

YOUTH AND CRIMINALITY



About ENACT

ENACT is a knowledge network focused on the fight against crime and terrorism (FCT). The network is funded under the Horizon Europe Framework Programme in Cluster 3 – Civil Security for Society. The project addresses the call topic HORIZON-CL3-2022-SSRI-01-02 ‘Knowledge Networks for Security Research & Innovation’, aiming to collect, aggregate, process, disseminate and make the most of the existing knowledge in the FCT area.

The project aims to satisfy two major ambitions,

- Provide evidence-based support to the decision-makers in the EU research and innovation (R&I) ecosystem in the FCT domain, targeted explicitly at enabling more effective and efficient programming of EU-funded R&I for the fight against crime and terrorism.
- Act as a catalyst for the uptake of innovation by enhancing the visibility and reliability of innovative FCT security solutions.

Report Feedback

We’re collecting feedback on this report through the EU Survey Platform, if you’d like to share your thoughts anonymously please click on the link below.

<https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/ENACT-FR-YOUTH>



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Executive Summary

Youth are implicated in, and disproportionately affected by, a broadening range of criminal phenomena: traditional offences (violent incidents, knife crime), drug-related offending (including darknet markets and party-drugs contexts), online harms (cybercrime, grooming, radicalisation) and exploitation (trafficking, social-media-facilitated recruitment). New vectors, such as social platforms, the ‘manosphere’, AI tools and gamified learning environments, are changing both how youth are recruited into crime and how they are victimised. Prevention that focuses on early intervention, parental and school support, place-based community responses, and targeted digital resilience yields the strongest evidence of reducing both perpetration and victimisation.

Context Note

The key claims in this flash report on youth and criminality are underpinned by some of the ENACT project sources and by other additional open sources. It summarises and analyses the major concerns, evidence, trends and challenges on this topic, ending with practical prevention recommendations (early interventions, family support, community solutions, technology and law enforcement responses).

Report Information

This report was commissioned by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, and its community for the Annual CERIS Fight against Crime and Terrorism event focusing on youth-related criminality and training for practitioners held on 30 September - 1 October 2025.

Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
EU	European Union
EUCPN	European Union Crime Prevention Network
LEAs	Law Enforcement Agencies
LEPH	Law Enforcement and Public Health
PHS	Public Health Services
SEL	Social and Emotional Learning
VaaS	Violence as a Service

Key Insights

Policy direction and key global priorities

As for minors and youth, the European Commission (EU COM) and related EU actors emphasise three main threats: (a) tackling online radicalisation and hybrid threats, (b) addressing drug harms, including party drugs and darknet markets, and (c) strengthening prevention and rehabilitation. In 2024, new laws sought to hold platforms accountable and protect young people.

In Australia, the Combatting Online Notoriety Bill 2024 [1] criminalised posting content that glorifies crime, giving the eSafety Commissioner authority to remove it. In the UK, the Online Safety Act [2] passed in 2023, began implementation, with Ofcom outlining measures to enhance child protection online. On 1 April 2025, the EU COM launched the ProtectEU Strategy [3], a new Internal Security Strategy to strengthen safety across Europe. A key element to address the specific needs of particularly vulnerable groups, such as children, is the forthcoming Action Plan on the Protection of Children against Crime, which will tackle online and offline threats such as grooming, radicalisation, and sexual abuse by coordinating existing tools and agencies and closing remaining gaps.

EU projects also fund novel prevention tools (e.g., the RAYUELA game to teach cyber hygiene). Ethical and legal considerations are central to EU and national youth crime policies, ensuring that prevention, monitoring, and digital interventions respect minors' rights, privacy, and proportionality while safeguarding their protection. Great efforts are being made to shift policy from purely punitive responses to mixed prevention/security approaches [4] [5] [6] [7]. This policy shift aligns with the academic review's findings by promoting strategies that emphasise rehabilitation and positive outcomes over punitive measures [8] [9] [10].

Drug markets and ‘party drugs’

The European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN) toolbox underscores that party drug risks are situational (risky nightlife contexts) and increasingly intersect with darknet supply chains [11]. Research highlights the value of closer collaboration between Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) and Public Health Services (PHS), combining expertise to reduce the health impacts of crime, including drug markets and substance use. [12] [13] [14] Law Enforcement and Public Health (LEPH) has emerged as an interdisciplinary field linking crime prevention with public health, with a focus on harm reduction and the social determinants of well-being. Since police and health services confront overlapping issues — from mental health crises and drug harms to domestic violence and trauma — coordinated responses are needed. Multi-component interventions (health, policing, venue management) are recommended [15] [16] [17].

