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Criminal exploitation of young people

Knowledge and practical advice for professionals
working with young people

2025

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Publisher: RVTS – Eastern Norway and the SaLTo Secretariat in the City of Oslo
Design and printing: Nano design/Aksell
ISBN: 978-82-694502-0-0

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Foreword

Crime among children and young people is a topic that always garners attention. At times, it is particularly topical and the subject of both public debate and intensified professional efforts. In recent years, an alarming trend has emerged in Sweden, where organised criminal networks have extensively recruited children and young people for different criminal acts, such as drug dealing and serious violent acts, including homicides. Fortunately, the situation in Norway is far less severe. However, it is important to remain vigilant about potential changes in how young people are recruited and exploited. It is also important to remember the children and young people who do not commit the most serious criminal acts, but who transport and sell drugs. They may be somewhat less visible, but can still experience pressure, threats, violence, and exploitation within the criminal networks they are part of.

To implement effective preventative measures, we need to know exactly what we are aiming to prevent. Young people may commit criminal acts entirely of their own volition, often together with others, but they may also be subjected to manipulation, pressure, and coercion where others benefit from the crimes they commit. Where young people are both perpetrators and victims, both types of crime must be addressed. Where young people are subjected to criminal exploitation, they may be victims of human trafficking and should, in such cases, not necessarily be prosecuted. In order to provide appropriate support to young people involved in and exploited for crime, it is necessary to know what control mechanisms they are subject to and

what is needed to enable their exit from crime. This handbook builds on experience-based knowledge gathered from Norwegian professionals who work closely with young people involved in crime. It emphasises the importance of considering exploitation and human trafficking both as an overarching perspective on youth crime and in interactions with individual young people. We hope that the handbook will contribute to the knowledge base for developing prevention strategies and measures, and serve as a tool to identify exploitation and implement suitable measures for comprehensive follow-up of young people subjected to exploitation.

The Norwegian edition of this handbook was published in 2024. Since then, we have observed a worrying development in Norway and other Nordic and European countries regarding the recruitment and exploitation of young people for criminal activities, including serious acts of violence linked to the phenomenon known as “violence-as-a-service.” In light of these developments, we have chosen to translate the handbook into English. We hope that the book will be useful beyond Norway’s borders, and that it will contribute to the exchange of knowledge and experience across countries.

Oslo, 31 October 2025

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Introduction

When children and young people commit criminal acts, this has serious consequences for the victims, the perpetrators themselves, and society. Therefore, it is important to prevent children and young people from becoming involved in crime and to follow up with those who have committed criminal acts to prevent recidivism and integration into criminal environments.

Child and youth crime is a major focus on the political agenda and garners considerable media attention. Particular concern is expressed for children and young people involved in drug-related crime, and young people who commit serious violence. The Norwegian Police's threat assessments,¹ the white paper on child, youth, and gang-related crime² and a number of media reports³ all mention that children and young people are recruited by criminal gangs and exploited as *runners* (errand boys) or to sell drugs. However, there is no further elaboration on what such exploitation entails for young people and what consequences it should have for preventive efforts and measures put in place to help young people exit from crime.

The aim of the handbook is to enhance understanding of how young people can be exploited to commit criminal acts and how the support services in such cases can identify and provide them with appropriate, comprehensive services. To provide appropriate support to children and young people who commit criminal acts, it is important to understand the underlying reasons. If the crime is caused not only by substance abuse, behavioural issues, profit motives, and similar factors, but also by the young person being subjected to pressure, debt, violence, or threats, they may require alternative forms of protection and support. This is important both to safeguard the best interests of the child and to prevent further crime.

The knowledge base for the handbook is primarily derived from experiences gathered from professionals through surveys, interviews, and workshops/group work. We have also reviewed relevant research from other countries, as well as a selection of local assessment reports focusing on youth and youth crime. There is a need for research within a Norwegian context, as well as the development of approaches for integrating this knowledge into prevention strategies and support measures. It is also important to enhance the competence of professionals who interact with young people

¹ Norwegian Police 2021, p. 13, Norwegian Police 2022, p. 15

² Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2021, p. 104

³ E.g., [Aftenposten 13 May 2019](#), [NRK 5 June 2022](#), and [VG 7 February 2023](#).

involved in crime and who are in a position to identify exploitation. Knowledge about exploitation is necessary in order to prevent, identify, and address it.

The handbook will be useful for all professionals who are in contact with young people involved in crime and at risk of exploitation. It primarily focuses on children and young people who are Norwegian citizens and/or reside in Norway, but it is also relevant for cases involving underage migrants.⁴ Identification and follow-up of young people subjected to criminal exploitation is a highly complex issue, and each case is unique. Therefore, this handbook does not offer definitive answers, but instead provides advice and input based on the current state of knowledge. As in all other fields, the knowledge base will be enriched and enlarged over time through research and practical experience. It will likely be necessary to adjust practices and revise this handbook accordingly.

⁴ For more information on criminal exploitation of minor asylum seekers and migrants, see: Lidén and Salvesen 2016, Lidén 2022, Tyldum et al. 2015, Vollebæk 2022

Structure and content of the handbook

Chapter 2 presents the knowledge base of the handbook. It provides a brief account of how RVTs and the SaLT Secretariat have gathered experience-based knowledge, experiences and research from other countries, as well as relevant knowledge from various local assessment reports on youth and youth crime. Chapter 3 addresses the links between youth crime, exploitation, and human trafficking. The definitions of criminal exploitation and human trafficking are provided, along with an explanation of why these issues are important to consider in efforts to combat youth crime. Chapter 4 presents knowledge about how exploitation occurs and who is behind it. The subsequent chapters discuss how to prevent exploitation (Chapter 5), how to identify whether young people are being exploited (Chapter 6), and how we can follow up young people who are being exploited (Chapter 7). The concluding chapter presents a comprehensive model illustrating the links between processes related to criminal exploitation of young people and the efforts of the support services.





Knowledge foundation

Internationally, criminal exploitation is among the most widespread forms of exploitation within human trafficking involving minors, particularly boys.⁵ In Norway, it has so far mainly been underage migrants who have been identified as victims of this form of human trafficking.⁶ In a number of contexts, it has been noted that Norwegian children and young people in at-risk environments or areas are also at greater risk of being recruited into drug dealing and subjected to criminal exploitation.⁷ However, there is no Norwegian research that investigates the extent of such recruitment and exploitation or explains how it occurs. Research on disadvantaged areas,⁸ youth crime,⁹ gang-related crime,¹⁰ and drug dealing¹¹ is relevant to shed light on the issue, but this literature has rarely included the exploitation perspective.

To identify exploitation and provide appropriate services for children and young people who commit criminal acts, it is important to understand the underlying reasons. In recent years, RVTS – Eastern Norway has therefore gathered and organised experience-based knowledge from professionals working with young people involved in crime, in collaboration with the other RVTS centres and the SaLTo

Secretariat. This work, together with a review of relevant research from other countries and a selection of local assessment reports, forms the knowledge base for this handbook.

Survey, interviews and workshop about young people subjected to criminal exploitation (RVTS – Eastern Norway and SaLTo)

In 2021, RVTS – Eastern Norway and the other RVTS centres¹² conducted interviews with six experienced professionals and conducted a survey with 190 respondents from relevant services (SLT – coordination of local drug and crime prevention measures, outreach workers, the Norwegian Police, The National Mediation Service (Konfliktrådet), child welfare services, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (Nav), etc.). Video recordings of the interviews and the results of the survey were presented at the national webinar “Young, criminal and exploited”.¹³ There were also presentations on the topic by speakers from Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The results of the survey are presented in Chapter 4, and quotes from the interviews and survey are also used in other chapters.

⁵ UNODC 2023

⁶ Tyldum et al. 2015

⁷ Jones et al. 2023, Uteseksjonen 2017

⁸ Brattbak and Andersen 2017, Kindt and Strand 2020, Rosten 2017, Strand et al. 2019

⁹ Allvin and Söderholm 2023, Bakosgjelten and Kjenn 2022, Dyb 2014, Oslo Economics 2022, Aase et al. 2020

¹⁰ Lidén and Sandbæk 2009, Lien 2004, Lien 2011

¹¹ Sandberg and Pedersen 2007

¹² RVTS – Eastern Norway, RVTS – Southern Norway, RVTS – Central Norway, RVTS – Western Norway, and RVTS – Northern Norway (see www.rvts.no)

¹³ The webinar was held on 12 October 2021. A recording is available on [YouTube \(RVTS Øst\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVTS_Øst).

On 17 October 2022, RVTS – Eastern Norway and the SaLTo Secretariat in the City of Oslo organised a workshop with around 50 professionals, mainly from Oslo. Prior to the workshop, we collected input from young people in the target demographic through youth workers in certain boroughs of Oslo. In addition to some practice-focused presentations, group work was undertaken to understand how to identify when young people are being exploited, how to prevent exploitation, and how to support victims of exploitation. The knowledge gained from the group work forms the basis for chapters 5, 6, and 7 of this handbook. The results of the group work were presented at a seminar organised by RVTS – Eastern Norway and the SaLTo Secretariat on 29 March 2023, which also featured presentations and comments from peer support workers and professionals. See the appendix for a more detailed account of the knowledge-gathering process and an overview of contributors.

Following the publication of the Norwegian edition of this handbook in 2024, we have developed a two-day digital course and additional educational resources on the topic. As part of this training, we conducted interviews with five professionals, including a researcher, practitioners from various services, and a former leader of a criminal network. Through ongoing dialogue with practitioners and diverse professional communities, we gain valuable insights into the situation of children and young people involved in crime, as well as the challenges faced by professionals working in this field.

The experience-based knowledge gathered by RVTS and the SaLTo Secretariat and presented in this handbook indicates that criminal exploitation of children and young people is a

challenge in Norway. The descriptions of how such exploitation occurs align with research from the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Denmark.¹⁴

Experiences and research from other countries

County Lines in the United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, there has been a focus for several years on child criminal exploitation related to organised crime and drug dealing, as addressed in numerous studies and reports.¹⁵ In the United Kingdom, this activity is predominantly regarded as human trafficking, and the minors involved are regarded as victims of exploitation.

County Lines refers to the practice of transporting illegal drugs from the major cities into rural areas, where they are sold. The term ‘County Lines’ refers to the dedicated mobile phone lines used in this practice. Organisers/criminal networks recruit vulnerable children and young people into this practice because they are thought to attract less attention or suspicion. Some young people are recruited through *debt bondage*, where they are subjected to coercion or pressure to participate in order to settle drug debts.¹⁶ Others participate of their own volition because they are seeking excitement and financial gain, and/or lack legitimate opportunities in marginalised communities.

14 Harding 2020, Jönsson and Nilsson 2019, Søgaaard 2022, Tollin et al. 2021, Tollin et al. 2023

15 Barlow et al. 2022, Calouori et al. 2022, The Children's Society 2018, Dixon 2023, Havard et al. 2021, Hunter et al. 2019, James 2021, Maxwell and Wallace 2021, Moyle 2019, Robinson et al. 2019, Turner et al. 2019

16 The Children's Society 2022

There are cases of coercion involving violence and threats, and more traditional examples of grooming, where the underage victim gradually develops trust and loyalty towards the organisers. It is reported that many victims are subjected to serious violence and sexual abuse.

Recruitment and exploitation of minors in Sweden and Denmark

Studies from Sweden and Denmark show that children and young people are also exploited by criminal gangs involved in drug-related crime in our neighbouring countries.

In 2020, a survey was conducted among Danish professionals¹⁷ to assess the exploitation of vulnerable young people and adults in drug-related crime. The study revealed that, alongside rising marginalisation and inequality in society, several factors have led to vulnerable young people being exploited by criminals. Competition has intensified over the past two decades. Several groups have fought to dominate the drug market and have become preoccupied with recruiting vulnerable young people for drug dealing. In addition, recent years have also seen the spread of new sales methods, where drugs (sold by phone or through social media) are delivered to buyers via a ‘courier service’. This sales method is more labour-intensive than traditional street sales and sales out of flats. Whereas drug dealing used to be characterised by the buyer having to seek out the seller, it is now increasingly the seller's job to deliver the drugs to the buyer's home, a car park, a nightclub, or any location preferred by the customer. This has led to a situation where

17 Søgaaard et al. 2020

gangs and individual criminal entrepreneurs require a larger workforce and are more inclined to recruit young people as drug couriers.

A Swedish study from 2023 describes how children and young people are recruited into criminal networks in Sweden.¹⁸ Children aged 12–15 are usually recruited by young people between the ages of 15 and 20. Recruitment can occur swiftly, sometimes in less than a day. For criminal networks, recruiting new members is a way to expand their drug distribution chains in the local area. Children are especially sought after for handling drugs. They represent cheap labour, are instructed to perform tasks with a high risk of detection, and contribute to the growth and establishment of criminal networks in the area. Older youth can thereby increase their earnings and pursue careers within the networks. Children who are already committing less serious crimes, are visible outdoors in at-risk areas or have friends and relatives within the networks, are at risk of being approached and courted by older youth in the area. Sometimes, children approach the network on their own, without realising that doing so will cost them their autonomy for a long time. Children and young people are also sometimes coerced or deceived into joining criminal networks. Newly recruited children are primarily used to store, transport, and sell drugs. Gradually, they may also be given other tasks, such as transporting weapons, committing acts of violence, and assisting with fraud. It is difficult for a child to exit a criminal network. However, opportunities to leave sometimes arise when the person who recruited the child leaves the country or is imprisoned, making it impossible for them to continue monitoring the child.

18 Tollin et al. 2023

Assessment reports on youth and youth crime

Several local reports on various youth environments mention the recruitment of young people into drug-related crime, although this is rarely the main topic of the report.¹⁹ This is highlighted by the police, other adult informants, and young people themselves. In connection with a mapping of certain youth environments in Lillestrøm Municipality in 2022, a survey was conducted among young people, in which they were asked directly about “recruitment to crime”.²⁰ Around 20 per cent of the young people responded that they knew young people who had committed criminal acts against their will. However, only a small proportion of young people (around 4 per cent) reported having personally committed criminal acts against their will. Another finding in the report showed that recruitment into crime can be a problem that starts in primary school.

In 2023, the outreach service in the Borough of Gamle Oslo conducted an assessment specifically focused on the recruitment of young people from the borough into criminal environments.²¹ The findings indicate that children and young people’s limited financial resources, lack of community and coping skills, combined with exposure to criminal activity and environments, put them at risk of being recruited into criminal environments. Read more about this in Chapter 4.

19 Among others, Bakken et al. 2020 (Lørenskog Municipality), Chabchoub 2019 and Hollerud 2017 (Outreach Section in Oslo), Lillestrøm Municipality 2023, Nedberge 2021 (Borough of Søndre Nordstrand)

20 Lillestrøm Municipality 2022

21 Jones et al. 2023





Youth crime, exploitation and human trafficking

Child and youth crime fluctuates over time but has generally decreased substantially in the past 15 years. At the same time, there have been changes in recent years, with more serious cases involving violence, robbery, and drugs, and an increase in the number of young people registered for sexual offences and repeat offences. There is also increased concern for children and young people who are at risk of being recruited into gangs.²²

Risk factors exist at multiple levels (individual, family, school, peer, and community) and can increase the likelihood of crime, particularly when several risk factors co-occur and protective factors are limited. Many young people who commit repeat offences are characterised by experiences of violence and abuse in their upbringing, poor economic conditions, overcrowded housing, repeated relocations, health and substance abuse issues, difficulties at school, behavioural and aggression problems, contact with child welfare services, and involvement of family members in crime.²³

The likelihood of young people being recruited or socialised into criminal environments rises when they live in neighbourhoods with a high proportion of vulnerable young people or criminals.²⁴ Young people with a low threshold for committing acts of violence are particularly at risk of being recruited by criminal gangs.²⁵

What is child criminal exploitation?

Exploiting a person means using that person to gain an advantage for yourself. The motive could be financial, but it might also be to obtain other kinds of advantages. Exploitation occurs through abuse of power, vulnerability or trust, through manipulation or various forms of violence. People are exploited in various ways, including for sexual purposes or to commit criminal acts.

²² Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2021

²³ Bakosgjelten and Kjenn 2022, Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2021, Oslo Economics 2022

²⁴ Strand and Kindt 2020, Aase et al. 2020

²⁵ Norwegian Police 2021, Aase et al. 2020

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) ²⁶

CCE occurs when an individual or group takes advantage of a power imbalance to coerce, control, manipulate, or deceive a child or young person under 18 into any criminal activity

- a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants; and/or
- b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator; and/or
- c) through violence or the threat of violence.

The victim may still be considered criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. The exploitation does not always involve physical contact and can also be carried out online through technology.

In the UK, this form of exploitation is referred to as child criminal exploitation (CCE). The definition generally follows the same pattern as that of child sexual exploitation (CSE), with the only difference being the form of exploitation – young people are exploited to commit criminal acts instead of sexual acts. Young people may receive benefits in the form of money, gifts, drugs, accommodation, attention or status in exchange for committing criminal acts. The term ‘forced criminality’ is also used; however, we believe that ‘criminal exploitation’ more accurately describes the activity. This is because the exploitation component is central, whereas coercion is not necessarily employed.

People can be exploited for all forms of crime. Children and young people are particularly exploited for various forms of drug-related and acquisitive crime (see Chapter 4). Adults may also be subjected to criminal exploitation.

