EUCPN
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK

Youth recruitment into organised crime

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    2. Family interventions and therapies
    3. Diversion schemes
    4. Online prevention
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01 *Problem analysis*

Young people and criminal networks

- Minors are involved in more than 70% of criminal markets:
  - Cybercrime, online fraud
  - Migrant smuggling
  - Property crime
  - Drug trade

- Trend over the last decade:
  - More and more young people joining criminal networks
  - They are getting younger
  - Involved in more serious and violent crimes
  - Shift from major urban centres to smaller cities

821

High-risk criminal networks active in Europe

25k

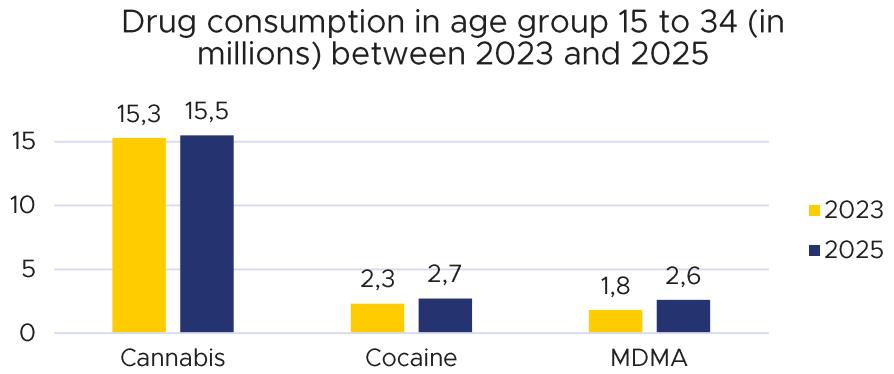
People involved in these networks

172%

From 2019 to 2022, the Swedish police noticed a 172% rise of children aged 14 and under involved in criminal activity

Why these changes?

1. Drug consumption (cocaine, cannabis, MDMA) is stable or increasing→ criminal networks need more workers to expand their operations



2. Criminality is getting more visible in public spaces, and can be seen as glamourous by some impressionable children

3. Shifting attitude of older criminals : youth are now seen as valuable workforce (in the past: incompetent, unreliable, and untrustworthy)

Challenges in gathering intelligence

- No unified definition of ‘organised crime’ between MS
    - UN definition: *“a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences […], in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.”*
- How do we define children and young people?
    - Most MS don’t have clear legal definitions
    - Differences in Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR)
- Visibility problem

→Inconsistencies in data collection, reporting, cross-country comparison
→Information gap

Risk factors

Individual level

- Gender

- Ethnic minority
- Emotional vulnerability, mental health issues
  - Teenagers report lower life satisfaction
  - ADHD, ODD, CD
- Delinquency
- School disengagement, dropping out
- Drug use

