



TEXTS ADOPTED

P10_TA(2026)0230

Recruitment of children by organised crime

European Parliament resolution of 18 June 2026 on the recruitment of children by organised crime (2026/2725(RSP))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,
- having regard to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 79/188 on preventing and countering violence against children by organized criminal groups and terrorist groups in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice,
- having regard to United Nations Economic and Social Council Resolution 2024/12 on the treatment of children associated with terrorist groups, including children who are recruited and exploited by those groups,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 1 April 2025 on ProtectEU 2025-2030: a European Internal Security Strategy (COM(2025)0148),
- having regard to Europol's report entitled 'EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (EU-SOCTA) 2025',
- having regard to the forthcoming EU action plan on the protection of children against crime,
- having regard to the STRIVE Juvenile project of the EU and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and its evaluation findings,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act)¹, in particular its provisions on the protection of minors

¹ OJ L 277, 27.10.2022, p. 1, ELI:
<http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj>.

online, the assessment and mitigation of systemic risks linked to illegal content and harmful online behaviour, recommender systems, and the responsibilities of very large online platforms and search engines,

- having regard to the Commission guidelines under the Digital Services Act on the protection of minors of 14 July 2025²,
 - having regard to Europol's Intelligence Notification of 12 November 2024 entitled 'The recruitment of young perpetrators for criminal networks',
 - having regard to the UNICEF Innocenti - Global Office of Research and Foresight working paper of September 2024 entitled 'Children's Involvement in Organized Violence: Emerging trends and knowledge gaps',
 - having regard to the EU strategy on the rights of the child and the EU drugs strategy,
 - having regard to the hearing of its Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs of 4 June 2025 entitled 'Radicalisation online, with a focus on the recruitment of children for organised crime and terrorism',
 - having regard to its resolution of 20 January 2026 on the murder of Mehdi Kessaci: urgent need for ambitious European action against drug trafficking³,
 - having regard to Directive (EU) 2016/800 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on procedural safeguards for children who are suspects or accused persons in criminal proceedings⁴,
 - having regard to Rule 136(2) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas organised criminal and terrorist groups are increasingly recruiting and exploiting children as part of their operational strategies, including to shield adult perpetrators from detection and prosecution and expand illicit activities;
- B. whereas Europol's November 2024 Intelligence Notification shows that minors recruited by criminal networks typically have no direct contact with higher echelons of organisations and are mobilised through criminal service providers; whereas these minors' limited

² OJ C, C/2025/5519, 10.10.2025, ELI:
<http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/5519/oj>.

³ Texts adopted, P10 TA(2026)0007.

⁴ OJ L 132, 21.5.2016, p. 1, ELI:
<http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2016/800/oj>.

knowledge of the networks' structure and the frequent absence of prior criminal records make them low-risk operatives who are less likely to provide useful information to law enforcement if arrested;

- C. whereas the recruitment and exploitation of children by organised criminal and terrorist groups violates the fundamental rights of children, including their dignity, with severe consequences for their safety and future; whereas children's vulnerability to recruitment by organised criminal networks stems from cumulative and intersecting risk factors, including a lack of a sense of belonging, adverse childhood experiences and mental health challenges, which are deliberately exploited; whereas effective prevention requires integrated responses addressing these factors;
- D. whereas child recruitment has evolved from a primarily humanitarian concern into a systemic enabler of organised crime, becoming embedded in the operational models of criminal networks, and is an obstacle to peace, security and development; whereas criminal groups that recruit children undermine the EU's security, fuel criminality and perpetuate cycles of violence and insecurity across generations;
- E. whereas these practices are facilitated by certain technological developments that may normalise and incentivise criminal behaviour among children;
- F. whereas Europol's 2024 mapping has identified 821 high-risk criminal networks active in the EU generating an estimated EUR 92-188 billion in annual revenue, accounting for approximately 0,7-1,4 % of the EU's GDP⁵; whereas minors are involved in more than 70 % of illegal market activities, including drug trafficking, extortion, online fraud, money laundering, illicit firearms trafficking, and violence-as-a-service schemes, with criminal networks exploiting children as young as 12 years old for tasks such as street dealing, cash couriership and extracting drugs from shipping containers;
- G. whereas criminal organisations systematically target children in highly vulnerable situations, particularly those facing socio-economic exclusion, school dropout and family breakdown, or children in migration, exploiting their economic insecurity, social marginalisation and lack of awareness of risks;
- H. whereas girls and young women are increasingly involved in organised crime, although they are often overlooked by criminal justice systems, with 22 % of identified trafficking victims in western and southern Europe forced into criminal activities, primarily drug trafficking;

⁵ Europol report of 4 April 2024, '[Decoding the EU's most threatening criminal networks](#)', updated in May 2026.