²⁶ Official definition of CCE in the United Kingdom, Home Office 2018, p. 48

Persons who are undocumented, people with intellectual disabilities, those with substance abuse problems, and other individuals facing special challenges are particularly at risk.²⁷

Could it be human trafficking?

There is no separate penal provision on criminal exploitation in Norway; however, it may fall under the human trafficking provision (Sections 257 and 258 of the Norwegian Penal Code). Human trafficking involves the exploitation of a person through violence, threats, abuse of a position of vulnerability, or other improper conduct for the purpose of prostitution or other sexual services, forced labour or services, military service abroad, or the removal of organs.

Consent to the exploitation is irrelevant when the person is under the age of 18, or if the person has consented as a result of violence, threats, abuse of a position of vulnerability or other improper conduct.

“All exploitation of minors constitutes human trafficking. This applies regardless of whether violence, threats, abuse of a position of vulnerability or other improper conduct has been used.”

Coordination Unit against Human Trafficking, 2023c, p. 7

Anyone can be exploited in human trafficking, regardless of gender, age, nationality or ethnicity. Crossing international borders and

²⁷ Papadaki 2020

Section 257 of the Norwegian Penal Code. Human trafficking

Any person who by violence, threats, taking advantage of a vulnerable situation or other improper conduct forces, exploits or deceives another person into/for

- a. prostitution or other sexual services;
- b. forced labour or forced services, including begging;
- c. active military service in a foreign country; or
- d. consenting to the removal of one of the person’s internal organs;

shall be punished for human trafficking with imprisonment for a term not exceeding six years.

The same penalty shall be applied to any person who

- e. facilitates such force, exploitation or deception as specified in the first paragraph by procuring, transporting or receiving the person;
- f. otherwise contributes to the force, exploitation or deception; or
- g. provides payment or any other advantage to obtain consent for such a course of action from a person who has authority over the aggrieved person, or who receives such payment or advantage.

Any person who commits an act as specified in the first or second paragraph against a person who is under 18 years of age shall be subject to punishment regardless of whether the act involved violence, threats, taking advantage of a vulnerable situation or other improper conduct. Any person who was ignorant of the fact that the aggrieved person was under 18 years of age shall be subject to a penalty if he/she may be held to blame in any way for such ignorance.

Section 258 of the Norwegian Penal Code Aggravated human trafficking

Aggravated human trafficking is punishable by imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years. In determining whether the violation is aggravated, particular weight shall be given to whether the person subjected to the act was under 18 years of age, whether severe violence or force was used and whether the act generated significant proceeds. Any person who was ignorant of the fact that the aggrieved person was under 18 years of age shall be subject to a penalty if he/she may be held to blame in any way for such ignorance.

organised criminal activity are not prerequisites for exploitation to be classified as human trafficking. The exploitation may be carried out by one or more individuals or by organised criminal networks.

Criminal exploitation is captured by the form of exploitation referred to as “forced services”

in Section 257 b of the Norwegian Penal Code. ²⁸ Under Section 258 of the Norwegian Penal Code, exploitation of minors constitutes aggravated human trafficking.

²⁸ Note that there is no requirement for the use of explicit coercive means such as violence, threats, and similar means, despite the wording ‘forced services’.

What do the terms mean? ²⁹		
Abuse of a position of vulnerability: The victims may be in a difficult situation where they feel they have no choice but to submit to the person(s) exploiting them. The organiser(s) exploit(s) this, often driven by personal gain.	Improper conduct: Improper conduct may, for example, involve placing someone in a debt situation that is difficult to escape from.	Deception: Misleading or enticing someone involves deceiving or persuading a person to participate in something they would not otherwise have done.

29 Coordination Unit against Human Trafficking 2023c

There are a number of challenges associated with the identification and investigation of human trafficking, which means that there are very few human trafficking cases in the criminal justice system.³⁰ It is often difficult to determine early on whether a case will ultimately be classified as human trafficking, another criminal offence, or if it will result in criminal prosecution at all. Sometimes this only becomes clear following extensive investigation. At this time, there are no other penal provisions that specifically cover criminal exploitation³¹. By comparison, there are several different penal provisions that cover various forms of sexual abuse/exploitation for sexual purposes,³² as well as exploitation in the labour market.³³ However,

30 See the Coordination Unit against Human Trafficking 2023a, Chapter 8

31 In the autumn of 2025, a legislative proposal is under public consultation regarding a [new criminal provision on the involvement of minors in crime](#) (deadline for consultation: 1 December 2025).

32 [Chapter 26 of the Norwegian Penal Code. Sexual offences, including Section 295 and Section 309](#) (Norway)

33 Violations relating to pay and working conditions, e.g., wage theft ([Section 395 of the Norwegian Penal Code](#))

it is illegal to use “criminal or other unlawful conduct”, threats or extortion for coercion, e.g., to force someone to commit criminal acts.³⁴ When sentencing, it shall also generally be considered an aggravating circumstance if the offence “was perpetrated by the offender exploiting or misguiding young persons, persons in a very difficult life situation, who are mentally disabled or in a dependent relationship with the offender”.³⁵

In Denmark, exploitation for the purpose of committing criminal acts is explicitly mentioned as one of the forms of exploitation in the human trafficking provision.³⁶ This is in line with the EU Anti-trafficking Directive, where criminal acts are mentioned as a specific form of exploitation.³⁷ In Sweden, a statutory provision was introduced on

34 [Section 251 \(Coercion\) or Section 252 \(Aggravated Coercion\)](#) (Norway)

35 [Section 251\(g\) of the Norwegian Penal Code](#)

36 [Section 262\(a\) of the Danish Criminal Code](#)

37 Article 2 of the [Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims](#)

1 July 2023 that makes it a criminal offence to recruit, pay, instruct or otherwise involve minors in criminal acts.³⁸

Victim or perpetrator?

“The police, child welfare services, schools, health services, and others who work with children and young people must be brave enough to consider the possibility that children who are initially portrayed as criminals may also be victims of human trafficking.”

From the survey

What distinguishes criminal exploitation from other forms of exploitation, such as exploitation for sexual purposes, begging or forced labour, is that the victims are, by definition, criminal offenders. When they come into contact with the police, they will therefore be given the status of perpetrator/criminal, and it is not necessarily obvious that they may also be victims/aggrieved parties. Young people who are subjected to criminal exploitation do not necessarily think of themselves as exploited. They may feel that they benefit from engaging in criminal acts and being part of a criminal environment. They may also feel that they are making independent choices. However, exploitation – the act of using someone for one's own benefit, e.g., by abusing a position of vulnerability – may be punishable by law, regardless of how the young person perceives the situation. Under the law, consent to the exploitation is irrelevant when the person

38 [Chapter 16, Section 5\(a\) of the Swedish Criminal Code](#)

is under the age of 18, or if the person has consented as a result of violence, threats, abuse of a position of vulnerability or other improper conduct.

There are many reasons why young people commit criminal acts. Research shows that young people involved in crime often have an upbringing characterised by poor finances, substance abuse, violence, and traumatic experiences.³⁹ These factors, which may ‘explain’ the criminal conduct, do not rule out the possibility that the young person may (also) be recruited and/or controlled in a manner that could fall under the human trafficking provision. And conversely: Young people who are exploited/subjected to human trafficking often come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, have difficult family and childhood circumstances, etc. This is precisely what puts them at risk of exploitation. Thus, socio-economic conditions, individual vulnerabilities, and exploitation or human trafficking are not mutually exclusive explanations for youth crime, but rather factors that complement and reinforce one another. Young people can be groomed by criminals who show them attention and care, offer expensive things they would otherwise not be able to afford, and provide them with ways to earn ‘easy money’ (see more on this in Chapter 4). Young people might believe that entering this world is their own choice, but often find it difficult to leave again. They may be influenced by a strong culture of loyalty in criminal environments, they may have incurred or been forced into debt, and/or be subjected to violence and threats.

39 Frisby-Osman and Wood 2020, Aase et al. 2020

In many cases, the lines between coercion, deception, and young people's own choices will be blurred – challenging a clear-cut distinction between victims and perpetrators.

It is important to remember that, under both Norwegian and international law, minors are by definition considered to be in a vulnerable position in relation to organisers, and it is therefore not necessary to prove the use of other means of coercion and control in order to classify the exploitation as human trafficking. This applies to criminal exploitation to the same extent as other forms of exploitation, such as exploitation for sexual purposes or forced labour.⁴⁰

“We have seen that several people have spoken out in favour of calling the exploitation of minors ‘human trafficking’. For us in the police, at least those of us who work with prevention, we felt like someone finally dared to put it into words. We have been working on prevention for a long time. We want to minimise our use of criminal proceedings. But now that we are applying the definition of ‘human trafficking’ to some cases, we must focus even more on prevention. We must recognise that individuals previously regarded as suspects might, in fact, be the aggrieved parties or victims in such cases. This could be a new way of working. I think it will be a good and positive way of working.”

From an interview with a police officer

Self-determined crime, exploitation or human trafficking – why is the distinction so important?

As mentioned at the beginning of the handbook, understanding the underlying reasons for criminal acts committed by children and young people is crucial for implementing effective measures.

Sexual exploitation is often contrasted with *self-determined sexuality*, a fundamental right to decide for oneself about one’s own body – *whether, when, with whom* and *how* one wants to be sexually active.⁴¹ Similarly, we could say that self-determined crime presupposes that the person freely decides whether, when, how, and with whom they will commit criminal acts, and that they are free to stop committing such acts and disengage from criminal environments. If young people commit crimes on behalf of others and find it difficult to disengage due to pressure, debt, violence or threats, there is a need for alternative forms of protection and support beyond what is required when the crime is solely motivated by profit, substance abuse, behavioural problems, or similar issues.

⁴¹ *Utdanningsdirektoratet: Støtte til undervisning om kjønn og seksualitet* [Norwegian Directorate for Education: Support for Teaching about Gender and Sexuality, available in Norwegian only] www.udir.no/laring-og-trivsel/lareplanverket/stotte/Stotte-til-undervisning-om-kjonn-og-seksualitet/selvbestemmelse-og-selvbilde/

⁴⁰ UNODC 2012a, 2012b

“When it comes to young people with Norwegian citizenship/residence permits, it must be recognised that they too are being exploited. We find that our reports of concern (to the child protection services) are not taken seriously, which leads to them becoming further entangled in criminal activities with no way to escape. These young people are traditionally perceived as ‘difficult’ and to blame for, e.g., standing on the street selling drugs. The perspective that coercion or exploitation may be involved is virtually absent when it comes to Norwegian youth, even though this is highlighted in reports of concern.”

From the survey

Young people involved in crime: Why is it important to focus on possible exploitation and human trafficking?

- To identify victims
- To provide suitable assistance
- To protect the rights of the child
- To prevent crime
- To build a possible criminal case against the organisers

Children and young people’s rights

Children and young people have the right to protection from all forms of exploitation, including criminal exploitation. *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) requires us to protect the child against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child’s welfare (Article 36) and to prevent the use of children in the illicit production and

trafficking of drugs (Article 33).⁴² *The Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings* stipulates, among other things, that special measures shall be taken to reduce children’s vulnerability to trafficking, notably by creating a protective environment for them (Article 5).⁴³

Young people over the age of 18 and adults shall also be protected against human trafficking and exploitation, including in accordance with the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol)⁴⁴ and the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking.

Duty to identify human trafficking

Norwegian authorities have a duty to facilitate the identification of victims of human trafficking (Article 10 of the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking). In Norway, there is no single body whose defined task is to identify human trafficking. We have a low-threshold system in which all bodies that may come into contact with victims shall have the necessary competence and procedures in place to facilitate identification.⁴⁵ Such identification is a prerequisite for providing the necessary assistance and protection to victims.

Duty to avert and duty to report

Under Section 196 of the Norwegian Penal Code,

⁴² [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#)

⁴³ [Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking ETS No. 197](#)

⁴⁴ [UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children \(2000\)](#)

⁴⁵ Coordination Unit against Human Trafficking 2023c

everyone has a duty to report or otherwise attempt to avert aggravated human trafficking and a number of other serious criminal offences.⁴⁶ If you work for a public authority, you also have a duty to notify the child welfare services when there is reason to believe that a child is being or will be exploited for human trafficking.⁴⁷

The criminal law perspective

Criminal prosecution of organisers of exploitation

It is also important to identify exploitation and human trafficking in order to build a possible criminal case and punish the organisers. A criminal case can also be key to providing victims with redress and compensation.

In the more obvious cases where violence and threats are used, it is clear that the young person should be regarded and treated as a victim, not a perpetrator. In cases that appear more complex or are in a grey area, it is also important to conduct a broader investigation to clarify whether the young person is being exploited by others. Not all drug-related and acquisitive crime committed by young people constitutes human trafficking, but it is important that the police and support services bear this perspective in mind and investigate it. When the police investigate under the human trafficking provision, they also have a large toolbox at their disposal, as they have the opportunity to use a wide range of investigative measures, such as surveillance or telephone tapping.

⁴⁶ See www.plikt.no for more information about the duty to avert a criminal offence.

⁴⁷ Section 13-2 of the Norwegian Child Welfare Act

Criminal proceedings can be difficult and are not the primary concern

Prosecuting the organisers is important, but in some cases it can be difficult to distinguish between victims and perpetrators. It is often peers or slightly older youths who recruit and appear to be organising the exploitation of other young people, and young people may be used to carry out threats and violence (see Chapter 4). Bringing a human trafficking case against young people in such situations risks granting impunity to the actual organisers. In addition, there is a risk that the vulnerable young person will not co-operate if it means that a friend risks being convicted of human trafficking. In Sweden, this dilemma has been taken into account in the section of the law that criminalises involving minors in criminal acts: if there is little difference in age or development between the parties, or if the offence is clearly less serious, the person concerned shall not be convicted.⁴⁸

The primary concern is that young people subjected to criminal exploitation receive support from various services. Victims of human trafficking are entitled to assistance, regardless of whether or not they co-operate in criminal proceedings.⁴⁹ This is often a challenge with foreign victims of human trafficking, but should not be an issue for children and young people with Norwegian citizenship or residence permits, who have full rights within the Norwegian welfare system. The main focus must be on the best interests of the child. Young people must receive assistance with the underlying challenges they face, and not just assistance to escape the specific situation of exploitation.

⁴⁸ Chapter 16, Section 5(a) of the Swedish Criminal Code

⁴⁹ OSCE 2023

The non-punishment principle

Under the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking, persons who have committed unlawful activities as a result of human trafficking are entitled to have their case reviewed for non-punishment (Article 26).⁵⁰ The non-punishment principle takes into account that victims of human trafficking are not in a position to make free choices, and is intended to ensure that non-punishment is considered when victims have committed offences as a result of their situation of exploitation.⁵¹ The provision requires all actors in the criminal justice system to investigate, when there are grounds for doing so, whether the criminal act was committed as a result of human trafficking. This applies at all stages of criminal proceedings – before a case is decided, while remanded in custody, and during a period of imprisonment.⁵² In connection with the prosecution of presumed victims of human trafficking, a closer assessment of the human trafficking situation shall be made, which must be weighed against the seriousness of the criminal act (proportionality assessment).⁵³

⁵⁰ Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking ETS No. 197

⁵¹ ICAT 2020, UN Human Rights 2020 and 2021

⁵² ROSA and the Norwegian Correctional Service 2023

⁵³ Coordination Unit against Human Trafficking 2023c, p. 46

What does an assessment of non-punishment involve?

→ Where there is reasonable suspicion of human trafficking, the person shall be referred to and assessed by the competent authorities or a qualified body, such as the focal point for human trafficking in the police district or relevant victim services.

→ The assessment by the competent authorities of whether there is reasonable suspicion of human trafficking is not necessarily binding on the prosecuting authority. However, the authorities must have a sufficient justification for reaching a different conclusion, and such a justification must be in accordance with the definition of human trafficking.

→ The prosecution of presumed victims of human trafficking is not inherently contrary to international obligations; however, a more detailed assessment of the human trafficking situation shall be conducted, along with a proportionality assessment regarding the severity of the criminal act.

For more information on the requirements for such assessments, seek guidance from specialists in human trafficking within the police.

Coordination Unit against Human Trafficking, 2023c, p. 46

In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) found that the United Kingdom had violated the rights of two underage boys who had been convicted of drug-related offences.⁵⁴ The United Kingdom was found to have violated Article 4 (prohibition of slavery and forced labour) and Article 6(1) (right to a fair trial) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The ECtHR also discussed Article 26 of the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking (the provision on non-punishment). Among other things, it was pointed out that the police did not immediately assess the boys' status as presumed victims of human trafficking, despite the fact that the boys' situation at the time of their arrest indicated that such a concern should have been raised.

⁵⁴ Case of V.C.L. and A.N. v. the United Kingdom, Applications nos. 77587/12 and 74603/12, 2021-02-16, referred to in the Coordination Unit against Human Trafficking 2003b, Jovanović and Niezna 2023



Criminal exploitation of young people in Norway

There are no studies that can provide a reliable indication of how many children and young people are subjected to criminal exploitation in Norway. In the survey conducted by the five RVTS centres in 2021 (see Chapter 2), respondents were presented with the definition of criminal exploitation (see Chapter 3). They were then asked whether they were aware of any cases where young people had been exploited for purposes such as drug-related and acquisitive crime, approximately how many of the young people they had been in contact with they believed might have been exploited, and how widespread they thought this form of exploitation was.

