Between Victimhood and Offending

A Nordic Scoping Study on the Links Between Youth Criminal Exploitation and Trafficking

Anniina Jokinen
Annette Bäckström
Sofie Relander
Natalia Ollus
Jenna Kenttälä
Carolina Bäckström

HEUNI

AUTHORS:
Anniina Jokinen, Annette Bäckström, Sofie Relander, Natalia Ollus, Jenna Kenttälä and Carolina Bäckström.

EDITORIAL DESIGN AND ILLUSTRATIONS:
Lea-Maija Laitinen
www.leamaija.works

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Executive summary

This scoping study explores the intersection between youth recruitment into organised crime, criminal exploitation, and child trafficking in the Nordic countries. It examines how these emerging forms of exploitation are understood and addressed by criminal justice and other relevant actors and evaluates the benefits and limitations of applying the human trafficking framework to such situations.

DRAWING ON ACADEMIC RESEARCH, official reports, media sources, and Nordic consultations with criminal justice practitioners, the scoping study highlights growing concerns about youth involvement in gang-related crime, with particular attention to Sweden as a reference point for the Nordic regional debate. The analysis emphasises the complexity of identifying situations where children involved in crime may actually be victims of exploitation and/or trafficking, which requires a nuanced understanding of vulnerability, exploitation and the coercive mechanisms at play.

Key findings include:

- **CHILDREN MAY** be recruited into and exploited in criminal activities through abuse of vulnerabilities such as young age, adverse childhood experiences including traumatic experiences, neuropsychiatric disorders, and financial dependence. Exploitation often occurs without evident use of force.

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- **RECOGNISING CHILDREN** exploited in criminal activities as victims of exploitation, forced recruitment and in some instances of human trafficking is essential for ensuring their protection and applying the principle of non-punishment as enshrined in international law. The mere act of recruitment of children for the purpose of exploitation in criminal activities can meet the legal definition of trafficking. The means of trafficking such as deception or abuse of position of vulnerability need not be proved when it comes to children.
- **FEW JURISDICTIONS** have clear provisions for non-punishment of children who are coerced into criminality or victims of trafficking, and the misidentification of exploited children as offenders can lead to criminal records, disrupted educational pathways, placements in foster care or educational institutions, which in themselves are known to be associated with increased risks of re-offending and re-victimisation, including of trafficking.
- **EFFECTIVE PREVENTION** of child exploitation and trafficking requires addressing adverse childhood experiences, strengthening protective factors, improved identification of any forms of violence targeting children and providing timely support to families. These measures reduce vulnerability and help prevent both exploitation and youth crime.

The report concludes that applying a trafficking lens to criminal exploitation of children can improve victim protection and shift responses from punitive to rehabilitative. Concretely, this implies that law enforcement should assess the possibility that a child has been manipulated or coerced by older perpetrators when they engage in criminal activities. To do so requires specialisation and building of capacity especially among criminal justice actors and social and health care professionals to improve identification of the patterns and dynamics of exploitation behind individual offending children. Ultimately, preventing child trafficking requires linking antitrafficking work with wider efforts to prevent harm and violence against children, including investing in early in support that reduces adversity, builds protection, and lowers children's vulnerability to both exploitation and criminal involvement.

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Child criminal exploitation, broadly defined as the incitement, coercion, or manipulation of a child into participating in criminal activity has been linked to human trafficking for the purpose of exploitation in criminal activities, and is a growing concern at global, European and Nordic levels.

SWEDEN IN PARTICULAR HAS seen a significant increase in gang-related lethal violent crime, such as shootings and bombings (e.g. The Guardian 13.11.2023; Dagens Nyheter 9.10.2023). The share of suspected perpetrators who are under the age of 18 has more than doubled since 2019 and is about a quarter of the total number of suspects (Dagens Nyheter 5.7.2024). Assessments indicate that criminal networks rely on older youths to identify and recruit younger children in vulnerable situations (Brå 2023). Various media sources indicate that children from Sweden have been recruited to commit violent gang-related crimes in Denmark (Expressen 7.8.2024; YLE 16.8.2024). Swedish criminal gangs have established themselves also in Norway, with subsequent violent incidents (SVT 18.8.2024). There are some indications that Swedish criminal gangs are trying to establish themselves in Finland and Iceland as well (Kaakinen et al. 2024; YLE 29.9.2023; Radio France Internationale 10.4.2022). It has also been reported that criminal groups are increasingly using children to carry out acts of violence and other crimes in Iceland (RÚV 20.4.2025).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires States Parties to take all necessary measures to prevent the trafficking of children (Article 35) and to protect them from all forms of exploitation through appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures (Article 19). If a child, i.e. a person under the age of 18 has been coerced into committing a serious offence for the purpose of exploitation, international law outlines that this can be defined as a case of human trafficking. However, often such cases are not identified or processed under the human trafficking framework. In fact, the understanding of what constitutes human