Risk factors

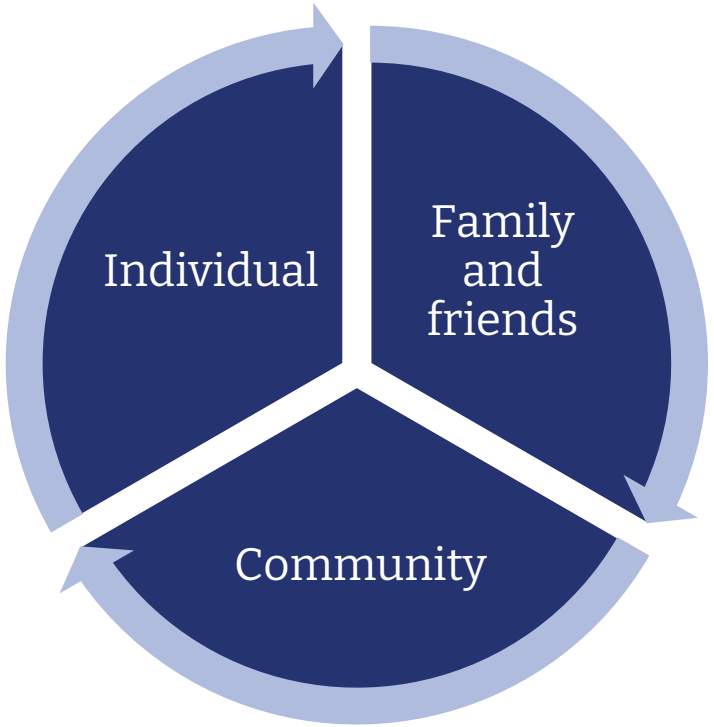
Family and friends

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

Community

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

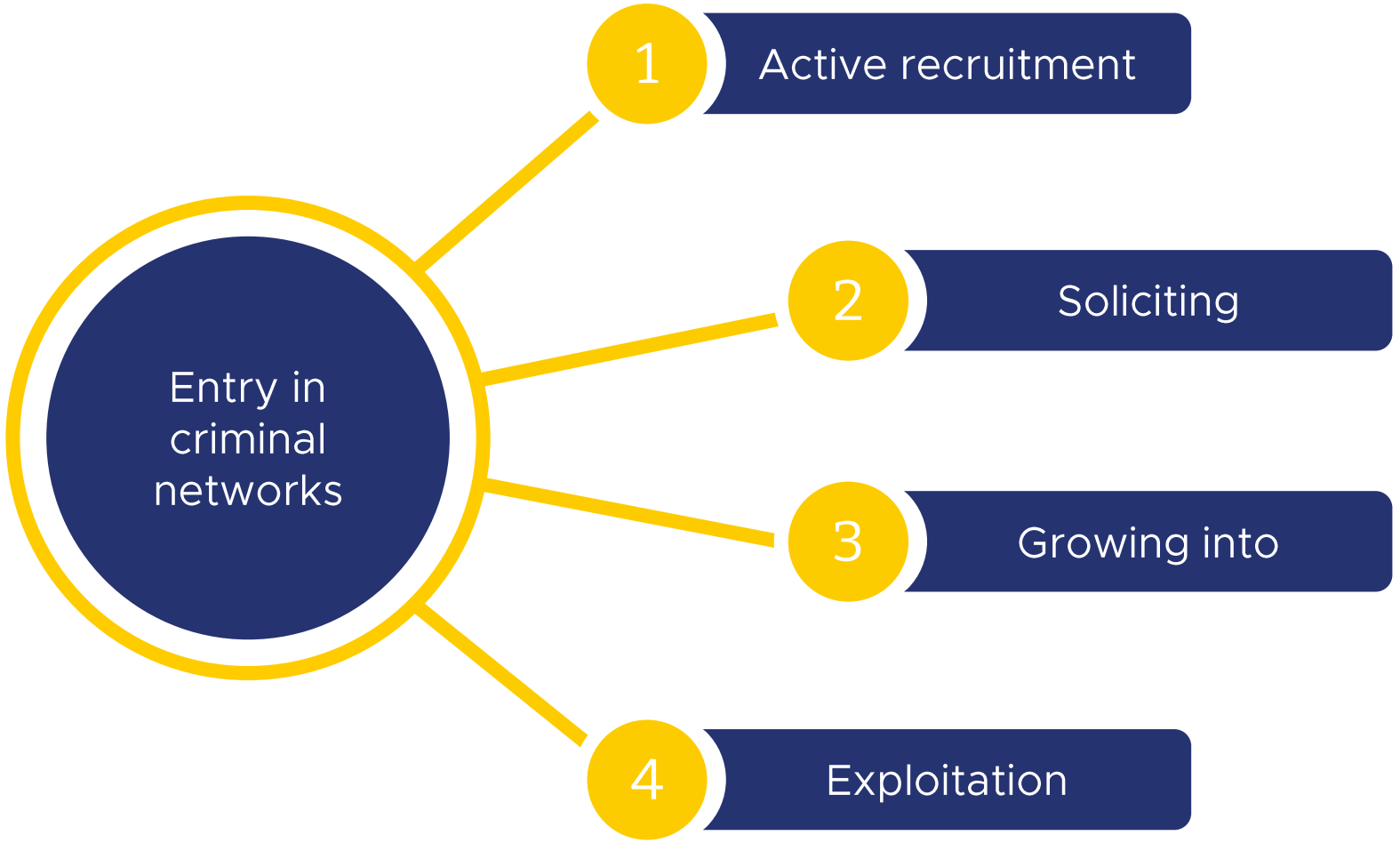
Risk factors



These factors alone do not individually predict a young person's involvement in organised crime:

- Their predictive nature is low, but their accumulation can increase vulnerability and lead to a greater likelihood of being recruited.
- The absence of protective factors heightens the risk.