Figure 1
Are you aware of any instances where young people have been exploited, e.g., for drug-related or acquisitive crime?

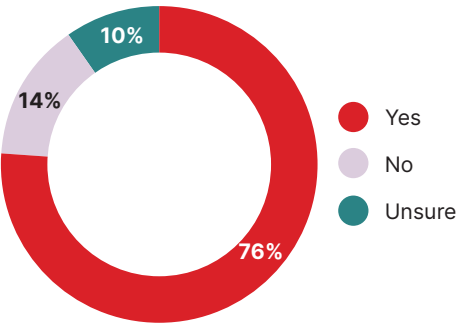


Figure 2
Of the young people you have been in contact with, approximately how many do you think may have been criminally exploited?

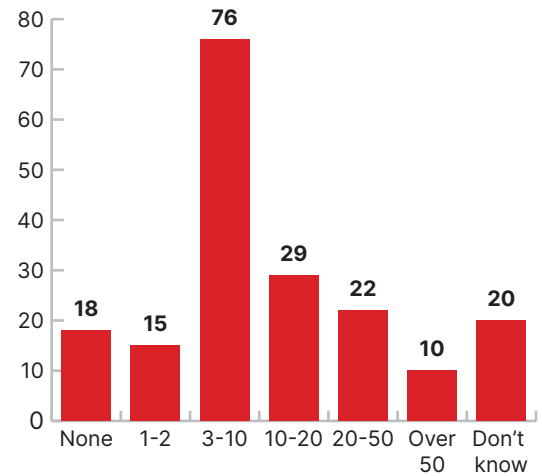
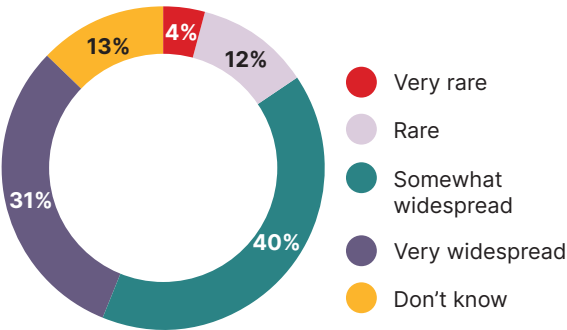


Figure 3
Based on your experience with young people involved in crime, how common do you think it is for young people to be in an exploitative situation?



Out of 190 respondents, 76 per cent (145) confirmed they were aware of cases of criminal exploitation of young people. 14 per cent (27) responded no, and 10 per cent (18) were unsure. 76 of the respondents (40 per cent) estimated that 3–10 of the young people they had been in contact with had been exploited. 29 (15 per cent) believed that 10–20 young people had been exploited, 22 (12 per cent) believed that 20–50 young people had been exploited, and 10 (5 per cent) believed that they had been in contact with more than 50 young people who had been exploited. There were also 18 respondents who did not believe they had been in contact with young people subjected to exploitation, and 20 who were unsure. A total of 71 per cent considered the criminal exploitation of young people to be widespread: 31 per cent (59) considered it to be very widespread, and 40 per cent (77) considered it to be somewhat widespread. 12 per cent (22) believed it to be rare, 4 per cent (8) believed it to be very rare, and 13 per cent (24) did not know.

In this chapter, we will highlight the survey results regarding forms of exploitation, recruitment and control methods, who is organising the exploitation, and how young people perceive the situation (voluntary or involuntary). In addition to the quantitative results, we will also include quotes from the survey and interviews, which provide a more detailed account of young people's situations. Where relevant, we will also refer to research from other countries and local assessment reports.

In what ways are young people subjected to criminal exploitation?

“Within the target group I work with, it is common for children in their early teens (especially those below the age of criminal responsibility) to be asked to commit crimes with the promise of status and reward. Examples include the sale of illegal drugs, drug trafficking, violence, and threats. There have also been examples where they organise young people to commit theft and burglary.”

From the survey

Storage, transport and sale of drugs

In the survey, respondents were asked in what ways the young people they knew had been exploited. Various offences related to drug-related crime were highlighted in particular: sale of drugs (64 per cent of the respondents), transport of drugs or money (59 per cent), and storage of drugs, money or stolen goods (56 per cent).

“A 10-year-old boy received small gifts and food for keeping lookout while older teens or young adults dealt drugs. At the age of 11, the boy was given money to store small amounts of drugs for the same group. At the age of 12, the boy was threatened into selling small amounts of drugs and running other errands for the gang.”

From the survey

“A young boy who was going to help his debt-ridden brother-in-law was used as a drug runner to fetch large quantities of drugs, which were to be sold so that his brother-in-law could pay off his debts.”

From the survey

“Young people were offered money to beat up an acquaintance (with debts) on behalf of a gang leader.”

From the survey

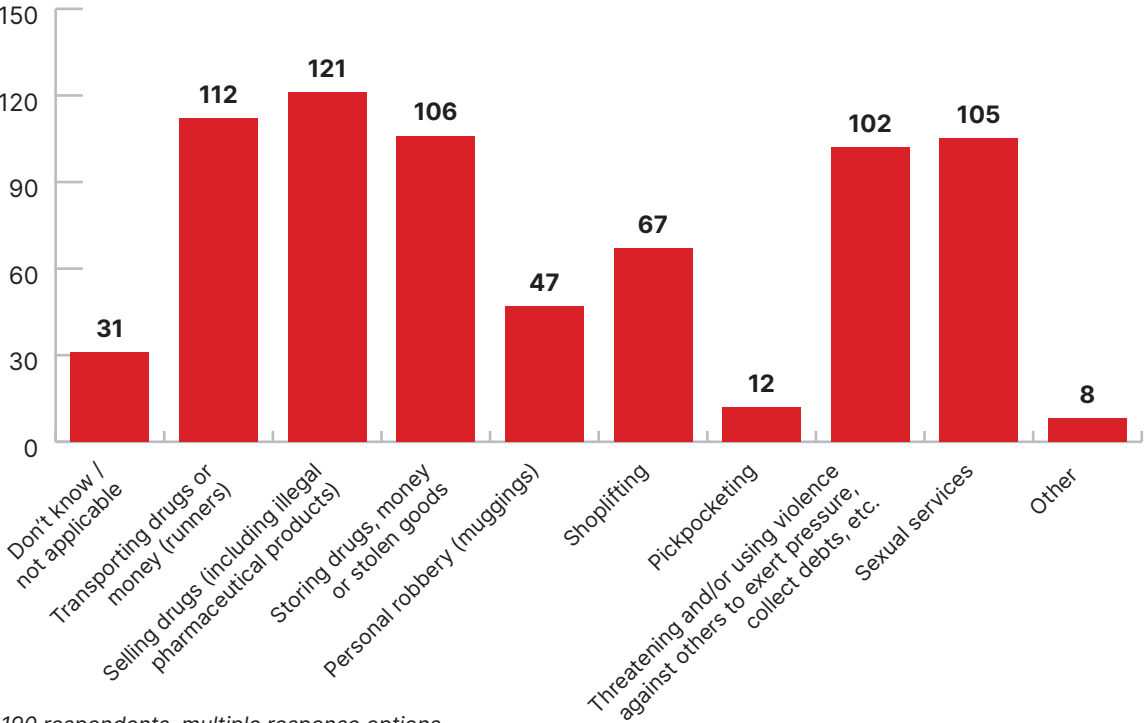
“The young person demonstrated their loyalty to the gang by committing acts of violence against others on behalf of the gang.”

From the survey

Committing acts of violence against others

Many of the respondents (54 per cent) were also aware that young people had been exploited to threaten or commit acts of violence against others in order to collect debts or exert other forms of pressure.

Figure 4
In what ways have young people been exploited?



190 respondents, multiple response options

“The young person was manipulated into committing acts of violence against another young person. Honour and loyalty were used as leverage.”

From the survey

In Sweden, minors are often given ‘assignments’ to commit various criminal acts by criminal networks. Such assignments include threats, extortion, debt collection, abuse, and shootings/ murders. It also occurs that people within criminal networks offer ‘their youth’ or ‘juniors’ as ‘soldiers’ to connections in other networks.⁵⁵ Violence-as-a-service is a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly widespread in several European countries⁵⁶, including Norway⁵⁷.

Acquisitive crime

Young people are also exploited for various forms of acquisitive crime, such as shoplifting (35 per cent of the respondents), personal robbery (muggings) (25 per cent), and pickpocketing (6 per cent). One of the respondents also mentioned handling stolen goods (reselling goods stolen from thefts/ robberies).

“Older boys get those below the age of criminal responsibility to steal items and beer for them from shops.”

From the survey

“Handling stolen goods. Reselling the proceeds of theft/robbery.”

From the survey

“We had a boy we were working with, and we could see that he was in a bad mood, sad and upset. One day, we got a call from the police saying that he had been caught shoplifting. He had stolen a lot. Afterwards, he told us that he had been threatened into stealing on behalf of others. He had been doing this for a long time. He had been forced to steal increasingly larger items. In the end, he realised that the only way to get out of it was to shoplift so badly that he would get caught. Following the theft, the boy was monitored more closely by store employees. That is how he got out of it. They could no longer threaten him into stealing more, as everyone in the shops knew who he was.”

From an interview with a social worker

Sexual exploitation

According to the respondents (55 per cent), sexual exploitation is widespread in criminal environments. They describe situations where young people receive drugs or money in exchange for sexual services, and situations where young people are subjected to extortion, blackmailing them into (continuing to) send sexualised images or perform services. Situations involving serious sexual abuse in connection with criminal environments and criminal exploitation are also described.

“A young girl had to perform sexual acts on a debt collector to erase her partner’s drug debt.”

From the survey

“A young person was abused by slightly older acquaintances he had met through a criminal environment. The abuse was filmed and then used as a means of pressure to get the young person to store illegal drugs, send threats of violence to unknown persons via social media and carry out other criminal acts.”

From the survey

In the United Kingdom⁵⁸ (within ‘County Lines’), Norway,⁵⁹ and Sweden,⁶⁰ it has been revealed

that girls and boys who are criminally exploited may also be subjected to serious sexual abuse, including as a means of punishment and control. Among identified victims of human trafficking, it is also relatively common for both women/girls and men/boys to be subjected to multiple forms of exploitation at the same time, e.g., forced labour and exploitation for sexual purposes, or exploitation for both criminal and sexual purposes.

Lookout and recruitment

Several respondents also described how young people were used to look out for and alert others of police presence, and to inform on and recruit other young people.

“Young people have been paid to report the location of the police via apps and to provide information about young people who are perceived as lonely, have low self-esteem, or are struggling with their mental health (these groups have been targeted for recruitment). Payment has been made in the form of drugs, money, stolen goods, and sexual services.”

From the survey

In Swedish criminal networks, research shows that it is largely young people aged 15–20 who recruit children aged 12–15 and exploit them as their own labour force to earn more money and advance their careers within the networks.⁶¹

55 Tollin et al. 2023

56 Europol (2025): From instigator to perpetrator: how violence-as-a-service operates

57 ‘The Norwegian Police (2025): Recruitment to Criminal Networks (in Norwegian only)

58 The Children’s Society 2018, Havard et al. 2021, Home Office 2018

59 Lidén and Salvesen 2015

60 Wagner 2017

61 Tollin et al. 2023

Fraud and money laundering

Various forms of fraud are also mentioned in the supplementary responses to the survey, e.g., that a young person's Vipps (a Norwegian mobile payment application) account is used to sell non-existent goods. Money laundering was not listed as an option in the survey, but according to the National Authority for Investigation and Prosecution of Economic and Environmental Crime (Økokrim), this is a growing form of exploitation.⁶² Children and youth as young as 15 are manipulated into acting as 'money mules' in exchange for money, goods or drugs. This occurs, for example, when they receive money that has been illegally obtained into their own account and then transfer it to accounts controlled by criminal actors. This is also a widespread phenomenon in the United Kingdom, where it is often referred to as *child financial exploitation*.⁶³ Large-scale fraud operations have also become a major source of income for criminal networks in Sweden. Young people may also be recruited for such operations, primarily related to telephone fraud.⁶⁴

62 National Authority for Investigation and Prosecution of Economic and Environmental Crime (Økokrim) 2023
63 The Children's Society 2022
64 Tollin et al. 2023

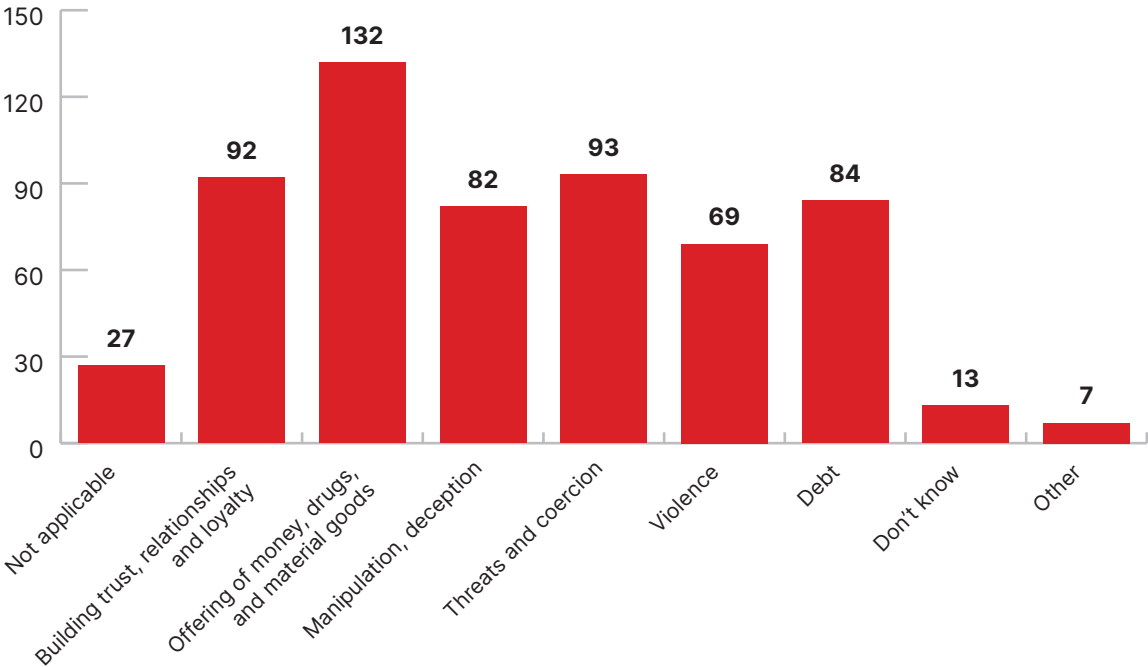
What recruitment and control methods are used?

The recruitment and control methods often used to exploit young people include what is often referred to as grooming, manipulation and deception, imposing debt, and the use of threats, coercion and violence. The methods used vary from one young person to another. All forms of exploitation measures are widespread, according to the respondents in the surveys (see Figure 5). From a rational perspective, it is in the interests of the organiser(s) to minimise the use of threats and violence. This is to reduce the chance that the young person will find the situation so difficult that they want to exit, possibly report it, or seek help.

“What we see is that both organised criminal groups and smaller, more disorganised groups use young people as drug runners, debt collectors, and sales agents. This is about access to money and, not least, status in marginalised circles. Some are adept at selecting vulnerable young people and giving them the status, ‘security’ and ‘honour’ that they themselves feel they lack in more traditional areas such as school, sports, home, etc. When someone can provide much of what they believe they are missing, it is a short step for some young people to commit crimes to establish a position for themselves.”

From the survey

Figure 5
What recruitment and control methods are used when young people are subjected to criminal exploitation?



190 respondents, multiple response options

Recruitment and control methods often occur in the following process:⁶⁵ First, the young person is *groomed* by establishing contact and offering them both material goods in the form of money, clothes, shoes, etc., and intangible benefits in the form of belonging, loyalty and status. They may also be *tested* by being asked to perform services or offered money for small assignments, such as storing drugs, transporting drugs, or storing or transporting money or weapons. Gradually, the

young person is often put in a situation where they incur *debt* and have to carry out (more) criminal acts to pay off the debt. *Violence and threats* occur if the young person resists or causes the organisers to lose money or status.

The challenge posed by criminal networks and gangs deliberately using young people in their activities is also highlighted in the Norwegian Police Threat Assessment:

65 The results of the survey are consistent with research, including Turner et al. 2019

Gangs attract young people, frequently those of deprived or minority backgrounds, by offering a sense of belonging, brotherhood, respect, protection and financial means normally beyond their reach. Chain recruitment of entire groups of friends and through family members appears common. There are also examples of threats and coercion being used. There is targeted recruitment of young people with a capacity for violence and their own distribution networks for drug dealing. Much of the recruitment activity takes place on social media. They take and distribute images designed to brag about the lifestyle and music videos that glorify gangster life and show guns, money, celebrities and girls. Recruitment activities generally take place in the gangs' core areas and local communities of the young people.

From the Police Threat Assessment 2021, p. 13

Grooming

The term grooming is often associated with sexual abuse and refers to the process whereby adults contact, befriend and establish an emotional connection with children in order to put themselves in a position where they can later abuse the child. The adult gains the child's trust by getting to know them and meeting their needs. Grooming can take place both through personal contact and via social media⁶⁶. Similar methods are also used to involve and exploit young people in crime.