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trafficking and exploitation, and how these relate to child criminal exploitation, varies across the Nordic countries. This divergence highlights the need to explore the extent to which youth recruitment into organised gangs and violent crime may be connected to human trafficking. Key questions include the role of consent, and the presence of control and coercion in the recruitment and involvement of children in criminal activities.

For example, the Norwegian research report by Vollebæk (2024) outlines linkages between criminal activities and human trafficking. Vollebæk argues that young people are often seen as being at fault themselves if they sell drugs or engage in criminal activities and are dealt with as perpetrators of crime. The possible role of coercion and exploitation seems particularly difficult to detect and understand when it comes to Norwegian citizens/residents, and young people are often seen as suspects rather than as victims. Similarly, recent Swedish research by Johansson (2025, 17) outlines that the threshold for applying the human trafficking framework in cases concerning criminal exploitation of children is set very high by the Swedish courts.

The specific nature of the crime is often irrelevant in cases of child criminal exploitation. The central issue is that the perpetrator, the exploiter, benefits from the illegal acts performed by the victim. This coercion may be overt, involving threats or violence, but it can also be more subtle, such as taking advantage of someone's age, psychological vulnerability, or cognitive impairments (e.g. Korkman 2023). Unlike other forms of human trafficking, victims of criminal exploitation are actively involved in unlawful behaviour, which can result in them being treated as offenders rather than as victims in need of support and protection (CKM 2022, 6). Furthermore, it is important to examine how the principle of non-punishment is interpreted and applied in cases involving children below or over the age of criminal liability (see e.g. Hannonen & Kainulainen 2022; Hannonen & Hyttinen 2024), and whether this principle is applied effectively to strengthen the protection of victims' rights.

This report does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon of criminal exploitation of children nor its links to trafficking. Due to the hidden nature of these crimes and the fact that very few cases come to the attention of authorities, the available data is limited. Instead, this report presents an exploratory mapping of the situation and the surrounding discussions in the Nordic countries.

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The following research questions have guided the process:

- **HOW ARE** the emerging forms of trafficking related to criminal exploitation, modus operandi and their linkages to criminal trends and developments understood and dealt with by Nordic law enforcement and criminal justice actors?
- **WHAT ADVANTAGES** and/or disadvantages does the understanding of these crimes from the framework of human trafficking entail? What are the consequences for the realisation of victims' rights?

Drawing on a range of materials, including academic research, official reports, media coverage, and other sources focusing on youth crime, youth gangs, criminal exploitation, and child trafficking alongside interview data and inputs from stakeholder meetings, the report seeks to shed light on emerging patterns and concerns using a broad approach. Particular attention is given to Sweden, where public and policy discussions around youth crime, gang involvement, and violence are more prominent than in the other Nordic countries. The data collection for this report was concluded at the end of 2025.

Ultimately, this report seeks to assess whether the human trafficking framework offers advantages or disadvantages in understanding the recruitment and involvement of young people in gang-related crime. It also explores what such a framework could mean for the young individuals themselves, as well as for the development of preventive and operational responses.

The report is directed to practitioners, policymakers and others interested in the issue of child trafficking and criminal exploitation. The report can be used as a handbook: its structure allows readers to navigate directly to the sections that are most relevant to their interests, without needing to read the report in its entirety. To support this approach, the chapter headings are formulated as questions, reflecting the exploratory nature of the report. Each section addresses a specific aspect of the phenomenon, offering insights based on data, case analysis, and expert perspectives.

