminal justice actors to apply victim-centered approaches; and promoting multisectoral cooperation among social services, education, health, and justice institutions. Through its cooperation with police academies across Southeastern Europe, the OSCE has trained more than 2,000 future police officers and first responders in 2024 and 2025 on trauma-informed responses to GBV. Innovative methodologies, such as incorporating survivor testimonies and interactive theater performances into trainings, have also proven effective in shifting institutional perspectives toward greater empathy and accessibility for victims. These approaches contribute to breaking intergenerational cycles of violence and reducing vulnerabilities that organized crime groups exploit in recruitment processes.

Research from the OSCE further highlights that young women and girls face distinct recruitment vulnerabilities in relation to organized crime (OSCE, 2023; OSCE, 2025). Criminal networks strategically target young women for specific roles such as drug or firearms transport, concealment, and cross-border logistics, exploiting the perception that they attract less suspicion from law enforcement. A key finding is the strong overlap between GBV and recruitment, with many women involved in organized crime having previously experienced domestic or sexual violence, reinforcing cycles of victimization and criminal exploitation. Another major vulnerability is digital recruitment, where social media platforms are used to glamorize criminal lifestyles, promote narratives of quick financial gain and independence, and lower perceived risks of involvement. In parallel, organized crime groups exploit the search for belonging among vulnerable young women, offering a false sense of family, protection, and identity.

Good practices identified by the OSCE emphasize the importance of addressing GBV as a core prevention strategy, including strengthening the capacities of frontline professionals to identify and support survivors, ensuring accountability for perpetrators, and adopting holistic approaches that also protect children of victims. Another effective practice is the inclusion of women with lived experience in prevention and awareness efforts, which helps dismantle the myths promoted by criminal networks and provides credible counter-narratives. Finally, expanding access to financial literacy, vocational training, and employment opportunities for young women is essential to strengthen economic independence, build resilience, and provide realistic alternatives to involvement in organized crime.

Lessons learned from the work of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) highlight that preventing youth recruitment into organized crime requires a fundamental shift in how the problem is understood and addressed. Interventions should move beyond a narrow security or trafficking lens to recognize it as a broader issue of violence against children that demands a whole-of-society response. A key insight is the importance of placing the child at the center of interventions and applying an ecological approach that engages families, schools, communities, and institutions in a coordinated way, recognizing that effective prevention depends on strengthening protective environments at multiple levels. Another critical lesson is the value of integrating scientific evidence, including neuroscience and child development, to better understand how adolescents' heightened sensitivity to risk, identity-seeking, and belonging is exploited by criminal and terrorist groups, and to ensure that prevention strategies are developmentally informed and age-appropriate.

Good practices include building strong multisectoral partnerships across law enforcement, education, health, and child protection systems, with clearly defined roles and referral mechanisms to ensure accountability and effective coordination. Equally important is investing in the capacity and wellbeing of frontline workers who support children, including addressing trauma and providing mentorship to improve the quality of responses in practice. The UNODC also emphasizes participatory approaches that actively involve children and youth in designing prevention strategies, recognizing their ability to identify risks and communicate in evolving digital environments. Finally, promising practices include combining top-down institutional engagement with bottom-up community leadership, leveraging local actors, including youth-led initiatives, to strengthen trust, relevance, and impact. Together, these approaches demonstrate that sustainable prevention depends on shared responsibility, context-specific solutions, and continuous collaboration across all levels of society to offer children real alternatives to criminal recruitment.

"Preventing the recruitment and exploitation of children into organized crime requires a shift from a punitive, security-only approach to a whole-of-society response that places children at the center, strengthens protective environments across families, schools and communities, and integrates evidence on child and adolescent neurodevelopment into prevention strategies."

Dayan Farias Picon

Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer,
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Lessons learned from Chile's National Service for Specialized Protection to Children and Adolescents highlight that preventing youth recruitment into organized crime requires a comprehensive protection model centered on highly vulnerable populations, combining prevention, care, and intersectoral coordination. A central pillar of the model is a trauma-informed approach, recognizing that many children and adolescents under state protection have experienced chronic trauma, violence, and abandonment. This implies that responses focused solely on behavioral control are insufficient; instead, institutions must provide safe, predictable, and restorative environments that address underlying harm and support recovery. A second key element is the use of specialized protocols and early detection mechanisms for serious rights violations, including sexual exploitation, trafficking, and recruitment by organized crime. Mandatory reporting systems and national registries allow authorities to generate reliable data, identify patterns of risk, and target prevention efforts, revealing, for example, concentration of risks in specific territories, age groups, and gender profiles. The model also emphasizes intersectoral governance, ensuring coordination between protection services, juvenile justice, and other sectors such as health, education, housing, and security. This is particularly critical given that many adolescents under protection also interact with the justice system, and fragmented interventions can increase the risk of continued criminal involvement.