- I. whereas illicit trade in firearms and the illegal use of pyrotechnics have contributed to a shift from low-level offending towards more serious and violent crimes involving minors, including extortion and killings; whereas criminal recruiters may offer minors substantial financial incentives, ranging from a few thousand euro to as much as EUR 20 000 for killings;
- J. whereas drug-related intimidation and coercion constitute a primary pathway through which organised criminal networks recruit and exploit children using debt, grooming and violence; whereas the cross-border reach of such networks means that these phenomena cannot be adequately addressed through national action alone;
- K. whereas expanding drug markets have driven the involvement of minors to alarming levels, as evidenced by sharp increases in the use of important logistical hubs, including ports; whereas the lack of harmonised effects of the current definition of organised crime across EU Member States complicates data gathering and comparability, and whereas data on minors in organised crime are scarce, often unreliable, and barely comparable due to varying ages of criminal liability and underreporting;
- L. whereas underinvestment in public services, including prevention, education and health services, are the root causes of child recruitment by organised criminal groups;
- M. whereas fragmented institutional responses and insufficient coordination between child protection systems, justice authorities, security agencies and digital regulators creates gaps that criminal groups exploit; whereas Parliament's resolution on the murder of Mehdi Kessaci in Marseille condemned the systematic recruitment of young people by criminal gangs and called for enhanced prevention, protection and prosecution, including specialised support for minors to escape exploitation and reintegrate into society;
- N. whereas Europol set up an operational task force called 'GRIMM' in April 2025 to coordinate with tech companies to identify efforts to recruit children via social media and messaging platforms, which is led by Sweden and brings together police from Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway;
- O. whereas evidence-based approaches such as those developed under the EU-UNODC STRIVE Juvenile project demonstrate the effectiveness of prevention-first, cross-sectoral, trauma-informed, gender-responsive and child-centred responses;
- 1. Strongly condemns the recruitment and exploitation of children by organised criminal and terrorist groups in all forms, both online and offline;

2. Recognises that child recruitment constitutes a serious crime against children and a serious human rights violation; stresses that it is an evolving internal-external security threat for the European Union, requiring a comprehensive response that focuses on protection, early prevention, access to rights and educational continuity, integrating internal security, justice, social and education systems, and strategies and measures aimed at strengthening the protective environment framework for children, both offline and online;
3. Recalls that a child is first and foremost a child and should be treated accordingly, and calls on the Member States to ensure that a child's best interest is always the primary consideration;
4. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to explicitly recognise prevention and responses to child recruitment by organised criminal and terrorist groups as a priority area within the forthcoming EU action plan on the protection of children against crime; calls for this action plan to include a dedicated prevention pillar with early-warning mechanisms involving schools, social services and families, and a youth-centred approach focused on developing life skills through direct community engagement;
5. Calls on the Commission to address the recruitment of children by organised criminal groups also in the upcoming legislative proposal for modernised rules on organised crime; invites the Commission to consider including in this proposal specific provisions, such as aggravating circumstances for the recruitment of children; reiterates, in this respect, its call for the establishment of a new common definition of 'criminal organisation', which also takes into account the use of violence, corruption or intimidation by criminal groups;
6. Calls on the Commission to publish, as soon as possible, a legislative proposal for the revision of the EU Pyrotechnics Directive⁶ to address the use of pyrotechnics as weapons, including the exploitation of vulnerable young people; encourages the Member States to intensify cooperation with Europol and Eurojust, particularly in ports, logistics hubs and urban areas with vulnerable communities, by sharing best practices and providing training on identifying and reporting suspicious activities involving children;
7. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to recognise drug-related intimidation as an established recruitment pathway into organised crime; calls on the Member States to ensure that national strategies addressing child recruitment explicitly incorporate

⁶ Directive 2013/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 June 2013 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making available on the market of pyrotechnic articles, (OJ L 178, 28.6.2013, p. 27, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2013/29/oj>).

interagency responses to drug-related intimidation, drawing on emerging best practice models;