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Note on data and methods

THE REPORT FUNCTIONS AS an initial scoping of a diverse set of Nordic sources to capture the complexities of the intersections of criminal exploitation of youth, child trafficking and recruitment, and the involvement of young people in organised, gang crime and/or violent crime. Key sources include academic research, journal articles, official reports from various authorities and NGOs, media coverage, and other sources covering issues related to youth crime, youth gangs, criminal exploitation, and child trafficking. Materials were searched in Nordic languages and in English using google, AI-based search tools as well as scientific article databases. AI-tools have also been used to translate sections of relevant materials from different Nordic languages into English.

In addition, supporting qualitative insights were gathered through interviews, bilateral meetings, focus group discussion and stakeholder meetings, including during the Nordic anti-trafficking coordinators' and police network meeting organised in Helsinki on 24 April 2025, during the Nordic conference "Scoping Emerging Forms of Human Trafficking" in Helsinki on 26 November 2025; and during the European Forum against Trafficking in Human Beings organized by the Council of the Baltic Sea States in Stockholm on 3–4 December 2025. Many of these interviews, stakeholder meetings and consultations were conducted partly in conjunction with HEUNI's other ongoing Nordic and European projects covering human trafficking and exploitation. They are detailed in Annex 1.

The insights of experts and practitioners referred to in Annex 1 and collected during the bilateral, roundtable and expert meetings as well as interviews for HEUNI's other ongoing projects provided background information and practical perspectives on the issue of youth crime and linkages to human trafficking. This mixed-method approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of emerging patterns and policy debates. While the focus in most chapters is on outlining findings from existing literature, the empirical data is used mainly in relation to the discussion on exploring the links to the trafficking framework and its possible advantages as well as issues related to the identification of trafficked children.

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Key terminology

CHILDREN are any persons under 18 years of age.

CHILD TRAFFICKING: The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation, forced labour, forced marriage, or exploitation in criminal activities. In the case of children, the means of trafficking such as threats, use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability need not be proved. Rather, they are already indications of aggravated human trafficking.

EXPLOITATION IN CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES OR CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION refers to taking unfair advantage of another person for personal gain, often through coercion, deception, abuse of power, or manipulation to exploit them in criminal activities. These activities can comprise of any number of criminal activities, such as pickpocketing, stealing, or selling or smuggling of drugs as well as violent crimes and cyber-facilitated crimes such as fraud and scams. The phenomenon is sometimes also called forced criminality, though criminal exploitation is a more comprehensive term.

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Part I

Setting the Scene: Overview and key trends

This section provides an overview of the context and key trends shaping the issue of criminal exploitation including child trafficking in Europe and the Nordic region. It begins by examining what is currently known about trafficking in children for forced criminality at the European level, followed by an analysis of emerging patterns in youth and gang-related crime in Nordic countries. Finally, it looks at victim statistics to identify what they reveal about child trafficking trends in the region. Together, these insights establish the foundation for understanding the scope and dynamics of the problem before moving to more detailed discussions in the subsequent sections.

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THE READERS ARE WELCOME to navigate directly to the sections that are most relevant to their interests, without needing to read the full report. If you are more interested in the findings of the scoping study, please go directly to part II.

What do we know about trafficking in children for the purpose of criminal exploitation at the Nordic and European levels?

FOLLOWING THE DEFINITION OF UN Trafficking Protocol (2000), trafficking in children refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation. Unlike adult trafficking, it does not require proof of coercion, force, or deception. Instead, the act and purpose alone constitute trafficking when the victim is under 18 years of age. Child trafficking involves the use of children for the purpose of different forms of exploitation, including (commercial) sexual exploitation, forced marriage, exploitation in criminal activities, begging, as well as forced labour and services.

> **Traditionally, exploitation in criminal activity has referred to pressuring or forcing a person to, for instance, pickpocket, steal, or sell or smuggle drugs.**

It includes situations where a person is taken advantage of and someone else benefits financially from the actions of the person. Children under the age of criminal responsibility may be used or manipulated to commit crimes as they are not subject to criminal liability, and overall, children are more easily manipulated to commit different kinds of criminal acts than adults (see Kervinen & Ollus 2019).