In the survey, many respondents (69 per cent) were aware of young people who had been offered money, drugs and other material goods and/or had become involved in criminal environments through relationships and out of loyalty (48 per cent). Connection to the local community and loyalty to friends, as well as a desire for belonging and status, are important factors. For young people from families with limited financial resources, the prospect of earning money can also be enticing. Social media is used to promote a lifestyle characterised by money, designer clothes and luxury, as well as to normalise a criminal lifestyle.

“They condition young people to develop an unhealthy relationship with money, making it difficult for them to return to normality. They make sure they have cool clothes, that they always go out and eat at nice places, and that they have money to spend. Then it is not easy to go back to having nothing, at least if you are from the east side [of Oslo] and have limited resources. Especially when you know that with these guys, you get a new phone and become a cool guy with cool clothes. You have people backing you up if anyone messes with you. They create an image, which is essentially fiction. It makes you believe you are cool, like you are doing really well. Until it all comes crashing down.”

From an interview with a youth worker

“To prove loyalty to the group of friends, to gain a social position in the local community with greater prestige. More as part of the culture in the community than the use of force and social control.”

From the survey

With criminal exploitation, young people are most often groomed by people in their local community, or friends and acquaintances who are aware of their situation and “weak points”. This makes recruitment more effective than if it had been carried out by strangers. This form of grooming is therefore referred to as ‘speed grooming’:

«Speed grooming is embedded in a wider ‘hyper’ context of seeking fast money, quick wins, rapid 24/7 communication, and hyper-masculinity. Potential victims are often targeted by others in their friendship groups, or by friends of friends who are alert to individual vulnerabilities and aspirations and so can bombard victims with individualised coercive and persuasive messaging from the offset.»

Dando, 2020

Adults or older youths in criminal environments may approach children and young people at a tender age and involve them in various services or assignments, with a gradual progression from seemingly innocent services to serious criminal offences:

“The young person started by taking NOK 20 from someone standing outside the school and was to receive NOK 200 for storing it at home until the next day. After that, the situation escalated until the young person turned 16 and was caught with large amounts of cash that he had stored under his bed.”

From the survey

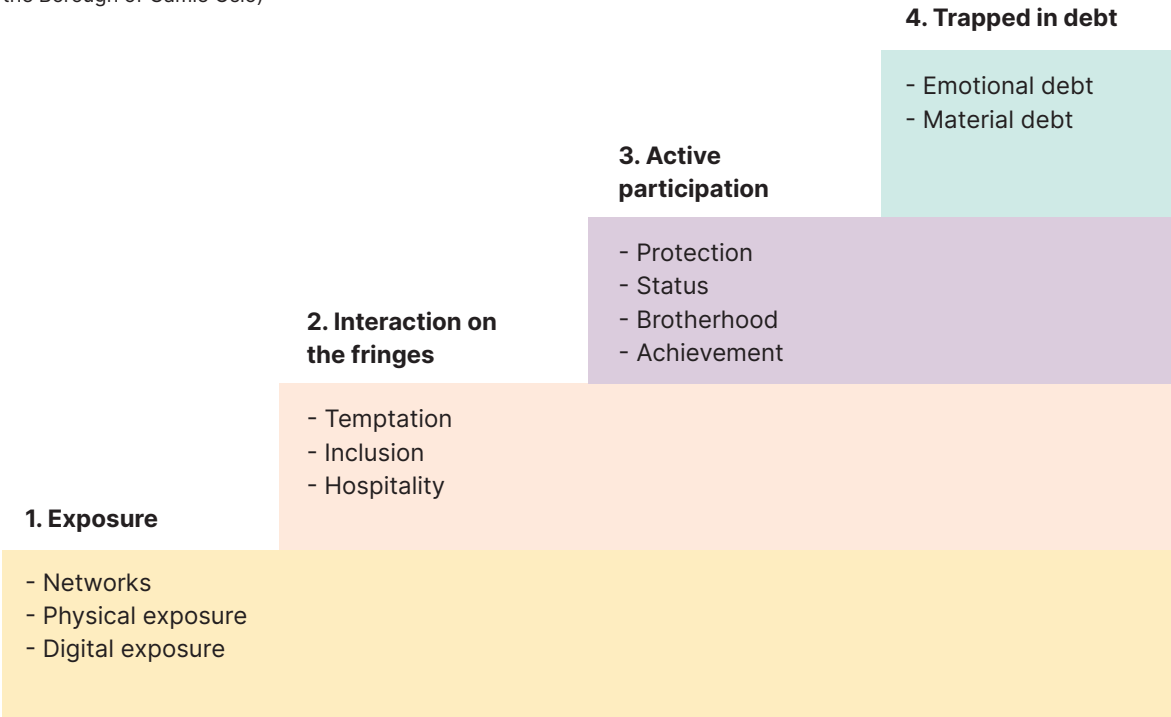
66 Europol (2024). Intelligence Notification - The recruitment of young perpetrators for criminal networks.

Steps to crime (Outreach Services in the Borough of Gamle Oslo)

Utekontakten (Outreach Services) in the Borough of Gamle Oslo has conducted an assessment of how young people are recruited into criminal environments in their borough.⁶⁷ Based on this assessment, they have developed a model demonstrating that exposure to criminal environments in the local community and on social media can act as a gateway to crime. Such exposure can arouse curiosity and lead to interaction with criminal environments. Young people may experience hospitality, inclusion and material temptations. This, in turn, can lead some young people to become actively involved

67 Jones et al. 2023 (Outreach Services (Utekontakten) in the Borough of Gamle Oslo)

in criminal environments. Young people may experience protection and status, and gain a sense of achievement and community, while at the same time being expected to show fierce loyalty, remain silent, and distance themselves from adults. Gradually, some may feel trapped in the situation and find it difficult to exit the criminal environment due to material/financial and emotional debt. Emotional debt refers to strong expectations and obligations to support the criminal environment. Young people with long-standing ties to criminal environments also describe how they can eventually become exhausted from trying to exit, losing hope that they can achieve anything other than street life, and becoming mentally ‘stuck’.



Model: Steps to crime (Outreach Services (Utekontakten) in the Borough of Gamle Oslo, Jones et al. 2023)

Although involvement in criminal environments usually develops gradually over time, recruitment can also occur rapidly. Swedish research shows that the recruitment of individual young people or groups of friends can, in some cases, occur in less than a day, and that young people can become involved in very serious crimes, such as shootings and homicide, immediately after joining a criminal network.⁶⁸

Debt and other traps

84 of the 190 respondents (44 per cent) were aware of cases where young people had been controlled and exploited through debt. Young people are often burdened with debt in ways that can be described as *manipulation and deception*, a means of control that 82 of the respondents (43 per cent) were aware had been used. Young people can be pushed into debt in various ways, such as being given a tab for more drugs than they can afford, by ‘losing’ money or drugs they are responsible for, either by being robbed or having them confiscated by the police.⁶⁹

“A young person ran up a large debt for a large quantity of drugs that they had never actually asked for (they were working as a small-time dealer to fund their own use). The debt had to be paid, otherwise the person would be subjected to serious violence.”

From the survey

68 Tollin et al. 2023
69 Outreach Section in Trondheim 2017

“They set a trap for them. For example, the young person is to deliver some goods. They have planned for someone to come and steal these goods, so that things go badly. Or the young person receives some goods, only to be robbed. Or the young person gives the goods to someone who does not pay, who, in turn, receives protection from the gang to avoid paying. They may also be put under time pressure, which means they are unable to pay on time. Then they incur debt. Once you are in debt, you cannot get out of it. You have to work to pay off your debt, and it never ends.”

From an interview with a youth worker

“In several cases I have worked on, relocation has become absolutely necessary due to the risk of violence, e.g., as a result of large debts. It is often the police who ‘discover’ that the young person is selling drugs. The police confiscate the drugs, and the young person is left with the debt.”

From the survey

Young people can also be pushed into debt for other reasons, sometimes because of actions they have taken or as a result of fictitious accusations.

“The young person was wrongly accused of something, then pressured to ‘make up for it’.”

From the survey

“Another example is that someone places a debt on you for something you have done. Suddenly, you owe 50,000, completely out of the blue. Then you have your gang, who help you out of the debt, either by ‘paying it off’ or using violence to stop it. Now you owe them. When they ask you for a favour, you cannot refuse. They got you out of that debt, helped you out of a tough situation, stood up for you, beat someone up for you. So you are in debt. A different kind of debt.”

From an interview with a youth worker

Young people who are seeking to disengage from crime may be subjected to manipulation in which, for example, loyalty and obligations to friends in the criminal environment are emphasised. Young people can also be caught in a trap where arrangements are made for them to be caught by the police and get a criminal record, which is then used to manipulate them into continuing their criminal activities.

“There may be runners who are very good at what they do and are starting to get ahead a little. They may start to earn a little money and want to exit. They might then be put in situations where the network wants them to be caught or get a criminal record. So that the boy or girl feels they have a criminal record and are now a bit ‘fucked’ anyway, so they might as well continue. That is the vibe they get from the guys: “Now you just have to go for it.” “Make the most of it while you are young. Save money.” “You will not get a job when you are older, so do it while you are young.” They use manipulative methods to keep them in.”

From an interview with a youth worker

Violence, threats and coercion

“The young people are recruited for small jobs, such as standing lookout during drug deliveries, and soon they gain trust and become runners. This gives them insight into an environment and relationships that pose a threat to their own freedom. If they want to break away from the gang, they are subjected to violence or other forms of social control.”

From the survey

Violence and threats are widespread in criminal environments in general. 93 of the 190 respondents (49 per cent) in the survey knew that young people subjected to criminal exploitation face threats and coercion, and 69 respondents (36 per cent) knew that they

were subjected to violence. Young people involved in crime face the risk of violence from outsiders, other criminal networks, as well as their own. Fear of reprisals prevents many from disengaging from criminal environments, seeking help or reporting crimes.

“The young person was offered to sell cocaine by another young person who was slightly older and had a reputation for being ‘dangerous’. The young person accepted the offer, but immediately regretted it. The young person was nevertheless forced to sell the drugs because this was now ‘his problem’. The young person gave the drugs to the police and used his own money to pay the dealer. He then announced that he wanted out. He was allowed to leave, on condition that he paid an additional NOK 3,000. The young person has not done so and is regularly contacted with threats of a beating unless he pays the ‘exit price’. The young person does not want to report the incidents for fear of reprisals.”

From the survey

Threats from criminal actors are often aimed at young people themselves, but can also target their families. Parents may also become involved when young people accumulate debts they cannot manage, leading to a difficult situation. On the one hand, parents may want to protect their child from violence and threats, but on the other hand, there is a risk that they will incur new debts and become involved in criminal activity.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Outreach Section in Trondheim 2017

“I am currently working with a young person who has been recruited into a gang in Oslo. He wants to leave but does not dare. He has to sell drugs; otherwise, they will get him or harm his family. He sells drugs but does not use them himself, and he has several convictions for violence. He describes violence as a high, a high needed to survive.”

From the survey

“Threats arise if young people want to leave these environments, and demands for compensation occur in the form of fictitious claims backed up by threats. In co-operation with the police, we do not recommend that such fictitious demands be met, as new demands may arise next week or next month if they pay. There has been talk of fictitious demands ranging from thirty thousand to several hundred thousand if they want to exit. This is very stressful for the family of the person concerned.”

From the survey

Who is behind the exploitation?

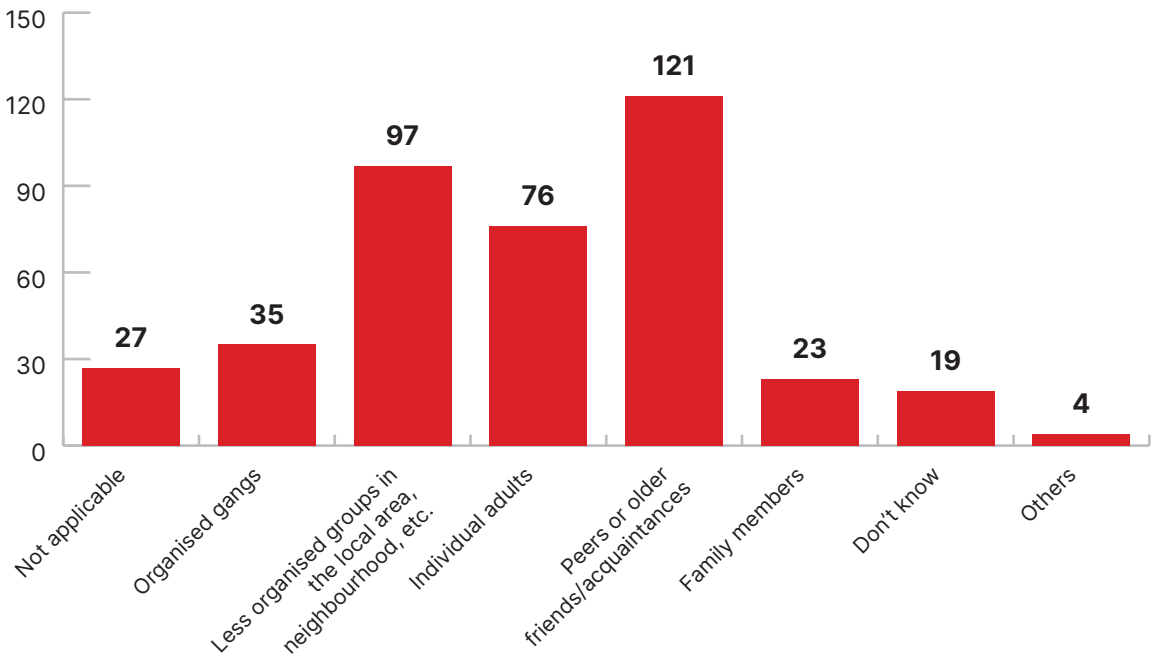
"The few young people who have admitted to selling 'a little' refuse to identify the organisers. In general, they say it is for personal use or that they want to earn a little money. A couple of girls have replied that we should not concern ourselves and that they are not doing anything illegal ..."

From the survey

Friends and acquaintances from the local community

It is not always easy to identify who is responsible for exploiting young people, as they are seldom willing or able to speak openly to adults who try to help them. Based on their knowledge of individual young people and youth environments, many respondents in the survey answered that the exploitation was carried out by peers or older friends and acquaintances (69 per cent), or by smaller, organised groups within the local community (51 per cent).

Figure 6
Who is behind the exploitation?



190 respondents, multiple response options

This must be seen in conjunction with the supplementary answers to Figure 4 (forms of exploitation), which describe how young people are also exploited to recruit, threaten and commit violence against others. As previously mentioned, Swedish research also shows that younger children and young people are usually recruited and exploited by older young people aged 15-20 (who in turn have been recruited and exploited by older people in criminal environments).⁷¹

Family members

To a much lesser extent, respondents were aware of instances where young people were exploited by family members (12 per cent). When young people are recruited by family members or friends, the line between voluntariness and coercion becomes especially blurred, making it difficult to sever loyalty ties through exit.

"There are quite fluid boundaries regarding recruitment and power/control. It is difficult to determine if young people view it that way, even if the adult world might see it as such. Example: If one brother asks another to deliver something to a friend, or a relative tells him about an easy way to earn good money, young people perceive this as positive. However, it can be difficult if the young person wants to exit, because, after all, it is a brother, and they may face a lot of grief... But is it exploitation? If the young person voluntarily participates in the same activities as their brother?"

From the survey

Organised criminal networks

The respondents were also aware that individual adults (40 per cent) and, to a certain extent, organised gangs (18 per cent) subjected young people to criminal exploitation. According to Swedish research, young people recruited mainly tend to have close social ties with older youths whom they 'work for', and although they may perceive themselves as part of a hierarchy, they generally lack insight into the higher ranks of the criminal organisation.⁷² Swedish criminal networks involving children and young people are described as loosely organised, yet simultaneously hierarchically controlled. They often comprise three or four age groups. The longer a network has been established in a particular place, the more age groups are established. At the top of the hierarchy are 'the elders' who oversee 'their juniors'. They, in turn, have their own 'juniors'. The networks are governed by loyalty upwards (towards the 'elders') and strict management and control downwards (towards their 'juniors').