More broadly, evidence shows that models such as co-responder teams, diversion schemes, and community prevention work best, especially for youth and vulnerable groups. Long-term collaboration, underpinned by integrated policies, joint training, and strong data frameworks, is key to creating safer and healthier communities [18] [19] [20]. However, while showing promise, this approach requires stronger monitoring and evaluation. Recent studies and reviews report benefits such as fewer detentions and improved referrals, but evidence on long-term sustainability and measurable impact remains mixed [21] [22].

Recruitment and criminal networks

Europol documents highlight targeted recruitment of young, often first-time offenders into criminal networks (including ‘violence-as-a-service’ [‘VaaS’]), and the use of social media to groom and recruit actors for violent or acquisitive crime. Prevention must therefore address both push factors (e.g., poverty, marginalisation) and pull factors (e.g., status, money, coercion) [23] [24].

Exploitation and trafficking via social media

Recent research and reviews document an increase in social media facilitated trafficking and exploitation of children and youth, with recruiters exploiting vulnerabilities and platforms’ affordances (e.g., direct messaging, anonymity) [25] [26] [27].



Online radicalisation and ‘manosphere’

EU and national reports stress the growing risk of digital pathways to extremism (radical, violent and terrorist content, misogynistic networks), with concerns about algorithmic amplification and community formation online that normalise violence or hate. Ofcom’s work on the ‘manosphere’ documents how youth can be exposed to misogynistic, radicalising content. Although systematic evidence on the long-term effects of the manosphere is limited, early research indicates that exposure fosters sexist attitudes, deepens inequalities in schools, and spreads harmful narratives about mental health, with potential links to radicalising behaviours among young males [4] [5] [27] [28] [29].

Technology risks and opportunities

Artificial intelligence (AI) presents dual effects: it can be exploited for radicalising and targeting youth, but also for prevention. [30] For example, through deepfakes used in terrorist propaganda to manipulate perceptions and strengthen recruitment narratives [31], or through algorithmic systems that amplify politicised hate speech and extremist content [32]. At the same time, AI also holds preventive potential: automated moderation, when combined with human oversight, is perceived by young people as effective in reducing online harms such as cyberbullying [33], while serious video games have been shown to foster empathy and counter extremist narratives [34]. Policy, therefore, needs to manage these risks while scaling up evidence-based applications for prevention and detection.

Recent statistics and measurable trends

Recruitment and youth involvement

Europol reports increased referrals and cases where youth are specifically targeted for recruitment into criminal networks or as ‘people to carry out attacks’ (including VaaS models) [23] [35] [36].

Exploitative trafficking

European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control (HEUNI) and vulnerability policing reports identify persistent and sometimes rising patterns of online-facilitated exploitation, with social media being a primary recruitment/transit channel for minors. HEUNI provides country/comparative data on numbers and patterns across Europe [37].

Online safety and crime

Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) Netherlands’ national statistics show a year-on-year increase in reported online harms and cybercrime incidents affecting minors and young adults (data trend 2023–2024), particularly fraud/scams and online grooming [38].

Knife and youth violence

Scholarly work suggests that focused scheduling and place-based interventions can reduce knife injuries; the Crime Science piece reviews staged approaches to phasing out knife crime [39].



Types of offending involving youth

Property and acquisitive crime: Theft, burglary, moped/scooter theft, which sometimes are connected with organised networks recruiting youth [23].

Violent offending: Violent offending: Street violence, knife offences, and ‘hired’ violence. Youth are both perpetrators and victims [39].

Drug-related offending: Possession, distribution, party-drugs consumption-related harms, and online procurement via darknet markets [11].

Online offences and cybercrime: Fraud, sextortion, hacking. Both as perpetrators, often juvenile hackers, and victims [40] [41] [42]. RAYUELA EU project targets cybercrime prevention [7].

Exploitation and trafficking: Grooming via social media, sexual exploitation, labour exploitation [37].

Radicalisation and extremism: Online recruitment to extremist movements and communities (including misogynistic/violent networks) [4] [27] [28].

Risk factors for youth offending and victimisation

Multi-level risk factors emerge across the literature.

Individual: Prior victimisation, mental health needs, substance use, low impulse control [11].

Family: Weak parental supervision, parental criminality, poverty, and family stress. Family support programs and enriched early years reduce later offending [43].

Peer and social: Gang membership, peer pressure, online communities that normalise crime or violence [24].

Economic and structural: Unemployment, lack of educational engagement, social exclusion. These factors increase susceptibility to recruitment by criminal networks [23].

Digital exposure: Unmoderated social platforms, algorithmic recommendations, private messaging and encrypted apps that facilitate grooming/recruitment [4].



Prevention and response: evidence-based strategies

The literature supplies some interventions with evidence and strong policy support.