Family dysfunction and inadequate child protection measures enable exploitation of children. Unaccompanied and separated migrant children are increasingly vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation. Also, children absconding from institutions of care are a specific risk group for criminal exploitation (e.g. Haapala et al. 2023; Kekkonen & Pekkarinen 2024; Vollebæk 2024). Initially, children and young people may be lured by promises of easy money, designer clothes, or drugs for personal use. Their engagement may start by running errands, but they may then be gradually pulled deeper into increasingly serious and dangerous criminal activities. Leaving

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is rarely straightforward; those who attempt to exit are often tracked down by the instigators and coerced back through threats and intimidation, including persistent harassment via phone calls and social media. (Länsstyrelsen 2018, 13.) This systemic exploitation traps young people in cycles of dependency, fear, and violence, making escape incredibly difficult and reinforcing their vulnerability to further abuse and control by these networks.

The exploitation of children in criminal activity has significant negative consequences for their physical, psychological, and social well-being.

Through involvement in criminal networks, children may be subjected to emotional abuse, such as threats, intimidation, and blackmail, as well as physical and sexual violence, including rape, substance abuse, serious injury, or even death.

In addition, exploited children may acquire criminal records, including concerning offences they did not knowingly or willingly commit. The long-term impact of such exploitation can be profound, limiting a child's development, disrupting their education, and severely limiting future opportunities of employment and social integration. (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2025; Baidawi et al. 2020, 4.)

In several EU Member States, there is growing evidence that children and young people are being increasingly recruited into organised crime, particularly the drug trade.

Across many European cities, criminal networks dominate open drug markets and actively exploit young people, often from disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds, through forced criminality (EUCPN 2024, 7; Lunneblad et al. 2024, 75). Next, we will outline what is known about trends and characteristics of children as victims of criminal exploitation in some of the key European countries, such as the UK, France and the Netherlands, and what linkages there are to human trafficking.

According to the UNODC, there is a noticeable increase in trafficking for forced criminality, as organised crime groups adapt their methods and exploit trafficking victims for online scams and other offenses (UNODC 2024, 3). In 2022, out of a total of 63,962 detected exploitation cases reported across 133 countries, 8% involved trafficking for the purpose of forced

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criminality (UNODC 2024, 20, 50). In Europe, post-pandemic data shows a rise in the number of boy victims of trafficking, coinciding with an increase in unaccompanied and separated children at borders, groups particularly vulnerable to exploitation. 47% of detected boy victims were trafficked for the purposes of forced criminality and begging, compared to 19% of girls (UNODC 2024, 12).

Europol and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction have reported that some of Europe's criminal networks are actively recruiting and exploiting children and adolescents to serve as lookouts, distribute drugs, or carry out violent attacks. These child victims include both local and foreign children, many of whom are trafficked by drug cartels and forced to participate in street-level drug distribution (UNODC 2024, 45).

In the United Kingdom, criminal exploitation has since 2019 been the most frequently reported form of human trafficking.

According to data from the British Home Office, 48% of the 12,727 potential trafficking victims recorded in 2021 were exploited for criminal purposes. A substantial amount of these cases involved British boys who were recruited by criminal networks through "county lines" operations.[1] These networks target vulnerable youth in urban areas and coerce them into transporting drugs to rural or smaller towns. In 2021 alone, 2,689 children were identified as victims of criminal exploitation, accounting for over 21% of all registered victims that year (CKM 2022, 10–11). For example, in 2018, a 21-year-old drug dealer was convicted of human trafficking of two 15-year-old boys and one 14-year-old girl. Although he controlled them by cell phone instructions, there was no evidence that the children had been forced to participate or that they had received any payment for their involvement (Maxwell et al., 2019). Recent

1 County lines is a term used in the UK to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line". They are likely to exploit children to move the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons. County Lines – National Crime Agency.

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research in Northern Ireland also found that paramilitaries[2] and organised crime groups exploit children and young people. In a survey among key informants, including practitioners and first responders, 79% of the respondents indicated they had encountered child criminal exploitation in Northern Ireland in connection with paramilitary activity (Kane & Chisholm 2025).