A key vulnerability identified is the transition to independent living, especially for youth leaving residential care. Many lack support networks and face structural risks such as unemployment, housing instability, and school dropout, making them highly susceptible to recruitment. In response, *Chile's* National Service for Specialized Protection to Children and Adolescents is advancing in five key areas: economic inclusion, housing, security coordination, mental health support, and governance, aimed at building sustainable life pathways. Finally, addressing recruitment requires systemic, coordinated responses that compete with the immediate incentives offered by criminal groups, particularly identity, belonging, and economic gain.

"The response we build through our programs has to compete with what criminal gangs offer."

Gabriel Mendoza

Head of the Intersectoral Coordination Unit, National Service for Specialized Protection of Children and Adolescents, Chile

4.

Prevention of Youth Recruitment and Involvement in Organized Crime: A Multi-Stakeholder Approach

Preventing the recruitment of children, adolescents, and young people into organized crime requires a shift from reactive, enforcement-led approaches toward early, targeted, and system-wide prevention strategies. Evidence from comparative models implemented in Europe shows that recruitment into organized crime is not a sudden event, but rather the result of a progressive process shaped by cumulative exposure to risk factors and unmet developmental needs.

Organized crime groups actively exploit these vulnerabilities—often targeting children below the age of criminal responsibility—to minimize detection and legal consequences.[1] Young people are frequently recruited into a variety of roles such as lookouts, couriers, or intermediaries, with involvement often escalating over time into more structured and potentially violent forms of participation.

This process is increasingly mediated by digital environments. Social media platforms have become central tools for recruitment, enabling criminal groups to normalize violence, glamorize illicit lifestyles, and promote narratives of belonging, status, and financial gain. These messages are often directed at socially excluded or marginalized youth, amplifying existing vulnerabilities, and accelerating recruitment pathways.

Effective prevention must therefore focus on disrupting these trajectories at an early stage. This requires coordinated, multi-stakeholder action across law enforcement, social services, education systems, families, and communities, with the shared objective of identifying and supporting high-risk individuals before pathways become entrenched.

Building on these principles, the following section presents the Swedish *Rätt Kurva* model—adapted from the German *Kurve Kriegen* approach—as an example of how early identification, structured risk assessment, individualized intervention, and sustained multi-agency coordination can be operationalized.

4.1
Key Features of Effective Youth Crime Prevention

Prevention must begin early, before behavioral patterns consolidate, and must be targeted toward individuals most at risk of developing persistent and repeat offending trajectories. While enforcement remains an important component of public safety systems, it is inherently limited as a preventive tool because it typically intervenes only after criminal behavior has already emerged. Evidence across countries shows that recidivism rates among offenders remain substantial, with reconviction rates commonly ranging between 20 and 60 percent within a few years of release (Yukhnenko, Sridhar, and Fazel, 2020). This indicates that a significant proportion of individuals continue to engage in criminal activity even after contact with the justice system. Repression and punitive enforcement, without a more comprehensive approach, are not highly effective as preventive instruments. Key features of effective crime prevention are:

- **Effective prevention is anticipatory rather than reactive.** It requires moving away from traditional approaches based primarily on policing and sanctions toward models that engage children and families before criminal patterns become established. This involves acting on early signals of risk rather than waiting for escalation.
- **Multi-agency collaboration** is critical, as it ensures that law enforcement, social services, schools, and other relevant actors work together, share information, and coordinate interventions to build a comprehensive understanding of risk and deliver timely responses.
- **Effective systems are based on structured and coherent intervention frameworks rather than isolated actions.** They are voluntary and built on trust, enabling long-term engagement with children and families. At the same time, they rely on systematic processes—such as risk screening and ongoing assessment—to guide decision making. A defining feature is their individualized nature: interventions are tailored to the specific risks, needs, and circumstances of each child.

- **Prevention is long-term and family centered**. Rather than focusing only on the child's behavior, it addresses the broader environment in which risks emerge, including family dynamics, school engagement, peer influences, and community conditions. It is the interaction of risks across these domains—not isolated factors—that drives progression toward organized crime involvement. Therefore, prevention requires a continuous process aimed at reducing risks and strengthening protective factors over time.