71 Tollin et al. 2023

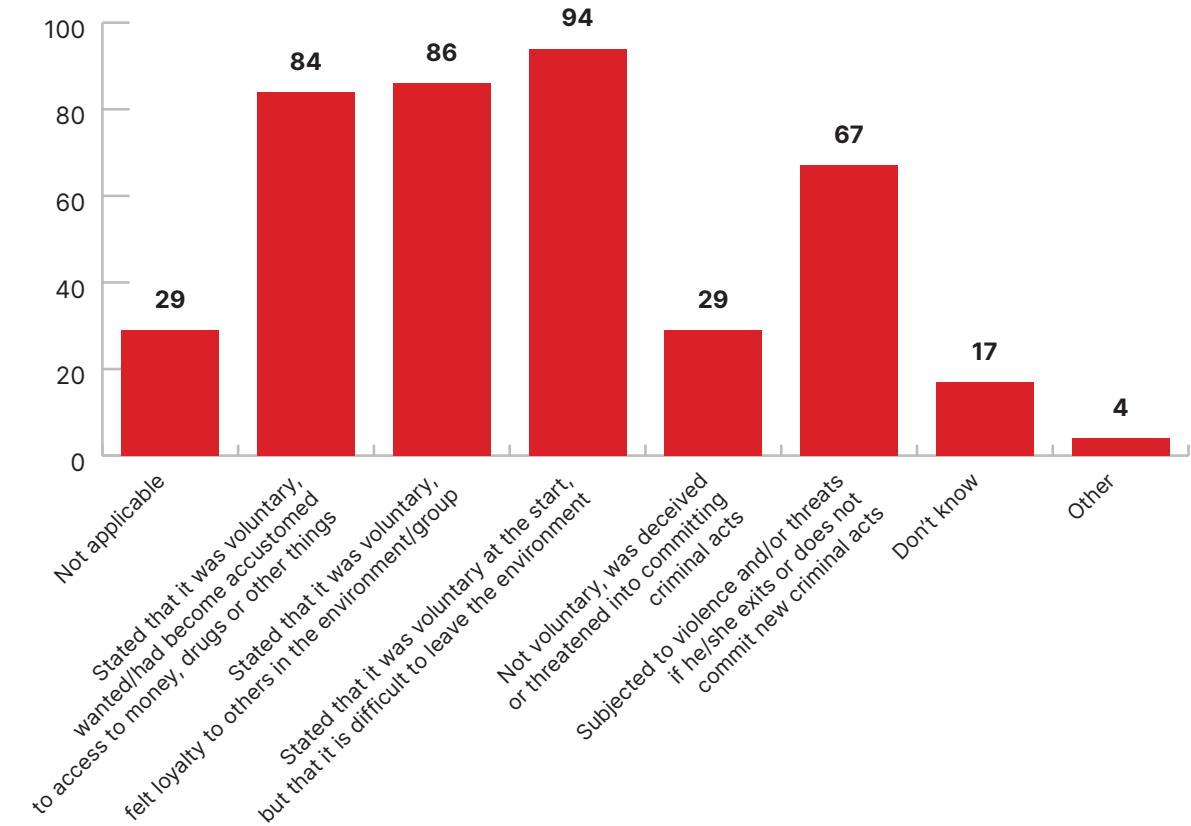
72 Tollin et al. 2023

Voluntary or coercion – how is the situation of young people perceived?

In the survey, the professionals were asked for their assessment of how the young people they knew experienced the situation in terms of voluntariness and coercion. Most respondents

reported that they experienced that the young people described the criminal activity as voluntary. Some perceive the situation as voluntary at the outset, but find it difficult to exit (49 percent), or participate voluntarily because they feel a sense of loyalty to others in the group (45 per cent), or because they wanted or had become accustomed to access to money, drugs or other material goods (44 per cent).

Figure 7
How do young people describe their own situation?



190 respondents, multiple response options

"I am aware of young people who commit crimes to get money, but do not perceive that they are unaware that it is a criminal act, or that an organiser is exploiting them. It is ostensibly a voluntary act."

From the survey

"No one is pressured by others to commit crimes, but it is perhaps a part of the local community, as young people do not see much else. Being a runner is not something you are pressured into in my area. Here, the younger ones ask to be runners for the older ones. Perhaps it is because they look up to them? In other areas, they may be pressured."

Input from young people

A relatively large number of respondents (35 per cent) were also aware of situations where young people were subjected to violence and threats if they wanted to exit or refrain from committing criminal acts, as described in the supplementary answers to Figure 5 (recruitment and control methods). A smaller proportion of respondents (15 per cent) stated that it was not voluntary at all, that the young person had been deceived or threatened into committing the criminal acts.

It is important to note that consent is irrelevant for the exploitation to be considered human trafficking when the person is under 18 years of age or when the consent is a result of violence, threats, abuse of a position of vulnerability or other improper conduct (see Chapter 2). Swedish research on children and young people in criminal networks also indicates that many young people lack understanding of what accepting an 'invitation' or 'offer' entails.⁷³ In other words, many are unaware that they will become subordinate to an 'elder' and lose their self-determination for a prolonged period.

73 Tollin et al. 2023



How can we prevent criminal exploitation of young people?

What are we trying to prevent – the crimes committed by young people, or their exploitation by other criminals? The answer, of course, is that it is crucial to prevent both types of crime and that they are largely interconnected. Young people who already commit criminal acts, especially together with others, are particularly sought-after recruits for more organised criminal networks.⁷⁴ Joining criminal networks often results in young people committing more and increasingly serious criminal acts, even independently.⁷⁵ By preventing young people from being recruited into gangs and criminal networks, we can prevent their exploitation and the restriction of their freedom of choice regarding the commission of crimes, as well as the spread of crime overall. Helping young people exit gangs and criminal networks (see Chapter 7) will also have a preventive effect, among other things, by limiting the recruitment of children in their early teens.⁷⁶

The professionals who contributed to the survey, interviews and workshop highlight several risk factors associated with young people and criminal exploitation: socio-economic factors (poor finances, overcrowded housing, large families and often single

parents), family members involved in crime, experiences of violence and trauma, poor academic performance, social difficulties, low impulse control, impaired cognitive abilities, and neurodevelopmental disorders (such as ADHD and autism spectrum disorders). There may also be risk factors related to the neighbourhood and local community, where children and young people are exposed to criminal environments.⁷⁷

There is a need for early intervention in kindergartens and schools, parental and family efforts, intervention in youth groups and local communities,⁷⁸ as well as various preventive measures for young people at the group and individual levels.⁷⁹ This is to prevent exclusion and reduce the risk of young people committing criminal offences in the first place and/or approaching criminal environments, as well as to reduce the risk of young people who are already involved in crime being subjected to exploitation and coercion.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Tollin et al. 2023

⁷⁵ Bjørge 2015, Tollin et al. 2023

⁷⁶ Older youths recruit younger ones to earn more money and raise their status/role within criminal networks (Tollin et al. 2023).

⁷⁷ Kalkan 2021, Wacquant 2008

⁷⁸ Norwegian Directorate of Health 2015

⁷⁹ Firmin 2020, Firmin et al. 2022

⁸⁰ Bjørge 2015, Carlsson 2005, Gerell et al. 2020, Lid et al. 2022, Runhovde and Skjevrak 2018

“We often find that it is young people who are already vulnerable who are ‘hand-picked’. Prevention must therefore take place on a societal basis. The focus must be on preventing young people from ending up in situations where they risk being exploited. This work must start as early as possible. Preferably, even before the child is born. Most of the young people we come into contact with have had a difficult childhood. This may involve financial difficulties, inadequate parenting skills, and other family challenges. They have often received follow-up from the child welfare services over a long period. It is important to work with the family and the adults in the child’s network. What happens in early childhood will often affect the teenage years. If we only take measures once adolescence has begun and problems have already arisen, we quickly fall behind, and the work becomes more like firefighting than prevention.”

From the survey

The respondents in the survey, the professionals we interviewed and the workshop participants are experienced prevention workers who had many suggestions on how to prevent children and young people from becoming involved in and/or exploited for crime, both at the community, group and individual levels. Table 1 at the end of this chapter provides an overview of all the recommendations related to preventive work.

Parental and family efforts

When children and young people struggle, it may be due to family stress. It is therefore important that parents are offered guidance and that families are assisted with various challenges related to finances, housing, health, and other matters. Regarding concerns related to high-risk youth groups and local communities, parent groups should be provided with information about substance abuse and crime among young people, what to look out for, and where to seek help.

Parents should also have access to specific information about how children and young people are recruited and exploited by criminal networks, what warning signs they should be aware of, how they can speak with their children about the issue, and who they can contact for help if they are concerned that their child is at risk of being recruited or exploited.

Information for parents: Recruitment to criminal networks

The Norwegian Police Authority website offers information for parents about the recruitment of children and young people into criminal networks.⁸¹ On the website, parents and other adults can learn about the warning signs to look out for.

81 The Norwegian Police (2025): Recruitment to Criminal Networks (in Norwegian only)

Recreational programmes, youth outreach work and job opportunities for young people

To prevent at-risk youth from becoming involved in criminal environments, it is important to offer them viable alternatives. Part of this involves fostering a sense of achievement and developing a sense of belonging and solidarity with peers and adults. Enhanced after-school activities and financial support for recreational activities are important. In addition to various activities that can contribute to a sense of achievement, several people highlight group discussions and thematic evening events as good tools for reflecting together with young people on, e.g., emotions, anger management, friendship, and other matters. This enables joint reflection and subsequent individual follow-up.

“Preventive measures should look at how they can give young people some of the same positive things they derive from being in a gang. A sense of belonging, solidarity, excitement, respect, income, hope for the future, and meaning can be highlighted as some of the positive aspects of being in a gang, at least in the beginning. If you are unable to offer this to young people in your local community, joining a gang will be a viable alternative for fulfilling these needs.”

From the survey

This is also important for young people on the fringes of criminal environments or who have already committed criminal acts. A break with positive role models and activities can shorten

the journey to criminal environments, which can provide a sense of achievement and community on their own terms.

“Young people who openly engage in crime must also have access to participate in other arenas (sports and culture) without being excluded due to substance abuse, as this will lead to further marginalisation and exclusion.”

From the survey

Many of the professionals emphasised youth outreach social work (youth outreach workers) and low-threshold measures for young people. This is also something young people themselves highlight: they want more presence from outreach workers and other safe adults.⁸²

“We need more outreach workers and regular fieldwork in all boroughs. Young people must feel safe speaking to adults (...). They need to know that it is not our job to judge them or make things more difficult for them. They need to know that we are always on their side. In practice, this means that we need to build trust among young people in prevention and support workers throughout the city, in all boroughs. Then we will be in a position to help those who are being exploited, and if we are out there among them, we can know when they are being exploited and be in a position to help them.”

From the survey

82 Jones et al. 2023, Lillestrøm Municipality 2023

In addition to having an overview of local youth environments and relationships with young people, it is important that outreach workers or others follow up on older youth and adults who sell drugs in the local community. Several respondents also emphasise that young people need opportunities to earn money legally, through summer and part-time jobs.

“Young people need opportunities to earn money legally, to pay off debts or establish some form of income.”

From the survey

Close to young people – targeted prevention of criminal exploitation

It is important to pay close attention to young people who are considered at particular risk of recruitment and exploitation by criminal environments. The professionals who contributed to the survey, interviews and workshop emphasise the importance of engaging in non-judgmental dialogue with young people about crime and criminal environments. Several emphasise the need to reach young people with information about recruitment and exploitation, ‘snitching’ and the like.⁸³ This can be done, e.g., in connection with teaching at lower and upper secondary schools, in various

83 Snitching: tattling/informing on someone. Children and young people often refrain from telling adults about serious incidents for fear of reprisals and because they believe adults will make things worse if they intervene. See *Er du snitch er du ferdig* [If you’re a snitch, you’re done] (University of South-Eastern Norway) and Skinnari et al. 2019

discussion or activity groups, or at thematic evening events for young people.

“We need to raise awareness of stories of exploitation among young people so they can better avoid falling into ‘involuntary’ exploitation situations. (...) The fear of contacting helpers and the possible negative consequences for young people that this may entail is a barrier to getting help at an early stage of exploitation. Reducing the fear of contacting helpers should be part of the prevention strategy.”

From the survey

Information for children and young people:⁸⁴

Ung.no (a Norwegian website providing official information for children and young people) offers information on how criminal gangs recruit youth through social media, and gives guidance to children and young people on what to look out for and what to do if someone asks them to commit a criminal act. The information has been developed in collaboration with the police.

In the United Kingdom, various actors have produced films and other material for use in educating young people about criminal exploitation.⁸⁵

84 [Ung.no/Krpos \(2025\): Kriminelle gjenger rekrutterer ungdom i sosiale medier](#) [Available in Norwegian only]

85 See, e.g., [Child Criminal Exploitation & Crime Prevention Educational Videos](#) (SocialWorkersToolBox.com), [Running the Lines](#) (Fearless.org) and [Save Me](#) (Safeguarding Enfield).

When working with young people who are especially at risk, it is important to be aware of both the positive and potentially negative effects of working at a group level. Thorough assessments must be made regarding, among other things, the composition of the group and which topics are best suited for one-on-one discussions with young people.

When it comes to individual follow-up of young people who are considered to be at risk of exploitation, many emphasise that mentors or social educators can play an important role. They can arrange and take part in enjoyable activities together with young people, help them find environments and activities where they excel, and support them with everyday tasks (e.g., waking up to go to school, looking for work, etc.), while also serving as positive role models. Young people at risk often need help completing their education or finding work.⁸⁶ It may be necessary to work comprehensively with the entire family on finances, housing, school, health, relationships, friends, environment, extended family, and relatives, etc. Parental guidance is important, but so is practical, concrete assistance. When a comprehensive programme is offered to young people, with shared goals set together with the young person and their family, and when the young person is surrounded by positive activities, communities, and adults, they become less vulnerable and less susceptible to recruitment.

86 Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) 2013

Close inter-agency co-operation

“We must focus on exploitation in our work with young people, shifting away from the role of perpetrator and the use of criminal proceedings. This is the starting point for slowing or stopping ongoing exploitation. Efforts should be directed towards fostering this understanding across government agencies.”

From the survey

Close and effective inter-agency co-operation is important in local prevention work, both at an overall system level and in individual cases. A prerequisite for effective inter-agency preventive work is that all relevant bodies have knowledge of exploitation and a common understanding of how it affects youth and crime prevention efforts. The various bodies are aware of different circumstances and have access to different information. They need to engage with one another to develop an understanding of the ‘24-hour youth’ and a shared view of concerns, needs, and opportunities.⁸⁷

87 The 24-hour youth: Young people’s lives across different arenas, such as school, leisure time (organised and unorganised), friends, and family.

“We need closer co-operation at the grassroots level, i.e., regular meetings between all prevention workers, youth outreach workers and preventive police – not just at the management level, but with everyone. Local crime prevention coordinators serve as strong links between the police and youth outreach workers. Good network meetings in the areas involving everyone from the police to youth club leaders, with trust and a good flow of information both to and from the police, which is always handled with discretion and flexibility and in the best interests of young people.”

From the survey

To achieve this, close and stable relationships between social workers, preventive police and other relevant bodies are necessary. It is easy to make contact when concerns arise about a young person or a youth group if you have the names and telephone numbers of partners and the person in question is a familiar face. Several respondents point out that various prevention efforts are often organised as projects of varying duration, which makes it challenging to create sufficient continuity in the prevention work.



Prevention of recruitment and criminal exploitation
– overview of advice and recommendations

Table 1 – Prevention of recruitment and criminal exploitation

General prevention measures – local community and family	Inter-agency and interdisciplinary co-operation	Group settings	Individual measures
<p>Overview and presence in the local community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach social work: adults who are out in the local community, have an overview of youth groups and relationships with young people • Follow-up of older youths and adults who sell drugs in the local community • Breaking up destructive environments and groups <p>Arenas for achievement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen schools in their work with children and young people facing challenges – homework assistance, individual instruction, use of alternative learning arenas • Summer and part-time jobs for young people • Strengthened activity programmes and financial support for recreational activities <p>Parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information for parents about what to look out for, where to get help, who to contact, etc. (at parent-teacher meetings, on social media, individually) • Parental guidance, courses, etc. • Assist the family based on their needs, e.g., finances, housing, school, health, friends and environment, relatives, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased knowledge and focus on the buying/ selling of drugs, debt and exploitation among parents/guardians, young people, schools, youth clubs, the child welfare services, the police and other relevant bodies (common understanding of concerns, needs and opportunities) • Close and stable relationships between social workers, preventive police and other partners, names and telephone numbers of contact persons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities that can contribute to a sense of achievement and interests in positive recreational activities • Group discussions and thematic evening events (e.g., emotions, anger management, friendship, etc.) – joint reflection and subsequent individual follow-up • Training and awareness-raising about grooming, recruitment and exploitation (at school or in recreational settings) • Consider the composition of groups, include a variety of young people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify environments and activities where they excel. Show trust and give responsibility • Mentor/social educator who actively supports young people and serves as a positive role model • Help the young person with everyday tasks: e.g., waking them up to go to school, helping them look for work and other practical matters • Help the young person complete their education or enter the labour market • Work comprehensively with the family, create common goals and a sense of community together with the young person and their family • Stay close to and surround the young person with positive activities and adults, so that they become less susceptible to recruitment

Identifying exploitation

“They need someone to talk to and seek help from who does not judge, and who does not immediately ask questions about what happened and why they did it, etc., but instead starts by building a relationship and establishing good contact with the young people. Just approach young people with respect and avoid being judgmental.”

Input from young people

To identify criminal exploitation of young people, adults need knowledge about the phenomenon so they can recognise the traits of exploited young people and engage with them in a way that builds trust. Table 2 on page 60 provides an overview of risk factors and indicators, and Table 3 on page 64 provides advice on how to speak with young people about their situation and possible exploitation.

“Culturally sensitive measures and approaches are very important. Understand the phenomenon and the environment. Speak with young people, build relationships and dare to ask questions. This is often a taboo subject because helpers often feel powerless and unable to help with issues such as drug debts.”