Recruitment mechanisms



Exploitation dynamics

Criminals take advantage of the power imbalance, (age, status, socioeconomic conditions) in order to control and exploit vulnerable young people.

→Gradual erosion of autonomy
→Obligation to fulfil some tasks
→Sexual exploitation in some cases

Exploitation is possible even if the involvement seems voluntary at first

→Blurred line between consent and exploitation

Online recruitment

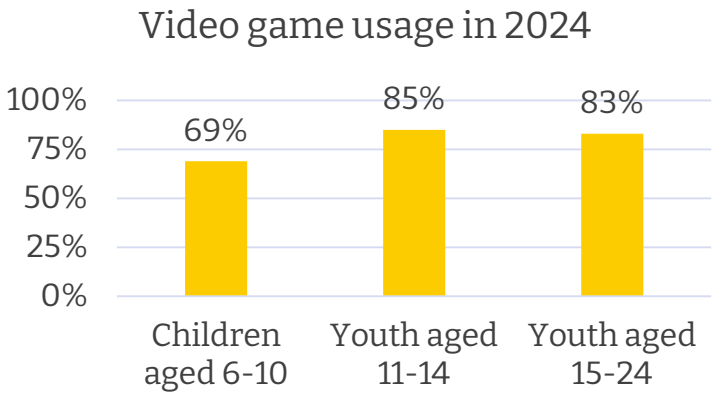
Social media opened up the recruitment pool beyond local neighbourhoods: greater reach, remotely, quickly and anonymously.

OCGs use social media to promote their brand, mirroring a marketing campaign:

- Advertising their lavish lifestyle
- Using emoji's, slang, cultural references relevant to online youth culture
- Promoting quick 'easy money' schemes using the codes of legitimate job opportunities

Online recruitment

Gaming platforms (Steam, Discord…) are also targeted by OCGs given their popularity.



Gamification: “missions” or “challenges” with rewards, rankings based on criminal acts

Benefits for recruiters:

- Anonymity
- Low risk of detection
- Encrypted messaging apps leaving little to no trace
- Fast engagement

Gradual and psychological recruitment

Mutual incentives

Criminal groups	Youth
• Cheap, expendable workforce, easier to influence • Quick way to expand operations • Shield senior members from street exposure • Reduce the risk of detection: limited view of the operations	• Quick financial rewards, “easy money” • Escape bad family conditions • Status, reputation, protection, security • Feeling of belonging/brotherhood • Assert or prove their masculinity, social identity • Thrill, adrenaline

02 *Prevention strategies*

Community-Oriented Policing (COP)

What is Community-Oriented Policing?

- Strategy that goes beyond traditional law enforcement practices.
- It seeks to build trust and cooperation between police and the communities they serve.

→Flexible philosophy rather than a fixed set of tools or procedures

Traditional policing	Community policing
Reactive, enforcement-led	Proactive, prevention-oriented
Focused on incidents and crime	Focused on underlying problems and harm
Centralised, top-down decision-making	Locally adapted, community-informed, tailored responses
Short-term interventions	Long-term relationship and trust building
Coercive authority	Dialogue, negotiation, and co-creation

Community-Oriented Policing (COP)

Why use COP as a prevention strategy?

- Social disorganisation theory: crime tends to increase in communities with weak social ties

- To foster positive youth-police relations
  - Youth (minority groups, with lower levels of education or living in deprived neighbourhoods) show lower levels of trust in the police
    → patterns of over-suspicion and under-protection.
  - Police officers may fear verbal or physical attacks, especially in neighbourhoods with a history of tension → defensive approaches.