Both the German and Swedish experiences show that effectiveness depends on combining structure with flexibility: structured systems enable consistent identification and prioritization, while individualized, relationship-based interventions ensure relevance and impact at the case level.

4.2 Why Early Prevention Matters

Early prevention matters because the most serious youth offending—and recruitment into organized crime—is highly concentrated. Research shows that a relatively small group of young people, estimated at around 6 to 10 percent, is responsible for up to half of recorded youth offenses (Howell, Krisberg, and Jones, 1995; Prognos, 2016). Targeting this group early can therefore generate substantial impact on reducing crime and preventing recruitment.

These trajectories develop gradually through the accumulation of risk factors. Early warning signs—such as school disengagement, exposure to violence, family instability, and involvement with delinquent peer groups—often emerge well before the age of criminal responsibility. In some contexts, exposure to criminal environments and recruitment processes can begin as early as ages 8 to 10.

At this stage, trajectories remain highly malleable. Early adolescence is therefore a critical window for intervention: risks are still reversible, but if left unaddressed they tend to intensify and become increasingly difficult to change over time. By late adolescence (ages 16 to 19), patterns of offending are often already consolidated.

Evidence from European practice underscores the importance of early action. The German experience from North-Rhine Westphalia focuses on identifying young people early in their criminal career before they develop into repeat offenders by interrupting the conditions that enable recruitment—particularly school exclusion, family vulnerability, and exposure to violence and criminal networks.

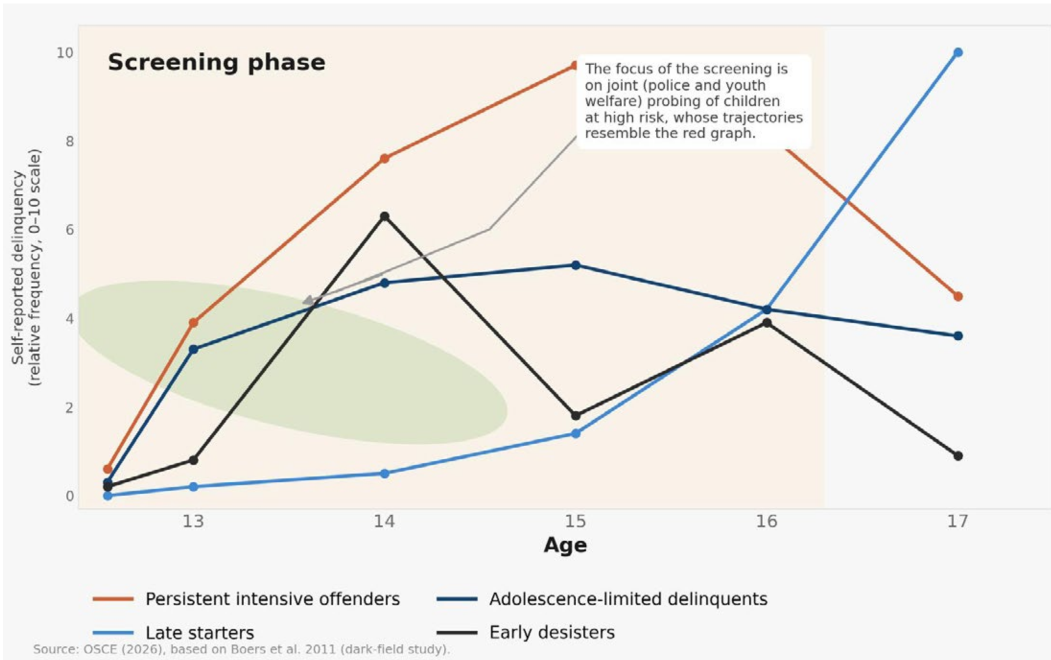
Inspired by the German model, the Swedish *Rätt Kurva* initiative brings together police and social services to identify children approximately between ages 8 and 15 who show early risk indicators, and to provide coordinated support before escalation into a repeat offender career occurs. This demonstrates that early prevention is both conceptually sound and operationally feasible when institutions are aligned and information is shared effectively. From a policy perspective, early prevention is both more effective and more efficient: intervening at the point of emerging risk is significantly less costly than addressing entrenched criminal behavior later in life.

4.3 Risk Screening

Risk screening is a central pillar of effective prevention, as it determines which individuals receive early, intensive support. It is a strategic function that enables systems to identify children and adolescents whose trajectories are most likely to evolve into persistent offending and potential recruitment into organized crime.