Early interventions (most impact over time)

High-quality early childhood education and family support. Programs that combine parent coaching, enriched preschool and home visiting reduce later serious youth offending [43].

Targeted early help for at-risk families. Multi-disciplinary early help (housing, mental health, employment support) reduces push-factors that lead youth into offending [37].

Parental support and school-based measures

Parental training programmes (supervision, consistent discipline, communication) reduce youth offending risk. Schools are essential delivery points for resilience and digital literacy programmes [43].

Social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools reduces aggression, improves school attachment and reduces later delinquency [44] [45].

Digital resilience and platform accountability

Digital literacy for youth and parents. Teaching recognition of grooming, scam tactics and radicalising content. EU/Ofcom/EU COM papers stress this as a priority [4].

Platform measures and safer design. Reporting tools, moderation, age-verified accounts and reduced recommendation of extremist/manosphere content. Technology can also be harnessed for prevention (e.g., educational games, automated detection) [5].

Community and place-based solutions

Multi-agency local partnerships (schools, police, social services, youth services) operating ‘multi-component’ programmes at nightlife zones, schools and neighbourhoods reduce situational risks (e.g., party-drug harms, knife crime) [11].

Positive alternatives and legitimate opportunities. Job training, mentoring, sports and arts programmes that provide status/identity alternatives to gangs [46].

Criminal justice and law-enforcement responses

Targeted disruption of recruitment networks (online monitoring, working with platforms, fast removal of grooming/violent content) and evidence-led policing to break recruitment chains into organised crime. Europol emphasises industry cooperation [23].

Rehabilitation and diversion for first-time young offenders: focus on education and mental-health pathways rather than immediate custodial responses [47] [48].



Two lenses: the victim and the perpetrator

Perpetrator perspective: Many young offenders are driven by a mix of short-term incentives (money/status), coercion, social belonging, and limited perceived alternatives. Recruitment often targets those with social or economic vulnerabilities. Interventions that address pathways (e.g., education, work, counselling) reduce recidivism.

Victim perspective: Young victims of trafficking, grooming, or violent crime often experience long-term harm (e.g., mental health, educational disruption, social isolation). Responses must be trauma-informed, ensure victim protection (e.g., safe housing, counselling), and include restorative practices where appropriate.

Understanding both perspectives allows the design of interventions that cut supply (prevent recruitment) and reduce harm (support victims).



Actionable Recommendations

- 01 Scale early years and family support:** home visiting, parenting programmes, enriched preschool, to promote high returns in reducing later offending.
- 02 Fund local multi-agency hubs** that combine youth work, mental-health services, education and policing to target hotspots (nightlife, neighbourhoods at risk).
- 03 Strengthen platform regulation and digital literacy:** mandate safer-by-design features, rapid takedown paths for grooming/extremist content, and scale school programmes on digital resilience.
- 04 Support alternatives to custody** for first-time and low-level youth offenders (diversion to education/training).
- 05 Target social-media-facilitated trafficking** with specialised investigative units and cross-platform alerts for suspected grooming/trafficking patterns.
- 06 Invest in evidence and evaluation:** fund longitudinal evaluations of interventions (what works locally) and share best and promising practices across EU networks.

Evidence Gaps and Next Steps

The supplied corpus is strong on policy reviews and thematic reports, but less rich in consistent, harmonised pan-EU numerical datasets for youth offending across all offence types. For a better estimate of prevalence and trends, it would be valuable to add statistics, both European/global and national, on child and youth criminality.

The AI/risk literature is rapidly evolving. More empirical trials are needed on the real-world effects of generative AI on radicalisation and on the effectiveness of automated moderation.

Wrap up

Youth criminality in Europe spans drugs, online radicalisation, trafficking, and violence, with the ProtectEU Strategy making child protection a core priority. Policy on youth crime is shifting from purely punitive approaches toward integrated prevention and rehabilitation strategies, emphasising early intervention, digital resilience, and safeguarding.

Ethical and legal considerations are central, ensuring that interventions — ranging from online monitoring and digital resilience programs to community and family-based initiatives — respect minors' rights, privacy, and proportionality while safeguarding protection.

Current priorities focus on tackling online radicalisation and hybrid threats, addressing drug harms including party drugs and darknet markets, and strengthening prevention and rehabilitation.

Evidence points to the value of multi-agency approaches, though effectiveness depends on proper resourcing and robust evaluation. Co-response models and whole-system strategies show promise, but long-term impact remains under-tested.

A two-lens perspective highlights both the vulnerabilities of youth as potential victims and the risk factors driving their involvement as perpetrators.

The emerging LEPH field frames policing and public health as natural partners, urging integrated, rights-based approaches that combine family support, education, digital literacy, mentorship and positive community alternatives to reduce offending, prevent harm and build sustained resilience.



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