Community-Oriented Policing (COP)

Some key principles

Trust

Cornerstone of COP
- In both directions
- Social workers can act as bridge/mediator between youth and police

Collaboration

Effective community policing does not happen in isolation → policing by consent
Partnerships in order to build informal social control mechanisms

Problem-solving

COP is a tool for early detection of risks and issues before escalating
→SARA model

Decentralisation

Community is not homogenous
→Need for local responses
→Delegate authority and decision-making power to local units

Commitment

COP is not a quick solution
Familiarity and consistency → build meaningful connections, understand local dynamics, and become trusted figures

Online

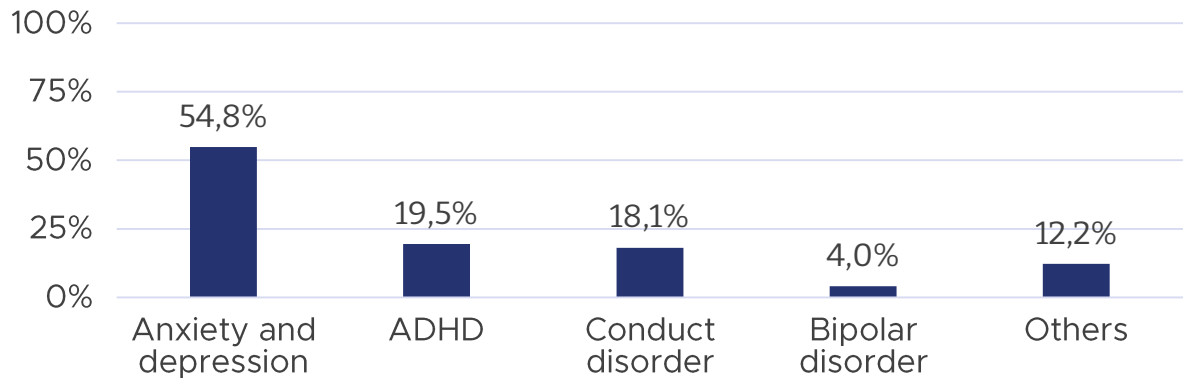
COP should meet people online
- To share safety information and promote events
- To listen, respond, and build presence in virtual spaces

Family interventions and therapies

Families play a key role in every child's development: they shape values, influence behaviour and provide support when needed.
→ Positive environment as a buffer against negative influences.

Dysfunctional family dynamics can lead to a higher risk of developing conduct disorders, drug abuse, low academic performance, delinquency → risk factors of recruitment into organised crime.