From the survey

Risk factors and indicators

When addressing criminal exploitation, special attention should be given to whether the young person:⁸⁸

- lies or appears to be hiding things from adults
- begins hanging out with new, older youth or adults
- has new clothes, phones or other expensive items without a natural explanation (or which are claimed to be ‘gifts’)
- stops asking for money, or appears to have more money of their own
- starts having two mobile phones
- sends or receives suspiciously large amounts of money via mobile apps or bank accounts (an unusually high number of transactions or unusually large sums of money)
- expresses themselves differently, using new expressions/slang or opinions (e.g., about crime)
- exhibits more aggressive/violent behaviour, and/or appears more nervous and withdrawn
- is often or for long periods absent from school, home or institution, is out late or all night, stays out a lot
- travels to, stays in or is found in places they have no natural connection to
- stores drugs, money or weapons, e.g., in new or unfamiliar bags or backpacks at home
- has injuries that may be due to violence, but does not want to talk about it or seek medical help

⁸⁸ ‘Red flags’ based on several indicator lists from [The Swedish Police Authority](#), [The Metropolitan Police](#), [The Children’s Society](#), [The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#), and [Missing People](#).

However, it can be difficult to distinguish between signs that at-risk young people are using drugs, committing criminal acts independently or with other young people, or have been recruited and exploited by criminal environments. When are criminal activities self-determined, and when are young people subject to control, pressure and coercion? The signs may be similar, and it is usually necessary to thoroughly assess the situation in order to clarify, if possible, the cause of the worrying signs.

We have compiled an overview of risk factors and indicators related to criminal exploitation of young people, based on input from experienced professionals who participated in a workshop on the topic (see Table 2). The traits are organised and presented, ranging from general risk factors and indicators to increasingly specific and concerning ones. Some risk factors are related to the young person's individual circumstances or family situation, while others are related to the local community. Changes in young people's networks and behaviour, certain external traits and the use of mobile phones and/or social media may be signs that young people are involved in something concerning. This does not necessarily suggest criminal activity, but may, e.g., involve the sale or exchange of sexual services. Furthermore, there are several indicators that may suggest that the young person is involved in substance abuse and/or crime, regardless of whether they are being exploited. Finally, there is an overview of traits that *may* be more specifically related to exploitation.

Not all traits in our overview are direct signs of exploitation. We have chosen to include the more general indicators and traits of involvement in substance abuse and crime because these are interrelated phenomena. We hope that this overview will help identify various concerning signs in context and, together with knowledge of the individual young person, help address concerns and lay the foundation for a thorough assessment of the young person's situation.

It is important to emphasise that this is not a checklist. Some young people may show several of these signs without being exploited, and others may be exploited even if they show no visible signs. It will be in the interests of the exploiter or criminal networks if the young person can, as far as possible, fly under the radar of the police, the child welfare services, and other adult helpers. Young people who are not a cause for concern among adults, and who are not considered vulnerable, may therefore also be sought-after for recruitment and exploitation.



Table 2 – Criminal exploitation of young people: Risk factors and indicators

Risk factors/ traits of at-risk persons	Local community	Changes in young people’s networks and behaviour	External traits	Use of mobile phones and social media	Drugs and crime	Signs of exploitation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Socio-economic factors: families in financial crisis, large families, overcrowded housing, single-parent households• Family members in prison or involved in crime• Previously subjected to violence, trauma• Contact with the child welfare services• Impaired cognitive abilities• ADHD, Tourette’s syndrome, autism• Poor academic performance• Social difficulties• Low impulse control, potential/ capacity for violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visible crime, e.g., drug dealing in the local community• New people in the local community, leading to changes in dynamics and behaviour among children and young people• Gatherings and meeting places, such as cafés, local shops, or other locations with high traffic of children and young people• Children and young people seen with adults or older youth with expensive cars• Observations of adults or older youth buying and distributing ice cream, kebabs, or similar items to children and young people in the local community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Changes in circle of friends at school and/or in leisure time, replacing previous positive networks with new connections• Changes in status within the circle of friends, new alliances• Discontinuing recreational activities because they are excluded or ‘don’t have time’, and becoming evasive when asked about it• Increased school absenteeism, leaving class early, and receiving poorer grades• Becoming more withdrawn, more self-assured or more irritable, aggressive• Change in time spent out of the home: they may be out early in the morning or late at night• Absent from home/institution for one or more nights• Refusing to answer or giving evasive replies to common questions such as “where are you going?”, “where have you been?” etc.• Becoming dismissive of adults with whom they previously had a good relationship: no longer wanting contact, shifting from open dialogue to no longer saying anything, new negative descriptions of adult helpers (e.g., “you are the child welfare services”, as an accusation)• Previously job seeking, but things have changed (“it’s fine”, “don’t need it”, “not important”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New expensive designer clothes, shoes, watches, jewellery, and other items that they cannot really afford• Has a lot of money, eats out a lot• Driven to or from school or work in expensive cars• Drives expensive, borrowed cars• Increased consumption of perfume, expensive and frequent visits to the barber and other wellness services that signal money and status	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Has more than one mobile phone• Receives many ‘important’ phone calls• Uses encrypted messaging apps such as Signal and Telegram• Has multiple accounts on various apps, which are used to arrange purchases/sales and possibly transfer money• Observation of an unusual amount of money being transferred/ received	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Has multiple phones, including a simple mobile phone with a prepaid SIM card and no data, which cannot be easily traced (e.g., one number for selling large quantities of illegal drugs and one number for orders via apps or social media)• Speaks in ‘code’ with other young people and/ or on the phone• Tries to hide things, knows what to say to adults so that everything seems fine• No registered income, but does not seek work or social assistance• Changes in hygiene: either visibly poorer hygiene or increased use of perfume to disguise smells• Appears intoxicated and/ or is with people who are intoxicated• Suddenly good at measuring units (maths)• Wants information about topics related to crime, punishment, etc.• Carries knives and weapons• Increased number of incidents reported to the police	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Isolated from friends, only spends time with the person(s) who is/are exploiting them, has little time for others because they always have to be available• Exhibits strong reactions after messages or phone calls, becomes angry, irritated or afraid• In conversations or when the young person is busy with other activities: receives phone calls or messages and suddenly has to leave• Older youth or adults interrupt conversations/ contact between the young person and adult helpers/professionals• Considerable age difference and/or power imbalance between the young person and friends/partner• Feared by other young people• The young person has been filmed in vulnerable situations• Repeated applications for social assistance may be a sign of high debt• On the move, travelling to commit crimes in other cities• Suspicion of exchanging sexual services for drugs or money• Tells or shows signs that they are under threats, e.g., that they have no choice but to carry out a task, that something will happen if they back out, etc.• Shows signs of having been subjected to physical or sexual violence

How to speak with young people about crime and exploitation?

“Young people say that they need to be approached with understanding. They know they have messed up, but they do not need to be scolded once they have dared to speak about what is happening to them and in their environment. They need support with what is happening now and in the future, and they need us to be adults who can offer solutions. Young people also say: ‘But sometimes I also need to be told off.’”

Input from young people

Young people subjected to criminal exploitation may be reluctant to talk about this for several reasons. This may be because they do not see themselves as exploited and/or feel loyalty to the environment, or because they fear reprisals. They may also fear the consequences of disclosing criminal acts they have committed, even if these were not necessarily voluntary. Youth workers and prevention workers have good communication skills. To identify potential exploitation, it is particularly important to build trust and approach young people in a safe, non-judgmental manner. Adults should be honest with young people and avoid making promises they cannot keep, while also striving to build trust that a way out is possible.

“There needs to be an anonymous place where young people can go and talk openly about their situation without any consequences.”

From the survey

“There is a need for the police and public services to discuss how best to help young people in such situations. Young people refrain from reporting to the police for fear of repercussions. This must be resolved wisely and perhaps not always ‘by the book’.”

From the survey

In Table 3, we have compiled advice from experienced professionals on how to identify cases of criminal exploitation of young people. As in all other youth work, it is important to have a good relationship as a foundation. The professionals who participated in the survey and our workshop on criminal exploitation of young people also shared their experiences with relationship building. Among other things, they emphasised the importance of taking the time to get to know the young person, being open and showing care in various ways. This could include organising activities, summer jobs or anything else that young people experience as positive. Such practical assistance makes it easier to get to know each other and ‘defuse’ the contact, making it easier to follow up on other issues as well. Show that you are familiar with the area and the environment young people are part of, and that you have knowledge and understanding of the challenges they face. It is necessary to dare to stand firm in challenging relationships and be able to cope with rejection. It is also important to be there when young people need you, and preferably not to tell them that you are finishing work and ask them to come back tomorrow. Instead, stay back for half an hour, or reply to messages in the evening and on weekends, if possible. It is also recommended that you speak up for and vouch for other adults: it is important to share responsibility and for

several people to have a relationship with the young person. Young people need adults who are confident in their role and the choices they make, who say what they are going to do, and keep their promises.

The advice summarised in Table 3 covers how to create a good setting for the conversation, how to speak with young people about concerns

regarding substance abuse and crime, and how to talk specifically about criminal exploitation. This is not a recipe for conducting such conversations, but rather suggestions and advice that may be inspiring and useful. How to proceed in a specific case depends, among other things, on your relationship with the young person and the seriousness and urgency of the concern.



Table 3 – Identifying criminal exploitation of young people

General framework for the conversation	Talking about drugs and crime	Talking about exploitation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider whether you personally have the relationship and competence/experience to conduct the conversation, or whether it would be wise to use other trusted individuals who know the young person well. If appropriate, those involved can meet together or in three-way conversations. Sometimes, it is easier to open up to someone they do not know because they might be afraid of disappointing those they know well.• Hold the conversation in a place and at a time that the young person feels comfortable with. If suitable, you can offer to have the discussion outside the borough, municipality, or city limits, or at another location the young person prefers. Sometimes, a car trip or preparing a meal together can be a good starting point.• Have the conversation when the young person is calm and ‘available’, and not too stressed or intoxicated.• Consider your own safety and what increases the young person’s sense of security. Be aware of where you are sitting, your body language, and so on. Some people do not like direct eye contact, i.e., ‘locking eyes’.• It is important to inform the young person and be clear about the duty of confidentiality, duty of disclosure and duty to avert a criminal offence, and about what is going to happen.• Encourage the young person to consent to information sharing and co-operation: The young person has the right to be heard about what information should be shared with whom, but this decision must be based on what is necessary to protect the young person in a responsible and appropriate manner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be honest with the young person about your concerns. How can you work together on this?• Adults must assess and prioritise, and avoid taking drastic measures when the young person shares experiences that border on crime and less serious offences, such as smoking cannabis. It is important that the young person chooses to share, and that the adult is in a position to help when the young person shows trust and shares.• Avoid approaching the young person with a moralising, condemning attitude; instead, set boundaries and tell them what you can and cannot accept, and why. Reflect on these frameworks/boundaries with the young person: e.g., “you cannot be intoxicated in meetings”, “you cannot carry a knife”, “you cannot smoke when we are together”.• Identify the reasons why the young person uses drugs and/or is involved in crime, and show that you understand the role this plays in their lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Depending on the severity and relationship: Consider discussing or informing the child welfare services <i>before</i> the conversation if you have a gut feeling or information that a young person is being exploited, in case there is a risk that the young person will run away and/or there is a need for urgent measures.• It is not desirable to have friends/acquaintances present during the conversation, as they may have different roles and be in an asymmetrical power relationship.• Look for windows of opportunity: Sometimes it is easier to identify opportunities, such as after violent incidents or other events.• Talk to the young person about both the positive and negative aspects of their situation, about who they are in relation to others, and about what friendship entails and does not entail.• Give examples, show that you know this happens: “I know several young people who have experienced...”. It is important that we dare to point out what we see. Be curious, but also direct. Young people do not necessarily express fear and anxiety, even when describing serious incidents. Use dilemmas: “What advice would you give to a friend who was facing this dilemma?”• Avoid words such as ‘victim’, ‘vulnerable’, and ‘human trafficking’. The young person may not necessarily identify with words such as ‘exploited’ or ‘recruited’; they may feel that they are committing crimes with friends and benefiting from it.• Depending on the situation and the degree of concern, ask directly whether the young person is under pressure, has debt, is receiving threats of reprisals, etc., or open the conversation and revisit it later.• Confirm that you understand the young person is in a vulnerable position and that it is difficult to discuss.• Be patient with what the young person tells you, take them seriously, and act quickly if they ask for help.

Even if the conversation is conducted properly, it is not certain that concerns about the young person being exploited will be confirmed or refuted. This does not mean that you have failed; you may still have initiated important awareness-raising processes that may encourage the

young person to talk at a later date. To identify exploitation, it will often be necessary to have several conversations, conduct other assessments of youth groups or networks, and possibly involve police investigations.

“Adults must be present and should follow up on discussions, ideally having multiple conversations each month. Adults must also show that they can cope with hearing whatever the young person has to say, and be clear and consistent in their role, so that the young person knows what kind of adult is there to help them. This helps build trust, so that I dare to be honest.”

Input from young people



How can we support young people subjected to exploitation?

The type of support a young person needs to exit an exploitative situation depends, among other things, on the recruitment and control methods to which the young person has been subjected. It is important to carry out a thorough assessment and safety evaluation.⁸⁹ There are a number of different measures that can be taken for young people who commit repeat offences,⁹⁰ who are involved in youth gangs or criminal networks,⁹¹ and who are therefore at risk of criminal exploitation. Young people and the adults around them will not always agree on what measures should be taken. It is a complex calculation that must be made when weighing considerations of participation and co-determination against considerations of protection and safety, as well as criminal law considerations.⁹² The rights and best interests of the child shall be given primary consideration.

In this chapter, we share experience-based advice from professionals who contributed to the survey, interviews and workshop on criminal exploitation of young people. The advice concerns assessment and motivational work,

follow-up of family and friends, interdisciplinary and inter-agency co-operation,⁹³ safety measures and close follow-up over time.⁹⁴ The focus is on overall, comprehensive support, not on criminal proceedings, administrative procedures in the child welfare services, or specific treatment measures. Finally, the advice is summarised in Table 4.

Assessment, information and motivation

To implement appropriate measures, it is necessary to thoroughly assess the young person's resources, challenges, needs, environment/network, and circumstances directly related to the situation of exploitation. The young person does not necessarily have an overview of or knowledge about the network's or the organiser's potential for violence. If necessary, assistance should therefore be sought from the police in conducting a safety assessment.

It is important to inform the young person and be clear about the duty of confidentiality, duty of disclosure and duty to avert a criminal offence (against the young person). To maintain trust in the relationship, the young person should,

89 National Board of Health and Welfare (Sweden) 2020
90 National Board of Health and Welfare (Sweden) 2021, Aase et al. 2020
91 Bogestam and Patel 2016, Forkby et al. 2019, Hedlund 2021, Hedlund 2023, Larsson 2023, Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services (SBU) 2023
92 National Board of Health and Welfare (Sweden) 2021, Aase et al. 2020

93 Procedures and guidelines: see Bufdir 2021, Bufdir 2022, Bufdir and the National Police Directorate 2020
94 Ytreland et al. 2022

as far as possible, be informed of what is going to happen. For the same reason, the young person and parents should be encouraged to consent to the disclosure of information and co-operation: The young person has the right to be heard about what information should be shared with whom, but this decision must be based on what is necessary to protect the young person in a responsible and appropriate manner. It can be explained to the young person and their parents that disclosing information is important to ensure proper support and to minimise the need for them to repeat their story to different bodies. The police and the child welfare services should, as far as possible, be made less intimidating: it is both acceptable and often necessary to seek help from these bodies.

Adult helpers can set certain requirements, but it is important that the young person is also involved in the change process and takes ‘ownership’ of the solution. You can reflect together with the young person: What do you think about breaking away from your environment or the organisers? What will happen? What do you need, what are you prepared to do (e.g., give up friends/ environment), and what does it take to create hope for the future? What works for you?

Young people often look to adults to see if they can do something about the situation they are in. If you cannot do anything about the most difficult issues, such as debt and threats of reprisals, you may be able to help with some of the things that are important to the young person here and now. Such assistance, along with adults’ understanding and care, encourages openness.

Support for family and friends

Family and friends are deeply affected when young people are in exploitative situations, and it is important that relatives and friends receive support.⁹⁵ Find out whether friends or family may be at risk of reprisals when the young person disengages or is removed from the criminal network. Family and friends should have access to contact persons at the police and the child welfare services who can provide information and support.

Some young people who have been subjected to criminal exploitation may continue living with their families, some may need to move out on their own, some may be moved to an institution by the child welfare services, and in some cases, the whole family should be offered the opportunity to relocate.⁹⁶ This depends, among other things, on the young person’s challenges, their willingness and ability to break away from the criminal environment, the family’s situation and the threat posed by the organiser or network. In any case, support to both the young person and the family is necessary.

⁹⁵ Hunter et al. 2019, Maxwell 2022
⁹⁶ Wroe 2023

“In some cases, the young person should move out of their home and will then require comprehensive support services in their new accommodation. When young people are to continue living at home, the whole family must be involved: how can parents and other networks support the young person’s request for help? Some families should be given the chance to relocate, but the measures must also be implemented in the new area to prevent the same issues from recurring in the new borough or municipality. Initially, people whom the young person and their family trust and who have the capacity for frequent contact and support should be involved. Such assistance can subsequently be scaled back when the young person and/or family feel(s) safe enough to do so. Most young people face complex challenges, so the measures taken for each individual must involve different competencies and agencies. The parents’ challenges must also be seen in context, and they should also be connected to proper support: follow-up from mental health services, social services and the housing office.”