The German model conceptualizes risk screening as a structured, pathway-oriented process aimed at identifying “true positives”—individuals unlikely to desist without targeted intervention (red line in Figure 1). Rather than reacting to isolated incidents, it assesses whether a young person is on a trajectory of escalating risk likely to lead to repeated and more serious offending. This distinction is critical, as many forms of youth offending are episodic or temporary (green line in Figure 1), whereas recruitment into organized crime is associated with persistent and cumulative risk patterns.

Figure 4.1. Risk Screening of Youth Vulnerable to Recruitment into Organized Crime



Source: Reinecke and Boers (2011).

Effective screening must be comprehensive and multidimensional, integrating information across several domains:

- **Individual factors**, such as exposure to violence, neglect, behavioral challenges, school absenteeism, or substance use (Martínez et al., 2012; Matthews and Milton, 2018).
- **Family conditions**, including domestic violence, low parental capacity, or instability (Herrera, 2024; Hikal, 2021).
- **Peer and environmental influences**, such as delinquent peer groups, social economic exclusion, or residence in high-crime areas (Damm and Dustmann, 2014; Lederman et al., 2002).
- **Social and cultural factors**, including marginalization and limited educational or social opportunities (Maio et al., 2020; Sviatschi, 2022).

Interventions should focus on the accumulation and interaction of risks, as clustering of vulnerabilities is a strong predictor of escalation. For instance, youths living in crime-ridden residential environments and with family members with criminal histories are more prone to involvement in crime because of the reinforcing effect of both factors and intergenerational transmission of risk (Basemer et al., 2017).

The Swedish *Rätt Kurva* model operationalizes this approach through a structured assessment system led by the police and complemented by social services. It compiles multiple sources of information for children aged approximately 8 to 15, including recorded offenses, police reports, missing-person incidents, exposure to family violence, and referrals to social services.

Building on this, the system applies a structured scoring approach combining:

- the seriousness of the offense, and
- the age of the child (with younger age weighted more heavily).

This generates an individual risk score that supports prioritization and distinguishes between temporary behavior and patterns with a higher likelihood of escalation. It supports more objective, consistent, and timely decision making, ensuring that limited resources are prioritized toward individuals with greater need for early intervention, while final decisions are made jointly by police and social services, incorporating professional judgment and contextual understanding.

4.4 Competent Multiprofessional Teams

Recruitment into organized crime is multidimensional challenge, reflecting the interaction of individual, family, peer, and social and cultural factors. No single institution can adequately respond to this complexity, and single-agency approaches are systematically limited.

Effective prevention requires the coordinated involvement of multiple professional groups. Law enforcement plays a key role in identifying early signals, particularly through offense-related data. This starting point must be complemented by the expertise of social workers, educators, and, where relevant, health professionals and community actors. Competence in this context does not derive from individual expertise alone, but from structured collaboration across sectors.

This multi-professional approach is closely linked to the principle of individualized prevention. Recruitment pathways differ significantly across cases, and risks and needs are highly context specific. Interventions must therefore be tailored to the individual child, based on a comprehensive understanding of their environment. Evidence shows that standardized or group-based approaches are insufficient to address the complexity of recruitment dynamics. This means that prevention must adapt to the child—not the other way around.

The German experience illustrates this clearly. In one case, a child's aggressive behavior was initially treated as a disciplinary issue. However, a joint assessment revealed that the behavior was linked to persistent bullying at school related to his weight. The response therefore went beyond behavioral interventions: the child received support to improve his physical well-being, including guidance from a nutrition specialist; his mother participated in cooking classes to promote healthier routines at home; and the child also engaged in anger management support. This integrated response addressed the underlying drivers of behavior, illustrating why one-size-fits-all approaches fail and why individualized solutions require diverse professional input.

The Swedish *Rätt Kurva* model operationalizes these principles through a coordinated system of case selection, assessment, and intervention. Cases are jointly identified by police and social services, often in collaboration with schools, based on shared assessment of risk. A comprehensive mapping process then captures the child's situation across domains, guiding the design of tailored intervention plans.

Interventions are delivered by multidisciplinary teams and may involve social services, schools, health care providers, and, where relevant, actors from civil society and the private sector. Coordination extends beyond the design phase: throughout implementation, actors remain engaged around the child and family, contributing according to their roles while pursuing a shared objective.

A defining feature of *Rätt Kurva* is the establishment of sustained relationships between institutions, the child, and the family, as well as with external partners. This continuity allows interventions to adapt over time and remain aligned with the child's evolving needs and circumstances.