20% of young people experience psychological or behavioural problems

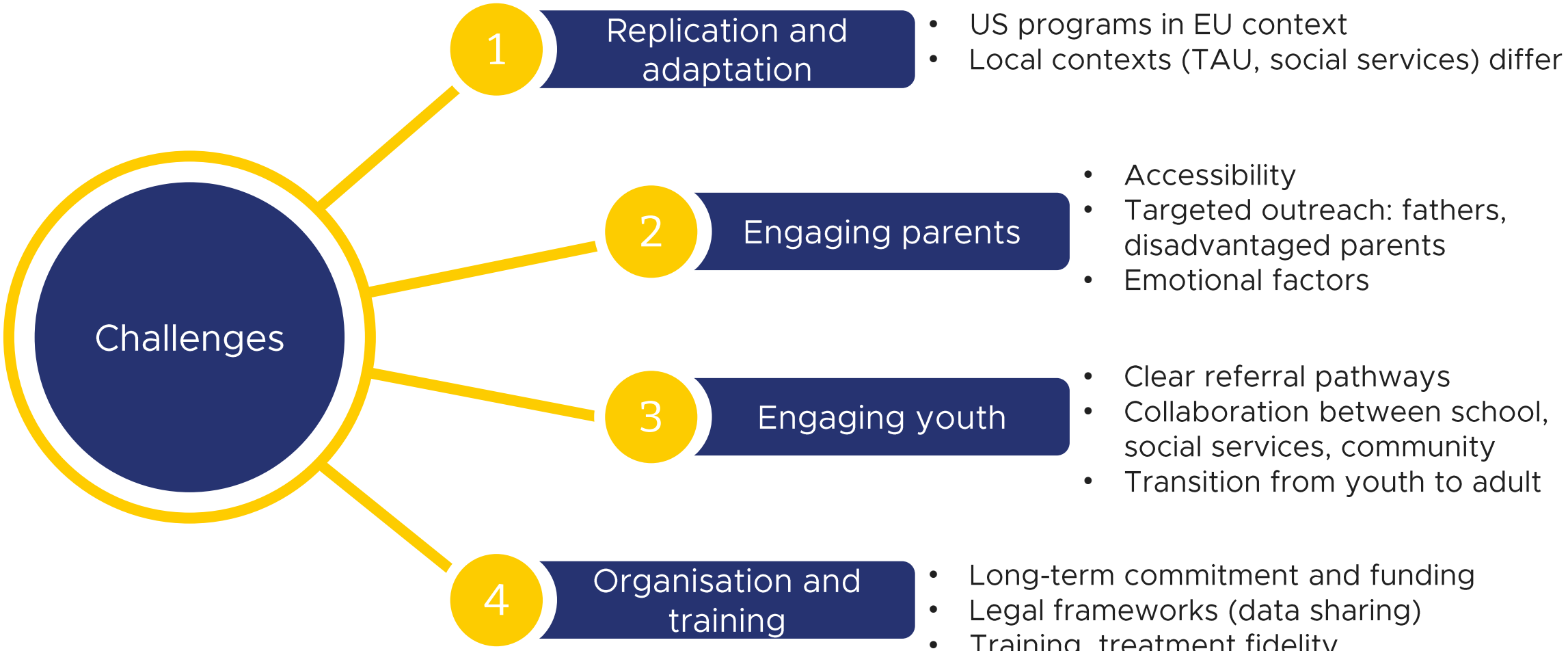


Estimates of key mental disorders among youth (10-19) in Europe

Family interventions and therapies

	Family programmes	Family therapies
Examples	Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) Family Check-Up (FCU)	Multisystemic Therapy (MST) Functional Family Therapy (FFT)
Goal	• Strengthen parenting skills • Improve family functioning • Prevent behavioural/emotional problems	• Address serious behavioural issues • Improve family dynamics • Reduce delinquency
Target group	Parents of children with emerging or moderate behavioural/emotional difficulties → prevention or early intervention	Young people with serious persistent difficulties, antisocial behaviour or risk of offending
Offer	Structured guidance, coaching Flexible: light-touch or intensive	Intensive, therapist-led interventions with the whole family Home-based sessions

Family interventions and therapies



- US programs in EU context
- Local contexts (TAU, social services) differ

- Accessibility
- Targeted outreach: fathers, disadvantaged parents
- Emotional factors

- Clear referral pathways
- Collaboration between school, social services, community
- Transition from youth to adult

- Long-term commitment and funding
- Legal frameworks (data sharing)
- Training, treatment fidelity

Youth diversion

What is diversion?

- Removing a child from the criminal justice system and redirecting them to community-based organisations, social services, or restorative programmes, in order to avoid a criminal record.

Why use diversion to fight recruitment into organised crime?

- Adolescence is a stage of risk-taking and impulsivity
- Harsh punishments can stigmatise and push youth further into crime.

→Diversion offers a constructive alternative promoting accountability and addressing the underlying causes of their behaviour.