From the survey

Even when the young person moves out of the family home, it is important to provide comprehensive services for the family, including parental guidance, housing, and financial matters. This is particularly important if the young person has siblings who may also be at risk of being recruited and exploited.

Interdisciplinary and inter-agency co-operation

It is important to have a clear division of roles and responsibilities among the various bodies involved when a young person is subjected to criminal exploitation. There are often many adult helpers, and everyone needs to understand their roles and responsibilities. To understand how to respond in an interdisciplinary and inter-agency manner during urgent and serious cases, contingency plans or action cards should be prepared.

Meetings between young people and support services should be well prepared in advance. As far as possible, the various bodies and the young person should clarify what they can agree on. This way, it is possible to identify what the young person needs to clarify in the meeting and help them take ownership of their own change and life management. ‘Gaps’ in assistance or co-operation are harmful when relocating between municipalities or boroughs. It is beneficial to have a trusted person and/or coordinator who can follow the young person in such cases, to ensure that there are no ‘slips’ and that the young person experiences as much continuity as possible.

Safety measures

Regarding minors and their interventions from the child welfare services, everything from support measures to compulsory placements may be relevant. If it is likely that the child is being exploited for human trafficking and it is necessary for the child’s safety, it may be appropriate to decide to place the child in an institution in accordance with Section 4-5

(emergency order for placement) or Section 6-6 of the Norwegian Child Welfare Act.⁹⁷ In such placements, it is possible to implement strict security measures to prevent contact with organisers or networks; however, the measures are not to be more intrusive than is necessary to protect the child.

In any case, a safety/contingency plan should be prepared for various scenarios related to threats, based on a comprehensive assessment of the young person's situation, and any safety assessment related to the local community, network and organiser/exploiter(s). Relevant measures may include contacting safe adults, the Safety Programme,⁹⁸ a contact ban, or relocation, possibly with a blocked address.

Advice and guidance on human trafficking:
For advice and guidance related to the support services, please contact the National Guidance Unit for Cases of Trafficking in Children (Bufdir).
Tel.: 466 15 000,
e-mail: menneskehandel@bufdir.no

⁹⁷ [The Norwegian Child Welfare Act, Section 4-5. Emergency order for placement of a child in an institution when there is a risk of human trafficking](#), and [Section 6-6. Order for placement of a child in an institution when there is a risk of human trafficking](#)

⁹⁸ [The Safety Programme](#) is a model for systematic follow-up of young victims of crime, based on SaLTo and the SLT co-operation in Oslo, Bærum and Asker.

Long-term support

It is important to adopt an urgent, short-term and long-term perspective, even though the situation and needs are subject to change. Young people must receive close, coordinated long-term support services, as well as assistance for a safe transition to adulthood, not just until 'the situation is sorted'. This involves accessibility and flexibility, and always giving young people new chances if things go awry. However, it also involves assessing whether the programme is meeting the young person's needs or if adjustments are necessary. Services should be youth-friendly, which means not always meeting in an office or clinic setting, but also in informal arenas where participants can 'lower their shoulders', for simple conversations with a safe adult. The young person will benefit from having a mentor, an available companion/confidant who is with them every step of the way, regardless of any relocations. The young person and mentor should share interests and participate in joint activities to help develop the young person's resources unrelated to crime or street culture.

"Young people who have already been recruited need to meet people who have been there and come out of it. They need to see role models who have made it, who may have been in tough environments when they were younger, but found a different path. They need to receive more follow-up."

From an interview with a youth worker

Many of these young people need support to complete their education (at school or in an alternative learning environment) and to

obtain and keep a job. The job should align with their interests, and the workplace must have a considerable understanding of these young people. Follow-up of both the young person and the employer may be necessary. The young person is also likely to need healthcare, including physical, mental, and possibly sexual health services, as well as dental health.

The young person will also need legal assistance and legal counsel in connection with any criminal proceedings, either as a victim or perpetrator. The young person may require financial counselling and potentially assistance in establishing debt settlement arrangements or repayment plans, as well as help with setting up a bankID (personal electronic identification system in Norway), obtaining a passport, and an ID card, along with support in other matters necessary for lawful and transparent finances.

Missing measures?

Several of the professionals who participated in the survey have found that there are gaps in the system for some young people and young adults who have experienced violence and trauma, mental health challenges, substance abuse and/or have lost confidence in the support services. This particularly applies to young people who have aged out of the child welfare system and fall through the cracks. In some contexts, they are rejected due to substance abuse; they may also be considered too young for long-term inpatient treatment, and it might not be beneficial to place them on a District Psychiatric Centre inpatient ward. Few institutions are available, and those that exist often have waiting lists of several months. This means several additional months of re-traumatisation, addiction, and abuse. Often,

young people have given up or turned to an even harsher criminal path or substance addiction, and are no longer prepared for treatment. Many need care, nurturing, food and rest to rebuild over time. There is a call for measures that are available outside 'normal' working hours. Many young people are struggling in the evening/night, but there are currently few available measures.

"We need safe inpatient wards that can accommodate young victims of crime and have places ready during the day. These young people are traumatised, often have high levels of post-traumatic stress, sleep difficulties, aggression problems, anxiety, substance abuse problems, and few or no support persons other than outreach workers. There is a need for an inpatient programme that offers both short-term and long-term treatment, which can keep these young people safe and help them move forward. Many of them need time and support to get through and begin to believe in a life without substance abuse or crime. We often have nowhere to send them!"

From the survey

"I hope that in the future we receive more funding and attention for this group, and a safe 'home' they can turn to once they finally manage to escape crime, abuse, and drugs! All too often, young people are left broken by life and with nowhere to turn for help. We can approach them as preventers and help them along the way, but they need more good places to go."

From the survey

Debt and the threat of reprisals often hinder young people from leaving criminal networks, and are perhaps the most challenging issues for support services to handle. One survey respondent highlights alternative loan schemes for young people with street debt as a potential way for them to break free from exploitative dependencies or networks.

“How do you deal with illicit debts? To pay or not to pay? If the young person pays, he suddenly becomes creditworthy again in the environment, and the way back is thereby shorter. If he does not pay, he will often face threats against himself and his family. I think it is a difficult issue, especially when young people fear for their lives and health. I believe that, as a support service, we lack sufficient measures to address these issues, and that young people often have to face these problems alone. These are often young people who do not trust the system or the police, and the phrase ‘the police are informed of the situation and are assessing measures on an ongoing basis’ does not build trust.”

From the survey


**Support for young people
subjected to criminal
exploitation – overview of advice
and recommendations**

In Table 4 on page 64, we have summarised the professionals’ advice on what is important to consider and what kind of assistance might be useful for young people subjected to criminal exploitation. The measures taken must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.



Table 4: Young people subjected to criminal exploitation – assistance and support

Assessment, information and motivation	Assessment of measures	Environment, friends and family	Interdisciplinary and inter-agency co-operation	Possible safety measures	Long-term follow-up
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is important to inform the young person and be clear about the duty of confidentiality, duty of disclosure and duty to avert a criminal offence (against the young person or others), and about what is going to happen.• Encourage the young person and parents to consent to information sharing and co-operation. What information should be shared, and with whom, must be based on what is necessary to protect the young person in a responsible and appropriate manner.• Conduct a thorough assessment of the young person's resources, challenges and needs, and conditions related to the exploitation situation. If necessary, the police should carry out a safety assessment.• Reflect with the young person to encourage their involvement in the change process: What do you think about breaking away from your environment/organiser? What will happen? What do you need and what are you prepared to do (e.g., give up friends/environment)? What works for you?• Assist with what is important to the young person in the here and now.	<p>When assessing which measures to implement, various, perhaps conflicting, considerations must be weighed against each other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The young person's own understanding of their situation, needs and wishes• The parents', support services' and police's understanding of the situation• The young person's right to co-determination must be weighed against the young person's right to protection, as well as safety and criminal law considerations• The best interests of the child shall be a fundamental concern <p>(The police make their own assessments related to criminal law)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Find out whether friends or family may be at risk of reprisals when the young person exits or is removed.• Comprehensive support for the family, including parental guidance, housing and finances. This is particularly important if the young person has siblings who may be at risk of being recruited and exploited.• Available contact persons at the police and the child welfare services who can provide information and support.• Sometimes the family should/must relocate to another city or municipality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is important to clearly define roles and responsibilities. Create contingency plans/action cards so that everyone knows how to act in urgent and serious cases.• Provide a permanent trusted individual/coordinator.• Meetings between young people and the support services should be well prepared.• Ensure that there are no 'gaps' in assistance or co-operation when relocating between municipalities or boroughs.	<p>A safety/contingency plan should be prepared for various scenarios related to threats. Based on a comprehensive assessment of the young person's situation, and any safety assessment related to the local community, network and organiser(s), various safety measures may be considered, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the Safety Programme• a contact ban• relocation, possibly with a blocked address• placement in an institution with or without the consent of the young person/parents, with possible restrictions (telephone, social media and visits) <p>Please note that such measures must not be more intrusive than necessary to ensure the safety of the young person.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide close, coordinated interdisciplinary support services over time, characterised by flexibility and availability.• Provide support to complete education (at school or in an alternative learning environment), or assistance in obtaining an apprenticeship and/or certificate of competence.• Provide support in obtaining and keeping a job, and follow up with both the young person and the employer if necessary.• Ensure that the young person receives the necessary health care: physical and mental health, dental health, sexual health (GP, mental healthcare services for children and adolescents/District Psychiatric Centre, public health nurse/school health service/Health centre for adolescents).• Ensure that the young person receives legal assistance/legal counsel in the event of any criminal proceedings, as a victim or perpetrator.• Assist the young person in obtaining a bankID, passport, ID card, and PC, and provide support with other matters necessary for lawful and transparent finances.• Arrange for financial counselling, possibly debt settlement.• Offer a mentor, a reliable companion or a trusted individual to be there throughout the process.• The young person must receive long-term follow-up, as well as assistance for a safe transition to adulthood.

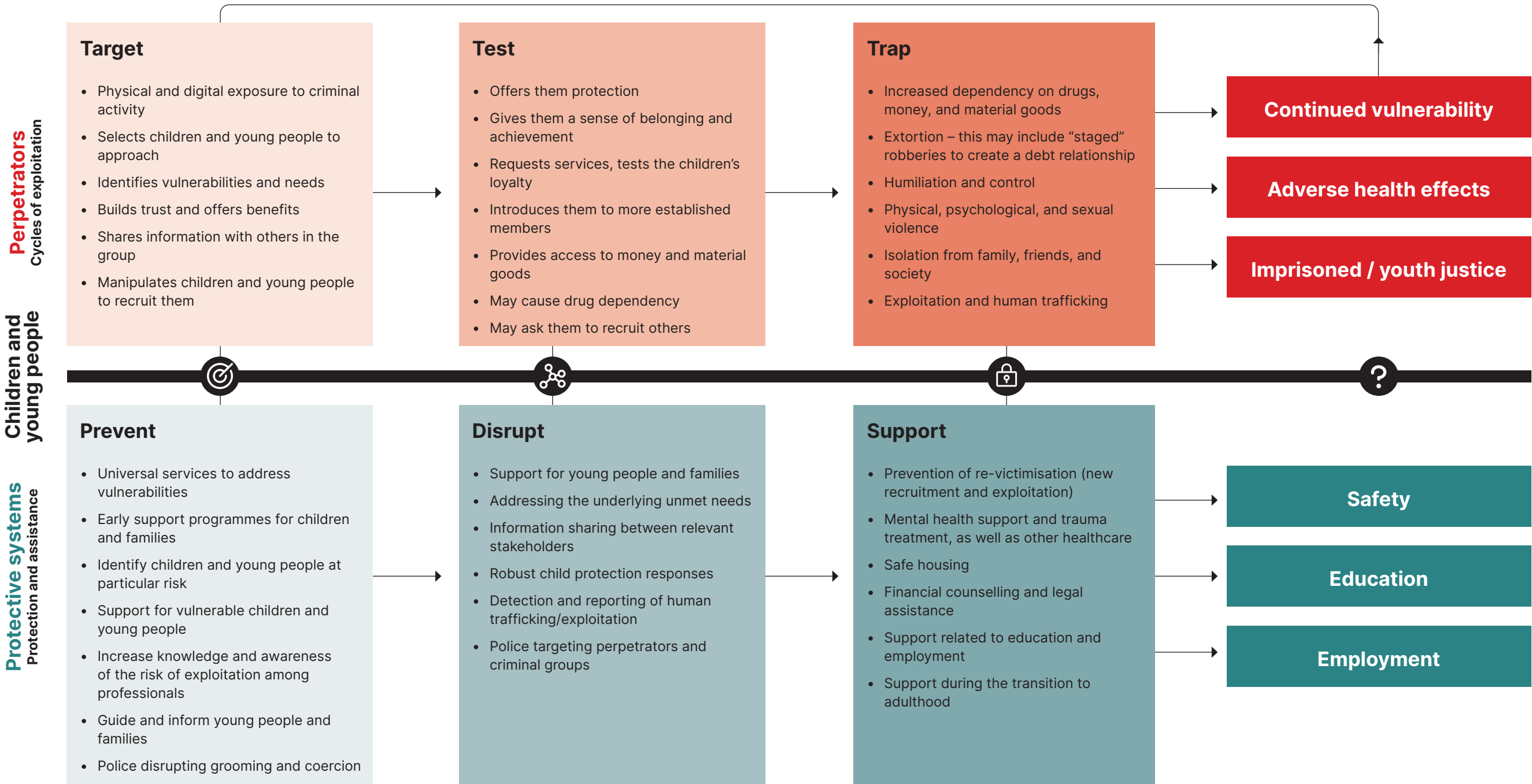


Young people subjected to criminal exploitation and the efforts of the support services – a process model

The Children's Society in the United Kingdom has developed a model that shows the relationship between different stages in which children and young people are subjected to criminal exploitation, and the efforts of the support services and the police.⁹⁹ We have adapted the model to the Norwegian context (with the rights holder's permission). The model serves as a summary and illustration of this handbook.

⁹⁹ Turner et al. 2019

Children and Young People Exploited for Crime and the Response of Support Services – A Process Model (The Children’s Society and RVTS)



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Appendix: Contribution to knowledge gathering

2021 Survey

"It is great that RVTS is addressing this. It is probably a partially overlooked field in the work with young people."

To explore what knowledge professionals working with young people involved in crime have about criminal exploitation, the RVTS centres carried out a survey between June and September 2021. The survey was distributed via email across various networks and through relevant social media groups. 190 respondents completed the anonymous survey. The respondents were professionals in SLT – local crime prevention co-ordinators (45), outreach workers (33), the police (25), the mediation services (23), the child welfare services (18), Nav (15) and the Norwegian Correctional Service (9), the health service (7), schools (5), culture and recreational services (3). Seven respondents selected "Other" in response to the question about place of work. Both small and large municipalities were represented, but most respondents were from large municipalities. We received respondents from all counties except Møre and Romsdal County.

"Great that this is being put on the agenda!"

The respondents did not form a representative sample of people working with young individuals

involved in or criminally exploited in Norway. It is likely that some of those who took the time to respond to the survey did so because they had relevant experience or a particular interest in the topic. While the survey cannot quantify the extent of young people's exposure to criminal exploitation, the findings confirm that it remains a genuine issue in Norway as well. The survey provided us with valuable, experience-based insights on the topic, which we hope will encourage further research and professional development.

"I think it is just fantastic that this topic is finally coming up and that someone is addressing it. I hope we manage to coordinate the services so that we can help children and young people who experience this."

A large proportion of respondents (up to 125 for some questions) contributed in-depth answers, examples, and reflections in the open, optional questions. Several individuals also offered feedback emphasising the significance of this matter.

"I think it is great that you do surveys".

The results of the survey are used in Chapters 3-7 of this handbook.

Survey for individuals working with young people involved in crime

RVTS (Regional Resource Centre on Violence, Traumatic Stress and Suicide Prevention) Northern Norway, Central Norway, Western Norway, Southern Norway and Eastern Norway is organising a national webinar on criminal exploitation of young people on 12 October 2021. In this connection, we are conducting this survey among professionals who work with young people involved in crime.

Target group: Anyone who works with young people involved in crime, e.g., the police, SLT, the Norwegian Correctional Service, the child welfare services, outreach workers, health services, schools, recreational services, voluntary organisations, etc.

The survey is anonymous. The results of the survey will be presented at the webinar on criminal exploitation of young people on 12 October 2021, and can also be used in other in-person and digital teaching, as well as in articles published via the RVTS centres' online resources.

The time needed will differ depending on how detailed your answers are, but we estimate about 5-15 minutes.

If you have any questions about the survey, please contact Line Ruud Vollebæk, Special Adviser, RVTS – Eastern Norway: line.vollebæk@rvtsost.no, tel.: 988 25 305.