A key implementation feature of the Swedish model is sustained family engagement. High levels of voluntary participation reflect both trust in institutions and the non-punitive framing of interventions, which is essential for long-term effectiveness.

The model also addresses a key implementation challenge: the need for role clarity and trust. Pedagogical professionals maintain an independent mandate from law enforcement, which is essential for building and sustaining relationships with children and families. This separation reinforces the supportive, non-punitive nature of the intervention and facilitates voluntary participation.

Ultimately, effectiveness lies not only in combining expertise, but also in aligning collaboration with individualization. Multidisciplinary perspectives enable tailored interventions, while individualized approaches depend on coordinated input from across sectors. In this regard, impact emerges from the integration of both dimensions within a broader ecosystem that includes families, schools, civil society, and community networks.

4.5
Selection and Initial Engagement

Early identification of recruitment risk depends on integrating signals from multiple systems. Law enforcement typically detects early offense-related indicators, while schools and social services contribute critical contextual information on behavioral, social, and family conditions. Early identification therefore relies on structured inter-institutional data sharing.

In the Swedish model, children aged approximately 8 to 15 may be preselected based on one or more recorded offenses, but final decisions are guided by assessment of their overall risk trajectory. Assessment integrates multiple factors—including age, offense type, frequency of police contacts, exposure to violence, and inputs from social services—and final selection is made jointly by police and social services, combining quantitative indicators with professional judgment.

Once selected, the process moves to structured family engagement. Preparation for this step includes gathering contextual information, particularly from schools (attendance, behavioral concerns, and peer dynamics). Initial contact typically begins with a visit by police officers, followed by social services, although joint visits may also occur. During these interactions, concerns and program objectives are clearly presented to the child and family. Communication is transparent and non-punitive, emphasizing risks, potential consequences, and available support. The objective is to establish trust and secure voluntary consent and participation from both the child and their family.

Note: The family can function both as a protective factor and a risk factor. When family environments are stable and supportive, they play a key role in prevention. However, when families are affected by dysfunction, violence, or neglect, they can significantly increase vulnerability. In such cases, the objective is not to exclude the family, but to engage it constructively to the greatest extent possible, through targeted interventions such as parenting support, anger management, and violence prevention programs.

4.6
From Prioritization to Real Impact: The Importance of Caseload Management

Evidence from the German model highlights a structural limitation in many traditional prevention systems: excessive caseloads dilute intervention intensity and undermine effectiveness. The Swedish *Rätt Kurva* model addresses this constraint by reorganizing resource allocation. Rather than spreading efforts across many low-risk cases, it concentrates attention on a smaller group of high-risk children, where intervention is most needed and can yield the greatest impact. This prioritization seeks to identify the roughly 10 percent of juveniles that face significant vulnerabilities in their families, peer group, and environment and therefore are at risk, without support, to become repeat offenders. In practice, this approach results in prevention efforts being focused on a smaller number of individuals and significantly reduced caseloads—typically around 10–15 cases per social worker—enabling more sustained, individualized, and high-intensity engagement with children and families.

Importantly, the model shows that lowering caseloads is less a function of increasing resources than improving prioritization. It targets interventions where they are needed most and can achieve the most impactful and lasting outcomes.

4.7 The Role of Pedagogical Expertise in Early Preventive Interventions

While earlier sections have focused on identification, screening, and prioritization, the effectiveness of prevention ultimately depends on how risk information is translated into structured, sustained intervention at the case level. Pedagogical expertise constitutes the implementation function through which intervention plans are operationalized in the child's daily life and family environment.

Unlike assessment or coordination functions, pedagogical work focuses on motivation, behavioral change, and continuity of engagement. It is concerned with how change is built incrementally through daily routines, structured activities, and sustained relational work. This requires stable contact, iterative adjustment, and the capacity to remain engaged even when progress is uneven.

Intervention Plan Design and Delivery

The individual intervention plan is the central instrument for translating risk assessments into operational change. It is developed jointly by the social worker working the case with the child and family and defines both short- and long-term goals that are realistic, meaningful, and adapted to the child's context. A key condition for effectiveness is that objectives are achievable and perceived as relevant, as motivation and sustained engagement depend on the credibility and attainability of the proposed change process.

The intervention plan typically combines different types of support depending on the child's needs and circumstances. These may include academic support to improve school attachment; the development of social and emotional skills; structured leisure activities that reduce exposure to unregulated peer environments; mentoring; and access to positive role models. These components are designed to reinforce one another within a coherent behavioral pathway.