Youth diversion

Labelling theory

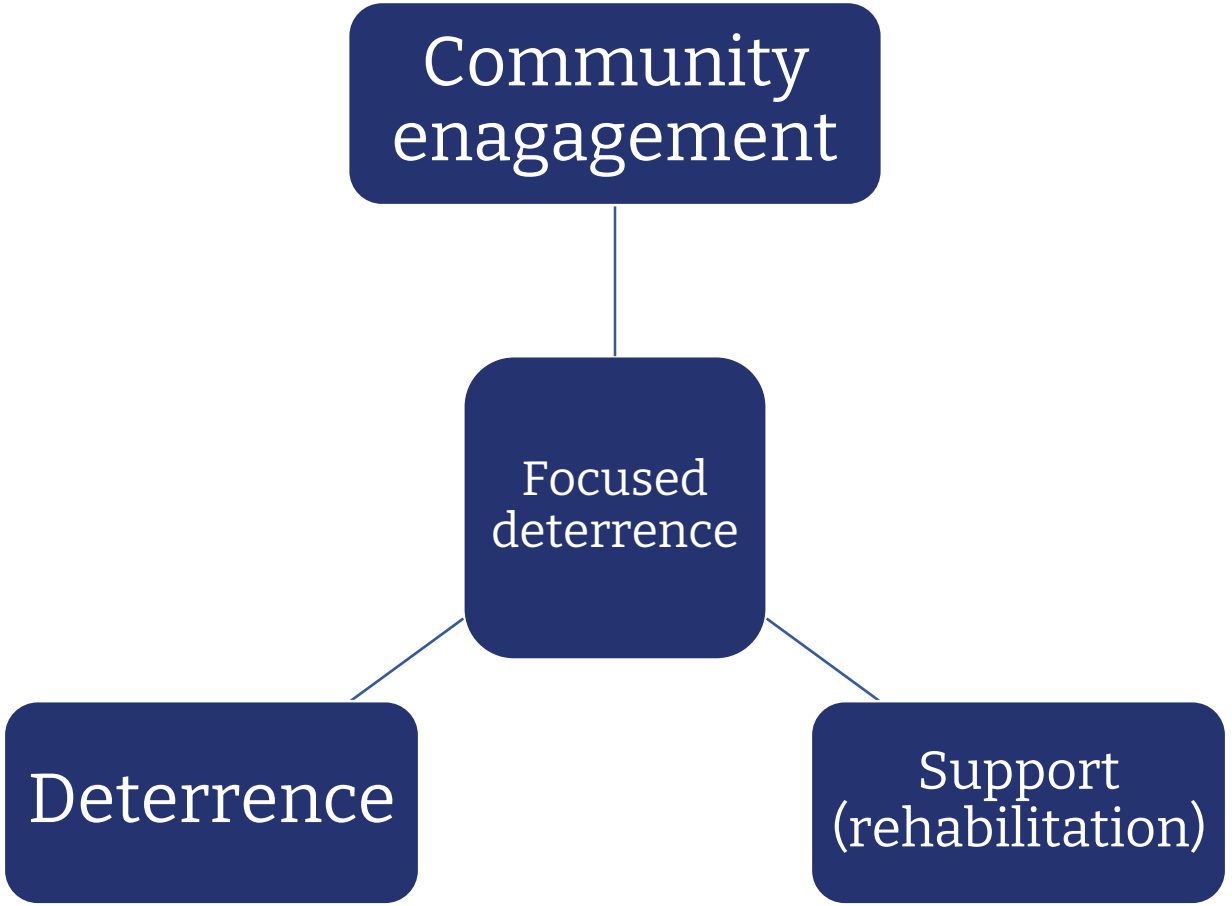
Desistance theory

Differential association theory

Youth diversion

Benefits	Challenges
• Reduced recidivism and support for rehabilitation • Efficient resource use and alleviating burdens on the courts • Preservation of education and social life • Minimising negative consequences of formal justice	• Guaranteeing legal safeguards • Expanding eligibility criteria • Preventing net-widening • Ensuring appropriate interventions tailored to each child • Streamlining the referral process • Improving collaboration among stakeholders

Focused deterrence



Focused deterrence

Preparation phase: target identification and partner engagement

Implementation phase:

- Consistent deterrent communication
- Call-in
- Swift and proportionate punishments
- Adequate support

Focused deterrence

Aka Pulling levers
Boston Ceasefire
Group violence intervention (US, LATAM, Rotterdam)
Sluta skjut (Malmö and elsewhere in Sweden)
Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (Cincinnati, US, and Glasgow, UK)

Online recruitment, online prevention

Reach, targeted, anonimity

Mainstream social media and instant messaging & alternative and niche online streaming/gaming platforms

Online recruitment, online prevention

Mechanisms of online recruitment

- Social validation and identity seeking
- Economic vulnerability
- Lack of supervision
- Grooming and manipulation

Online recruitment, online prevention

1. Address risk factors
2. Digital literacy and resilience

Better Internet for Kids guidelines for parents and teachers

- Help children build a support system
- Use the best available safety tools
- Transparent supervision
- Talk regularly and openly about life online
- Know where to get support