* Mandatory

Background questions

1. Which county do you work in?*
 - ☐ Troms and Finnmark
 - ☐ Nordland
 - ☐ Trøndelag
 - ☐ Møre and Romsdal
 - ☐ Vestland
 - ☐ Rogaland
 - ☐ Innlandet
 - ☐ Viken
 - ☐ Oslo
 - ☐ Vestfold and Telemark
 - ☐ Agder
2. What is the population of the municipality where you work?*
 - ☐ Under 2,000
 - ☐ 2000–5000
 - ☐ 5,000–10,000
 - ☐ 10,000–20,000
 - ☐ 20,000–50,000
 - ☐ Over 50,000
3. Where do you work?*
 - ☐ The police
 - ☐ SLT
 - ☐ Child welfare services
 - ☐ Child welfare institution
 - ☐ Other child welfare measures
 - ☐ Norwegian Correctional Services (prison, probation services)
 - ☐ Mediation services
 - ☐ Outreach services (outreach social work with youth)
 - ☐ Mental healthcare services for children and adolescents
 - ☐ Culture and recreational services
 - ☐ School (teacher, educational psychological service, minority adviser, social worker)
 - ☐ Health services
 - ☐ Nav (social services)

- ☐ Refugee services, residential care home for unaccompanied minor refugees
- ☐ Voluntary sector
- ☐ Competence centres, universities and university colleges
- ☐ Other

4. Where do you work?* *(for those who selected 'Other' to Question 3, open text field)*

Awareness of criminal exploitation of young people

We will now ask you some questions about any knowledge you may have of young people who have been exploited for criminal activities.

Criminal exploitation of young people is defined as follows (from Knowsley Safeguarding Children's Board):

Criminal Exploitation involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them completing a task on behalf of another individual or group of individuals; this is often of a criminal nature.

The criminal exploitation often occurs without the child's immediate recognition, with the child believing that they are in control of the situation. In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/ economic and/or emotional vulnerability.

5. Are you aware of any instances where young people have been exploited, e.g., for drug-related or acquisitive crime?*
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Unsure

6. If you chose 'unsure' for the previous question: Why are you unsure? *(open text field)*

7. Approximately how many young people you have been in contact with do you think may have been criminally exploited?*
- ☐ None
 - ☐ 1–2
 - ☐ 3–10
 - ☐ 10–20
 - ☐ 20–50
 - ☐ Over 50

8. In what ways have the young people been exploited? (multiple response options)*
- ☐ Not applicable – not aware of young people who have been exploited
 - ☐ Transporting drugs or money (runners)
 - ☐ Selling illegal drugs
 - ☐ Storing drugs, money or stolen goods
 - ☐ Personal robbery (muggings)
 - ☐ Shoplifting
 - ☐ Pickpocketing
 - ☐ Threatening and/or using violence against others to exert pressure, collect debts, etc.
 - ☐ Sexual services
 - ☐ Other

9. If you chose 'other' for the previous question: How were the young people exploited? *(open text field)*

10. What recruitment and control methods are used when young people are subjected to criminal exploitation? (multiple response options)*
- ☐ Not applicable – not aware of young people who have been exploited
 - ☐ Building trust, relationships and loyalty
 - ☐ Offering of money, drugs, and material goods
 - ☐ Manipulation, deception
 - ☐ Threats and coercion
 - ☐ Violence
 - ☐ Debt
 - ☐ Don't know
 - ☐ Other

11. If you chose 'other' for the previous question: What recruitment and/or control method was used to exploit the young people? *(open text field)*

12. Who organised the exploitation? (multiple response options)*
- ☐ Not applicable – not aware of young people who have been exploited
 - ☐ Organised gangs
 - ☐ Less organised groups in the local area, neighbourhood, etc.
 - ☐ Individual adults
 - ☐ Peers or older friends/acquaintances
 - ☐ Family members
 - ☐ Don't know
 - ☐ Others

13. If you chose 'others' for the previous question: Who organised the exploitation of the young people? *(open text field)*

14. Please provide a brief description of a case (or multiple cases) where a young person was exploited by adults or other young people to commit criminal offences. How was the young person recruited? In what ways were they exploited? Were power and control exerted? *(open text field)*

15. How does the young person describe their situation? (multiple response options)*
- ☐ Not applicable – not aware of young people who have been exploited
 - ☐ Stated that it was voluntary, wanted/had become accustomed to access to money, drugs or other things
 - ☐ Stated that it was voluntary, felt loyalty to others in the environment/group
 - ☐ Stated that it was voluntary at the start, but that it is difficult to leave the environment
 - ☐ Not voluntary, was deceived or threatened into committing criminal acts
 - ☐ Subjected to violence and/or threats if he/she exits or does not commit new criminal acts
 - ☐ Don't know
 - ☐ Other

16. If you chose 'other' for the previous question: How did the young person describe their situation? *(open text field)*

17. Based on your experience with young people involved in crime, how common do you think it is for young people to be in an exploitative situation?*
- ☐ Very rare
 - ☐ Rare
 - ☐ Somewhat widespread
 - ☐ Very widespread
 - ☐ Don't know

18. Have you ever considered that the exploitation the young person(s) has/have been subjected to may be covered by the concept of human trafficking?*
- ☐ Not applicable – not aware of young people who have been exploited
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Don't know

Knowledge and support services

Now you are almost done with the survey! First, we would like you to answer a few questions about knowledge/knowledge needs and support services for young people subjected to criminal exploitation.

19. Please take a position on the following statements about young people subjected to criminal exploitation (from strongly agree to strongly disagree):*

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Don't know / neutral	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I have good knowledge of the topic.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think we have good interagency cooperation regarding youth involved in criminal activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think we have good preventive efforts targeting children and young people in general.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think we have good preventive efforts targeting youth who are particularly vulnerable to recruitment into criminal activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think we have good measures in place for youth who want to exit criminal activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think we have good measures in place for youth who are exposed to exploitation (such as debt, threats, violence, etc.).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

20. What is needed to prevent criminal exploitation of young people? *(open text field)*

21. What is needed to help young people who have already been subjected to exploitation?
How can existing measures be adapted?
Is there a need for new/additional measures? If so, what measures? *(open text field)*

22. What do you need to know in order to help young people who are being exploited? *(open text field)*

23. Is there anything else you would like to convey about this topic? *(open text field)*

Interviews with professionals 2021

The RVTS centres conducted several conversations and interviews with experienced professionals as part of preparations for the national webinar in autumn 2021. We made three films based on the interviews:

Four Professionals Tell Their Stories: How are young people subjected to criminal exploitation? (07:29)

- What does it mean that young people are being exploited?
- What types of crime are young people exploited for?
- Is this human trafficking, and if it is, what does it imply?

Five Professionals Tell Their Stories: Vulnerable young people, recruitment and harmful effects (11:09)

- What young people are vulnerable to exploitation?
- How are young people recruited?
- What are the consequences of exploitation for young people?

Five Professionals Tell Their Stories: We all have a responsibility – on prevention, inter-agency co-operation and support measures (10:12)

- How can we prevent criminal exploitation of young people?
- How can we help young people?

The following professionals contributed to the films:

- Marie Gullestad, Agency for Child and Family Welfare Services, City of Oslo
- Vebjørn Brækken, Outreach Section in Trondheim
- Kenneth Wøhni Helberg, Troms Police District
- Morad Aziman, Kingwings Crew
- Muhammed Elfström, Outreach Services in the Borough of Søndre Nordstrand
- Anette Storm-Aafoss, Eir Child Welfare Services

The films are used in teaching and are available on [YouTube](#).

Quotes from the films are used in Chapters 3, 5, 6 and 7 of this handbook.

National webinar on 12 October 2021

The RVTS centres arranged the national webinar “Young, criminal and exploited” on 12 October 2021, with just under 1,000 registrants. Recordings of the event are available on [YouTube](#).

Programme:

Conference hosts: Kirsten Eriksen (RVTS – Northern Norway) and Pernille Lavoll Baade (RVTS – Southern Norway)

09:00–09:10 Welcome

09:10–09:50 Criminal exploitation of young people in Norway:

- What is criminal exploitation of young people?
 - Line Ruud Vollebæk, RVTS – Eastern Norway
- Criminal exploitation of young people in Norway: Findings from a survey by RVTS (2021) – Line Ruud Vollebæk, RVTS – Eastern Norway
- Five Professionals Tell Their Stories: How are young people subjected to criminal exploitation in Norway? (film)

09:50–10:00 *Break*

10:00–10:30 Experiences from the UK:

- Disrupting child criminal exploitation – Iryna Pona, The Children’s Society

10:30–10:50 Unaccompanied minor migrants subjected to criminal exploitation in Sweden (and Norway)

by Katia Wagner, journalist and author

10:50–11:00 *Break*

11:00–11:30 Experiences from Sweden

- Youth crime in Sweden from a human trafficking perspective – Maria von Bredow, Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention

11:30–12:00 The criminal law perspective:

- A brief summary of international and Norwegian legislation – Line Ruud Vollebæk, RVTS – Eastern Norway
- Criminal exploitation of young people: Criminal law practice in the Norwegian context – Rudolf Christoffersen, Public Prosecutor in Hordaland

12:00–12:45 *Lunch*

12:45–13:30 What makes young people vulnerable to exploitation and how can we help?

- Five Professionals Tell Their Stories: Vulnerable young people, recruitment and harmful effects
- A child and adolescent psychological perspective on criminal exploitation – Clinical Psychologist Lars Lyster, RVTS – Eastern Norway
- Five Professionals Tell Their Stories: We all have a responsibility – on prevention, inter-agency co-operation and support measures

13:30–13:40 *Break*

13:40–14:30 Panel discussion chaired by Kadafi Zaman: Reflections on the human trafficking perspective on youth crime and the way forward. Panellists:

- Dishanie Amit Eliassen – Police Prosecutor, Youth Section at the Downtown Unit, Oslo Police District
- Kenneth Wøhni Helberg – Superintendent/Police Contact, Section for Intelligence and Prevention, Troms Police District

- Younas Mohammad-Roe – Manager at the Emergency Child Welfare Centre, City of Oslo
- Signe Horn – Secretary General, *Voksne for Barn* [Adults for Children]

Input from young people 2022

RVTS – Eastern Norway and the SaLTo Secretariat in the City of Oslo wanted to gather input from young people about their knowledge and experiences of criminal exploitation of young people, ahead of a workshop with professionals in autumn 2022. The SaLTo Secretariat, therefore, sent a request to experienced professionals who work closely with young people, asking if they could assist in gathering their thoughts and experiences on the subject. It was stressed that this should be carried out in a way that emphasises safety and upholds privacy. The young people were not to be encouraged to talk about their own experiences, but rather in an anonymous manner and about the youth circles in general.

Questions for the young people:

- Do you know of any young people who have been recruited or felt pressured by others to commit crimes?
- How does it happen? Please provide specific examples.
- How should young people in this kind of situation be approached to encourage them to confide in adult helpers?
- Do you have any advice for adults who want to help young people in this situation?

We received input from two boroughs (we have chosen not to identify which boroughs). The input is summarised by the professional who was in contact with the young people. We do not know how many young people contributed.

Quotes from the young people appear in Chapters 4 and 6 of this handbook.

A number of local assessment reports on youth circles and youth crime also include input from young people on recruitment to criminal environments and drug sales.¹⁰⁰

Workshop 17 October 2022

On 17 October 2022, RVTS – Eastern Norway and the SaLTo Secretariat in the City of Oslo organised a workshop on criminal exploitation of young people. The event was attended by around 50 experienced professionals from the police, outreach workers, child welfare services, social educators, mediation services, the Norwegian Correctional Service, and others. The first part of the day featured expert presentations on young people who commit repeated and serious offences, criminal exploitation of young people, and how we can engage in dialogue with young people on these topics. We had previously collected input from young people in two boroughs, which was presented to the participants. The second part of the day was devoted to group work, during which the professionals shared knowledge and experiences on signs and indicators, detection, prevention, and follow-up of young people subjected to criminal exploitation. The results of the group work, along with input from the survey, form the basis for the recommendations in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

¹⁰⁰ Bakken et al. 2020 (Lørenskog Municipality), Chabchoub 2019 and Hollerud 2017 (Outreach Section in Oslo), Jones et al. 2023 (Outreach Services in the Borough of Gamle Oslo), Lillestrøm Municipality 2022 and 2023, Nedberge 2021 (Mortensrud, Borough of Søndre Nordstrand), Outreach Section in Trondheim 2017

Programme for the workshop on 17 October 2022:

What do we know about young people subjected to criminal exploitation?

09:00–09:15 Welcome, practical information about the day

Film: “Four Professionals Tell Their Stories: How are young people subjected to criminal exploitation?”

09:15–09:30 What do we know about young people who have committed repeated and serious offences in Oslo? Presentation of the SaLTo report

09:30–09:45 What do we know about young people subjected to criminal exploitation? Results from the survey by Line Ruud Vollebæk, RVTS – Eastern Norway

09:45–10:00 *Break*

Experiences: How to engage in dialogue with young people?

10:00–10:30 Morad Aziman, Kingwings Crew

10:30–11:00 Jørgen Gulbrandsen, Urgent mental healthcare (young people) – Borough of Stovner

11:00–11:15 *Break*

Young people recruited to crime: Professionals’ and young people’s perspectives

11:15–12:00 Film: “Five Professionals Tell Their Stories: Vulnerable young people, recruitment and harmful effects”

Young people’s perspectives

12:00–12:45 *Lunch*

Group work: How can we best approach young people who are at risk or have already been exploited?

12:45–13:00 Film: “Five Professionals Tell Their Stories – on prevention, inter-agency co-operation and support measures”
Introduction to group work

13:00–13:30 Group work Part 1: How can we identify criminal exploitation of young people?

13:30–13:45 *Break*

13:45–14:30 Group work Part 2: How can we encourage young people to talk to adults about their situation?

14:30–14:45 *Break*

14:45–15:30 Group work Part 3: How can we prevent recruitment, and how can we help those who have already been recruited and are being exploited?

Group work 1: How can we identify criminal exploitation of young people?

Keywords: external traits, changes in behaviour, environment/relationships, what triggers gut feelings/concerns? Be as specific as possible!

Group work 2: How can we encourage young people to talk to adults about this?

Keywords: words and expressions, what questions can you ask to create a safe space, physical setting/activity/situations, relationships – who is best suited? Who should do what and when? From open/rhetorical to specific. Pitfalls – Clarification of roles

Group work 3:

How can we prevent young people who we know are especially vulnerable from being recruited and exploited?

Keywords: early intervention (avoid spending excessive time on broad prevention at a universal level)

How can we help young people who have already been recruited? Keywords: measures at the group and individual levels. Remember those under duress, in a threat situation

Seminar of 29 March 2023

On 29 October 2023, RVTS – Eastern Norway and the SaLTo Secretariat in the City of Oslo organised the seminar “How can we approach young people subjected to criminal exploitation?”. The seminar began with an introduction to the exploitation of young people in crime as a form of human trafficking, before presenting the results of the autumn 2022 workshop. This was then commented on by representatives from various professional backgrounds (who had been given access to read the recommendations prior to the seminar). The speakers and participants emphasised the importance of addressing potential exploitation and human trafficking linked to young people who commit criminal offences. This perspective is important both to safeguard young people’s rights and to implement as targeted and effective measures as possible. There were also presentations on the value of experiential expertise when working with young people at risk of criminal exploitation.

Programme for seminar on 29 March 2024: How to approach young people who have been subjected to criminal exploitation?

09.00–09.45: Welcome - SaLTo and RVTS – Eastern Norway
Exploitation and human trafficking – Line Ruud Vollebæk (RVTS – Eastern Norway)

10.00–10.45 **On criminal exploitation of young people, risk factors, indicators and detection** – Line Ruud Vollebæk (RVTS – Eastern Norway)


11.00–11.45 **The rights perspective** – Cecilia Dinardi (lawyer) and Thov Midtsund Nordbø (senior adviser, Office of the Norwegian Ombudsperson for Children)

11.45–12.45 *Lunch*

12.45–13.30 **The practice perspective: How can experiential expertise be used when working with young people involved in crime?** – Ghulam Abbas (Borough of Alna, author of the recently published book *Gudfaren* [The Godfather]), Berat Jusufi, and Nils Fredrik Tveter (both Borough of Grünerløkka, and featured in the film *Krigere* [Warriors])

13.45–14.30 **The recommendations, with comments** – How can we help young people subjected to criminal exploitation? By Line Ruud Vollebæk (RVTS – Eastern Norway)
– Comments by Katinka Hartmann (Oslo Mediation Services) and Anne Kristin Stakston Langvik (Oslo Police District)

14.45–15.30 **The way forward, panel discussion** with the speakers



Children and young people who commit criminal offences often do so together with others. Even if they may feel that they benefit from engaging in criminal behaviour, they may also be exploited by older youth or adults, and it can be difficult to exit. To provide appropriate support to children and young people who commit criminal acts, it is important to understand the underlying reasons. If the crime is caused not only by substance abuse, behavioural issues, profit motives, and similar factors, but also by the young person being subjected to pressure, debt, violence, or threats, they may require alternative forms of protection and support. This is important knowledge for everyone working with young people involved in crime and young people at risk of exploitation, both to safeguard the best interests of the child and to prevent further crime.

This handbook offers an introduction to the concept of criminal exploitation and how it can constitute a form of human trafficking. It builds on experience-based knowledge gathered from Norwegian professionals who work closely with young people involved in crime, supplemented by research and experience from other countries, particularly Sweden and the UK. The handbook describes how young people are recruited and criminally exploited in Norway, and how the support services in such situations can prevent and identify exploitation, and provide young people with proper and comprehensive support. It emphasises the importance of considering exploitation and human trafficking both as an overarching perspective on youth crime and in interactions with individual young people.

We hope that the handbook will be useful beyond Norway's borders, and contribute to the exchange of knowledge and experience across countries.

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