Importantly, the intervention is not limited to the child. It works with the family as a unit of intervention, recognizing that many risk factors are embedded in the home environment. This may involve addressing lack of daily structure, economic hardship, limited parental capacity, or inconsistent supervision. Strengthening the family's capacity is therefore a central mechanism for stabilizing the child's environment and sustaining behavioral change over time.

For parents, interventions may include parenting programs, employment support, or access to apprenticeships. Over time, additional vulnerabilities such as substance use or exposure to violence may also be addressed. Trust and alliance-building are essential throughout this process and are supported by continuous engagement between social services, designated professionals, and, where relevant, law enforcement in a clearly defined supportive role.

The Swedish *Rätt Kurva* Model: Implementation Features

A defining feature of this approach under the Swedish *Rätt Kurva* model is that it builds motivation through engagement and progress. Children's interests and strengths—such as sports, music, or technology—are actively incorporated into intervention design to reinforce positive routines, strengthen engagement, and promote a constructive future orientation. Continuous follow-up, feedback, and the use of positive incentives further support this process.

Within the Swedish *Rätt Kurva* model, the approach extends beyond public services through a whole-of-society model, involving partnerships with civil society and the private sector. In Sweden, companies such as IKEA, H&M, and AstraZeneca contribute through employment opportunities, apprenticeships, mentoring, and structured training. These partnerships expand the range of opportunities available to children and families, including summer jobs, skills development, and supervised work experience, which reinforce long-term social integration pathways.

On average, a child is in the prevention program for around two years. This illustrates that youth involvement in crime is no easy fix, but a result of many vulnerabilities requiring targeted and long-term support to the juvenile and his/her family.

Illustrative Case

Justin (Age 12), Sweden

Justin was identified by police following minor group-based offenses linked to older peers. A broader assessment revealed that his behavior was embedded in the context of school disengagement, weak daily structure, and limited supervision at home.

The intervention plan focused on building a stable and meaningful routine around Justin's daily life. Academic support was coordinated with the school to improve attendance and re-establish attachment to learning. Structured leisure activities were introduced to replace unstructured time with supervised, prosocial engagement, as well as to gain confidence and positive attention and feedback. At the same time, targeted work with the family focused on improving daily structure and strengthening parental capacity to provide consistent supervision and support.

A central element of the intervention was maintaining motivation through small, visible steps of progress. Rather than focusing on abstract long-term change, the intervention emphasized achievable goals—such as consistent school attendance or regular participation in structured activities—so that improvements were tangible for both Justin and his family.

Over time, this combination of structured routines, strengthened family environment, and sustained engagement reduced exposure to criminogenic contexts and supported behavioral stabilization.

Program Exit and Sustainability

Equally important is the management of transitions. Support is gradually reduced as stability is achieved. Prevention is considered successful when there is no ongoing offending, agreed goals have been met, and the child demonstrates sustained positive development. Exit from the program is carefully managed and includes structured linkage to community-based resources such as schools, mentoring initiatives, and leisure programs to ensure continuity. Even in cases of partial success, transitions are actively managed to prevent relapse and to maintain coordination across institutions.

The evidence from the German and Swedish experiences points to a consistent finding: recruitment into organized crime can be anticipated and disrupted when systems are able to act early, prioritize effectively, and sustain coordinated intervention over time. The coherence of the prevention system is the most important success factor.

Across both models, the most decisive factor is the ability to translate early signals of risk into targeted action. This requires institutional arrangements that support joint assessment, structured prioritization, and continuous follow-up across agencies. Where these elements are in place, prevention becomes operationally effective, but also institutionally demanding. A second key implication is that prevention effectiveness depends on concentration of effort. Given limited resources, focusing on a smaller group of high-risk children enables the intensity and continuity of support required to alter developmental trajectories. Broad, low-intensity approaches are significantly less likely to produce sustained effects.

Finally, successful prevention depends on the quality of implementation at the case level. Identification and prioritization are only meaningful if followed by consistent, trust-based engagement capable of addressing the underlying drivers of risk across family, school, and peer environments.

Taken together, these experiences suggest a clear policy direction: strengthening integrated systems that can identify risk early, allocate resources strategically, and ensure sustained, individualized support. However, the feasibility of translating these models across contexts depends on institutional capacity, inter-agency coordination, and the availability of specialized professional resources. The core challenge is therefore not only technical design, but also the ability to maintain the conditions required for high-quality implementation over time.