Online recruitment, online prevention

1. Address risk factors
2. Digital literacy and resilience
3. Online environment
    - Self-regulation/censorship
    - Digital Services Act

Online recruitment, online prevention

Digital Services Act (2022/2024)

- Platforms must ensure that their design, functionality, and default settings are safe for children if children use the platform
- VLOPs must additionally conduct structured risk assessments to identify systemic risks

- Includes risks related to “those seeking to recruit minors into criminal gangs or promote violence”
- Monitoring of effectiveness

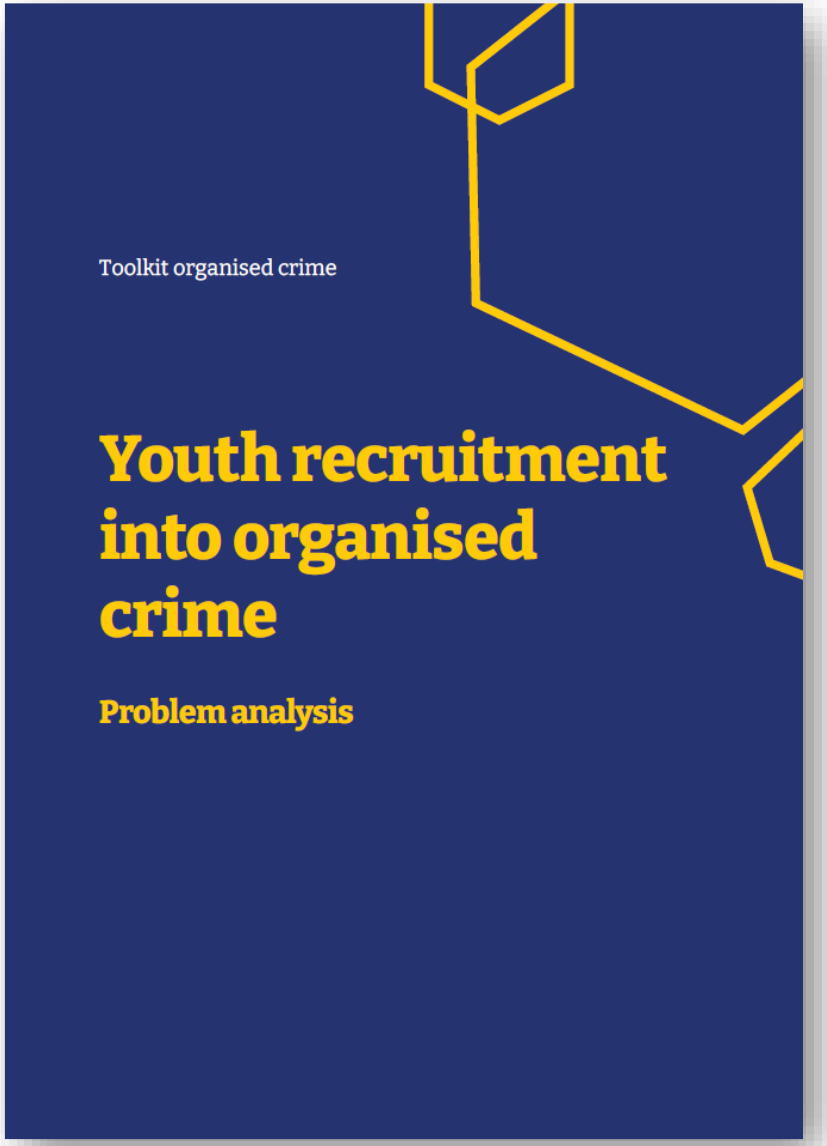
- Limits:
    - not-applicable to IM
    - enforcement

03 Conclusions

Conclusions

Effective prevention strategies

Address risks in families, neighbourhoods, and online
Policing strategies should aim at strengthening communities
Sanctions should be swift and proportionate
Alternatives should exploited: rehabilitation and resilience
Safer online environment for children


Toolkit organised crime
Youth recruitment into organised crime
Problem analysis

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Thank you

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