In addition to the UK, France, Belgium and the Netherlands have also reported cases of children being exploited in criminal activities. Dutch research suggests that the number of children trafficked for drug-related and other crimes is likely underestimated (CKM 2022). The victims identified according to (REF) are mostly Dutch teenagers, some of whom may have minor mental or behavioural health issues. The rising identification of boys trafficked for forced criminality across Europe may be due to increased awareness and attention to this growing issue. According to the UNODC, about 22% of all identified victims in Western and Southern Europe in 2022 were trafficked for the purpose of forced criminality, including drug trafficking. This marks a notable increase compared to 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Western and Southern Europe, trafficking for purposes of forced criminality has shown a marked increase, with the number of detected victims rising from 6.6 to 9.6 per 100,000 population. Trafficking for forced criminality in Western and Southern Europe appears to affect children, particularly boys, more significantly than adults (UNODC 2024, 45, 167–170).

In France, a recent UNICEF report found that many child victims remain invisible, especially when children are exploited for criminal activities or offences in the context of trafficking. The children concerned, whether French or foreign, come from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Their age, the accumulation of vulnerabilities, and the fact that they face fewer criminal penalties make them prime targets for exploiters. The forms of control exerted may come from organised and structured international criminal networks but also occur within the family circle or a small social environment. Although French law includes coercion to commit offences in the definition of human trafficking, relevant cases are rarely investigated or recognised as such

2 Paramilitaries refer to armed groups, often aligned with loyalist or republican ideologies, that operated during a period of violent conflict from the late 1960s to 1998 over Northern Ireland's constitutional status and remain active today primarily through organised crime and drug-related activities. Loyalist paramilitaries: Who are the groups in Northern Ireland?

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by judicial authorities. (UNICEF 2025.) As a result, in France, child victims of criminal exploitation are too often prosecuted and penalised for offences committed as a consequence of their exploitation according to UNICEF, though there are some relevant convictions as seen in the next case example box. In the report, UNICEF called for legal reform and a need to develop a comprehensive national strategy to prevent exploitation and to identify and protect affected children. (Ibid.)

Case example: France

IN FRANCE, SIX MEN were convicted of human trafficking in 2024 in a major case involving the recruitment of children for criminal activities. The case involved the recruitment and exploitation of vulnerable youths, primarily from Morocco, who were forced into criminal activities on the streets of Paris. Police uncovered a criminal network that deliberately made children dependent on drugs to control and exploit them. The network used the children to commit crimes, including theft and robbery. A central challenge in the trial was proving that the youths had been actively recruited, a requirement under French law for human trafficking charges. The court concluded that the perpetrators had established a system in which the children were made into drug-dependent slaves and coerced into committing criminal acts. The case highlighted the complexity of supporting exploited youth, many of whom have committed crimes themselves and are reluctant to seek help. (Permanent Representation of France to the UNODC in Vienna 2025, 10; Le Monde 13.1.2024: Le Monde 30.7.2025.)

In the Netherlands, criminal exploitation was formally recognised as a form of human trafficking and made a criminal offence under Dutch law in 2013 (CKM 2022, 9). However, criminal exploitation appears to remain significantly under-prosecuted. The Public Prosecution Service initiated criminal proceedings in only 48 cases involving human trafficking for the purpose of criminal exploitation, making it the least prosecuted form of trafficking in the Netherlands. Of these, 27 resulted in first-instance convictions. (Ibid., 11.) Also, according to the 2022 CKM report, there is a general lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the extent and characteristics of criminal exploitation in the Netherlands.

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Between 2016 and 2020, the Dutch Coordination Centre against Human Trafficking (CoMensha) received reports of 672 individuals who were potential victims of criminal exploitation (CKM 2022, 6, 10). In the Netherlands, 63% of the registered criminal exploitation cases involved victims who had been coerced into drug-related offences, while others were forced into theft, begging, fraud, and recruiting others for sexual exploitation (ibid., 11). Most of these cases involved adult victims of African origin being exploited in drug-related criminal activities. Official reports involving children of Dutch nationality were notably scarce. In the Netherlands, there is a growing concern about the deliberate recruitment of vulnerable youth for drug trafficking. CKM found that in over half of secondary schools and nearly half of vocational schools there were suspicions of some students being exploited for drug-related crimes. Media reports also highlight how criminals intentionally target vulnerable individuals to carry out such illegal activities. (Ibid., 6, 10.)