In terms of exit and follow-up support, both the Swedish and German prevention models continue supporting participants even after they successfully complete the program or leave it prematurely, for example due to relocation. The initiatives aim to ensure continuity and stability by connecting young people and their families with relevant welfare services, vocational training opportunities, and other forms of support that can help provide long-term social and financial stability. For participants who move to regions where the program is not available, the initiatives support transfer management, including referrals to locally available educational, vocational, or social support services. At the same time, while prevention outcomes are very positive—for example, around 98 percent of all successful participants in the German initiative do not become repeat offenders—not all young people respond to preventive or pedagogical interventions. In such limited cases, participation is only terminated following repeated intervention attempts and a joint assessment by both police officers and social workers that all reasonable support measures have been exhausted and criminal behavior persists. These individuals may then be referred to specialized repeat-offender programs aimed at reducing further harm and protecting the community.

4.8 Quality Management and Evaluation

Effective prevention systems are built on robust governance structures that ensure quality, consistency, and continuous improvement. This includes clearly defined standards, systemic monitoring, and the treatment of programs as adaptive learning systems that evolve through evidence and feedback. In this regard, effectiveness is actively managed over time.

A central pillar of this approach is the use of scientific evaluation to generate reliable evidence on both implementation processes and outcomes. Independent assessment strengthens accountability, supports learning, and informs iterative improvements in program design and delivery.

Impact evaluation should capture two complementary dimensions. Behavioral outcomes reflect short- to medium-term changes such as improved school engagement, reduced exposure to risk environments, and more prosocial behavior. These indicators often constitute earliest observable signals of intervention effectiveness. Criminological outcomes capture longer-term effects, including reduction in persistent offending and the prevention of entrenched criminal trajectories. These two dimensions are closely linked: while behavioral change is an important intermediate result, the ultimate objective is sustained reduction in criminal involvement over time.

Beyond effectiveness, prevention systems must demonstrate economic efficiency. This is critical for policymakers responsible for resource allocation across competing priorities. Repeat juvenile offenders generate significant long-term societal costs, including expenditures related to criminal justice, health systems, social services, and victimization. Evidence from Europe shows that by age 25, a repeat offender may have around 100 victims and generate approximately

EUR 1.7 million in social costs (Prognos, 2016). Even marginal reductions in such trajectories can therefore yield significant fiscal and social returns, reinforcing the case for early, targeted intervention as both a social and economic investment.

Effective prevention systems depend on the ability to identify, prioritize, and continuously reassess high-risk cases. Early signals of recruitment risk often emerge across multiple institutional settings, including law enforcement, education, and social services. As such, prevention depends on structured data-sharing and integrated information systems rather than siloed assessments.

Given limited resources, prioritization is essential. Over-selection can dilute intervention intensity and effectiveness, while under-selection risks missing critical cases. Structured assessment frameworks address this challenge by combining initial risk indicators with deeper, multi-domain analysis of family context, school attachment, peer relations, and behavioral patterns over time. The objective is to anticipate likely trajectories and enable timely intervention.

Illustrative Case

Early Identification and Trajectory Change (Justin, age 12)

Justin, a 12-year-old boy, first entered the police data system through minor group-based offenses. He was not a leader but consistently acted alongside older peers—an early signal of exposure to criminal networks. A more comprehensive assessment revealed multiple risk factors, including school disengagement, association with delinquent peers, and household instability.

The accumulation of cross-domain vulnerabilities—rather than any single incident—signaled elevated risk of escalation. Following identification, a tailored intervention was implemented, combining school-based support, structured leisure activities, and family engagement. Over time, Justin demonstrated improved school attendance, fewer incidents of problematic behavior, and more stable social relationships. After a sustained period without further offending, he successfully transitioned out of the program.

This case illustrates how early identification, combined with continuous monitoring and tailored intervention, can redirect trajectories before they consolidate into criminal careers.

Operational Example: The Swedish *Rätt Kurva* Model

The Swedish *Rätt Kurva* model operationalizes these principles through an institutionalized system of monitoring, coordination, and continuous improvement. Responsibility for the program lies with the national police, supported by a standardized methodology implemented locally through structured coordination with social services. Governance is reinforced through regular coordination mechanisms, including annual review processes and clearly defined institutional roles. The model also leverages partnerships with external stakeholders, including academia and the private sector, to support holistic interventions and strengthen evidence-based implementation.

Monitoring is continuous and multidimensional, covering program participation, inter-agency collaboration, crime data, behavioral change, and broader social outcomes. This enables the system to function as a learning architecture in which implementation is continuously refined based on emerging evidence. In addition to internal follow-up mechanisms, the program is subject to independent academic evaluation by researchers from the University of Gothenburg, which strengthens the credibility and independence of program assessment and provides an evidence base for future refinement and scale-up.