8. Urges the adoption of a prevention-first approach and integrated protection systems that are child-centred, gender-responsive, trauma-informed and cross-sectoral, focusing on the early identification of at-risk children, community-based interventions and strengthening families and social services; highlights the positive role of sport, educational associations and community organisations in offering safe, healthy and inclusive environments;
9. Considers that the cross-border nature of organised crime renders purely national victim protection responses inadequate for children and young people; calls for enhanced cooperation among the security, justice, child protection, education and health sectors, as well as public-private partnerships, to ensure integrated and cross-sectoral protective environment frameworks for children, both offline and online;
10. Stresses that the online dimension of child recruitment is now central to the operational models of organised criminal and terrorist groups, which systematically exploit digital services to identify, target, groom, manipulate and coerce children; stresses that the online recruitment of children by organised criminal networks creates a significant enforcement gap due to limited cooperation by platforms; calls on the Commission and the Member States to ensure that current obligations for platforms are enforced;
11. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to ensure the robust, consistent and child-rights-compliant enforcement of the Digital Services Act, in line with the Commission guidelines on the protection of minors;
12. Calls on the Commission to ensure the full enforcement of EU digital legislation, and to strengthen, where necessary, the obligations on platforms to take action against the exploitation and recruitment of children, as well as to strengthen the protection of minors online through the upcoming Digital Fairness Act, closing regulatory gaps in areas such as safety by design, age-appropriate defaults, and targeted commercial practices directed at children, while ensuring that new measures remain proportionate, evidence-based, and consistent with the broader digital regulatory framework;
13. Stresses the growing threat of crime-as-a-service, including violence-as-a-service, through which young people are recruited online to undertake violent tasks; welcomes Europol's Operational Taskforce GRIMM and calls on the Member States, Europol and Eurojust to strengthen joint investigations targeting recruiters, instigators and high-level actors, rather than limiting enforcement action to the minors carrying out the offences;

14. Emphasises that children involved in criminal activities as a result of recruitment must be treated in line with international standards; recalls that engagement with violent groups is often driven by gradual coercion and group dynamics rather than ideological adherence;
15. Stresses that due account must always be taken of the individual circumstances of each case, including coercion or exploitation, as well as of the seriousness of the criminal offence committed, of the level of risk posed by the offender to public safety, and of the applicable EU and national law;
16. Calls for child-friendly, gender-responsive and trauma-informed justice systems and tailored cross-sectoral, trauma-informed reintegration programmes, including access to education, mental health and psychosocial support and recovery and rehabilitation services, protection from retaliation, including for the families, pathways to decent employment and measures to prevent stigmatisation and repeated recruitment; recalls that under Directive (EU) 2016/800, deprivation of a child's liberty, in particular detention, should be imposed only as a measure of last resort and, where possible, Member States' competent authorities should have recourse to alternative measures; notes that in certain Member States restorative justice has proven to be effective;
17. Urges the Member States to improve interoperable, cross-sectoral data collection and sharing on the recruitment of children into organised criminal and terrorist groups, including disaggregated and harmonised EU-wide data, to better understand trends and risk factors; stresses that any collection, processing or sharing of data concerning children must fully comply with data protection rules and the principle of non-discrimination;
18. Supports the scaling up of successful evidence-based initiatives such as the EU-UNODC STRIVE Juvenile project and its strategic successor, EU-UNODC Protecting Futures initiative, including in fragile and conflict-affected contexts;
19. Calls for stronger international cooperation with partner countries to address cross-border recruitment networks and prevent the externalisation of criminal exploitation;
20. Stresses that as part of such cooperation, particular attention must be paid to children in situations of heightened vulnerability, including unaccompanied and migrant children, and access must be ensured to safe reporting channels, guardianship, legal assistance and rights-based cross-border child protection mechanisms;
21. Stresses the importance of addressing root causes, including poverty, inequality, exclusion, lack of education and exposure to violence and underinvestment in public services; calls on the

Commission and the Member States to increase financial support for civil society organisations, community-based initiatives, sports associations and educational programmes in areas most exposed to organised crime recruitment, offering credible alternatives to criminal pathways;

22. Is particularly concerned about the disproportionate targeting and exploitation of girls and young women by organised criminal networks, including through grooming, trafficking and sexual exploitation; stresses that girls face specific barriers to escaping criminal coercion and to accessing justice, recovery and reintegration, and calls on the Member States to ensure that all prevention, protection and support measures are gender-responsive and specifically address the vulnerabilities and needs of girls; recalls in this regard the obligations set out in the Anti-Trafficking Directive⁷;
23. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to allocate adequate funding under relevant EU programmes to prevent and effectively respond to the recruitment of children by organised criminal and terrorist groups, and in particular to support the 116 000 missing children hotline network as key multi-agency partners in identifying children at risk;
24. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, Europol and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

⁷ Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, (OJ L, 2024/1712, 24.6.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1712/oj>).