Risk assessment and case prioritization are also revisited periodically, often several times per year, through joint police-social services reviews. This ensures that intervention intensity and case allocation remain aligned with evolving circumstances and risk profiles.

5.

Key Findings and Recommendations

This section summarizes key findings and policy-oriented recommendations emerging from Technical Training and Policy Dialogue on Disrupting Youth Recruitment into Organized Crime held in Rome from March 24–26, 2026. It reflects insights from a diverse range of actors in Southeastern Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean, including policymakers and frontline practitioners from law enforcement, social services and child protection, international organizations, and civil society.

The section aims to inform ongoing policy discussions on addressing organized crime and its impact on young people. In this context, the increasing recruitment of children below the age of criminal responsibility represents a growing security, social, and developmental challenge across regions.

5.1 Key Findings

- **Recruitment is occurring at a younger age**
  Organized crime groups are increasingly targeting children below the age of criminal responsibility (typically under 14) to evade detection and prosecution. Cases involving children as young as 8 years old have been reported across Southeastern Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

- **Gender remains a blind spot**
  Evidence suggests that the recruitment of girls and young women remains under-recognized. Criminal networks may target them because they are perceived to raise less suspicion due to gender stereotypes and biases.

- **Young people are increasingly involved in more serious criminality**
  Young people are increasingly involved in serious criminal activities, including drug trafficking, money laundering, and violent offenses, in some cases described as violence as a service.

- **A combination of risk factors drive criminality**
  A range of interrelated factors may increase vulnerability to recruitment. These include domestic and gender-based violence, often contributing to a victim-offender overlap. Other risk factors include neglect (including due to parental absence and migration), substance use, aggressive behavior, dropping out of school, socio-economic disadvantage and the search for belonging, with criminal groups often exploiting gaps in safety, identity, and support.

- **Social media is increasingly used as a recruitment tool**
  Criminal networks increasingly use social media to expand and refine recruitment efforts, promoting criminal lifestyles and contributing to the normalization of violence. Through language and symbols tailored to youth, as well as elements of gamification, criminal activities may be presented as attractive, low risk, and rewarding, masking their real consequences and dangers.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

- **Start prevention efforts at an early stage**
  Prevention strategies should begin at an early age, focusing on children before risky behaviors escalate. Early intervention allows institutions to address vulnerabilities proactively and reduce the likelihood of progression into more serious forms of criminal involvement.

- **Shift toward tailored prevention**
  Measures should be tailored to the individual child, their family context and specific risk factors, moving away from one-size-fits-all approaches.

- **Prioritize resources effectively**
  In the context of limited human and financial resources, support should be focused on high-risk children through evidence-based case assessment, prioritization, and sustained case management.

- **Strengthen multi-agency cooperation**
  Effective prevention requires close collaboration between law enforcement, social services, education, child protection, and other relevant actors to help identify at-risk youth early and address root causes through a holistic and coordinated approach.

- **Invest in capacity building**
  Continuous training is essential to equip frontline practitioners with the skills to identify, assess, and respond to cases. Joint practice-oriented training across sectors can help build trust and improve cooperation.

- **Promote credible counter-narratives in online spaces**
  As recruitment increasingly takes place online, prevention should also operate in digital spaces. Credible counter-narratives, including those informed by lived experience, can help expose the realities and risks of organized crime and counter its glamorization.

- **Enhance public–private cooperation**
  Stronger partnerships between law enforcement and the private sector,

including social media platforms, are needed to detect, disrupt, and prosecute online recruitment activities. This cooperation should be framed as a shared responsibility and a public–private cooperation model, to foster constructive and sustained engagement from technology and communications companies. The private sector can play a key supportive role by providing internships and vocational opportunities for at-risk youth, as well as supporting job placement for their family members, thereby contributing to economic empowerment and overall crime prevention efforts.

- **Strengthen regional and cross-regional cooperation**
  Given the transnational nature of organized crime, prevention efforts should be supported through enhanced regional dialogue, information-sharing, and networks of practitioners.

These findings underscore the urgency of strengthening prevention systems and enhancing coordination across sectors and regions. Addressing youth recruitment into organized crime requires sustained investment in early intervention, institutional capacity, and cross-sector collaboration. In this regard, continued dialogue, capacity-building support, and the exchange of evidence-based practices across regions remain critical to supporting countries in developing effective, scalable, and sustainable responses.

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