Dutch law upholds the non-consent principle, which maintains that individuals cannot legally consent to exploitative conditions, regardless of how they entered them. Furthermore, the non-punishment principle ensures that victims of trafficking are not held criminally liable for offences committed as a direct result of coercion. The Dutch penal code does not limit criminal exploitation to specific crimes, which means that a wide range of criminal behaviours, including theft, robbery, and begging, can fall within its scope. However, a complicating factor is that victims of criminal exploitation are, by nature of the crime, involved in unlawful activity. This creates a significant risk that they will be treated as offenders rather than victims, which can prevent them from receiving necessary legal protections. (CKM 2022, 9; see also Villacampa & Torres 2017.)

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What are the current trends in youth and gang-related crime in the Nordic countries based on statistics?

OVERALL, YOUTH CRIME IN Sweden has declined since the 1990s. At the same time, lethal violence within criminal environments has increased, mainly through shootings. In 2023, children accounted for a quarter of suspects, which is twice as many as in 2019 (Polisen 2025a, KSAN 2025). Young people remain overrepresented in crime statistics: in 2020, those aged 15–20 made up 20% of all prosecution decisions[3], despite comprising only 8% of the criminally responsible population. (SOU 2021:68, 248.) Nevertheless, the percentage of prosecution decisions for children of ages 15–17 decreased from 13% in 2023 to 8% in 2024. The percentage of prosecution decisions concerning 15–20-year-olds also slightly declined, to 17%. (Brå, 2025a). At the same time, some young offenders are involved in serious crimes linked to criminal networks, and during the last decade, reports have indicated that such violence has become more severe and committed by increasingly younger individuals. (SOU 2021:68, 248.)

Number of Decided Suspicions Involving Individuals Under 15 in Sweden

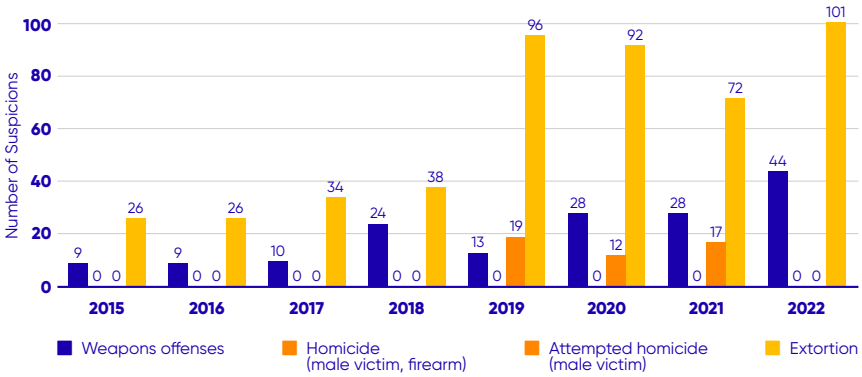

FIGURE 1: Number of decided suspicions involving individuals under the age of 15, according to Section 31 of the Act (1964:167) containing special provisions on young offenders, broken down by type of crime and year. Source: Brå 2023, 55.

3 Regarding the word "prosecution decision", we have loosely translated this from the word "Lagföringsbeslut" in Swedish, as it does not have a precise translation, nor an equivalent legal definition in English. Prosecution decision refers to any decision following the prosecution process, such as the prosecutor deciding to waiver the prosecution, a conviction or a conviction by prosecutorial order.

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As shown in Figure 1, the number of identified children (under the age of 18) increased from 672 in 2019 to 1,179 in 2022, nearly doubling over a four-year period. Children also made up a slightly larger share of registered individuals in 2022 (15%) compared to 2019 (13%). This trend was even more pronounced among young people overall. The number of registered individuals aged 21 and under rose from 2,036 (39.5%) in 2019 to 3,425 (43.3%) in 2022. (Brå 2023, 42.) The number of crimes suspected to have been committed by children under 15, doubled between 2013 and 2023. This concerns all crimes, but the increase is largely attributed to an increase in e.g., suspected harassment and assault. The increase specifically concerns mostly 14-year-olds. Despite this, the number of investigated crimes with a potential sentence of at least 1 year among children under 15 has remained stable in the past decade, except in certain crime categories. Current data indicate that there is no clear correlation between the number of suspected crimes and the number of actual offences committed by children under 15 years old (Brå 2025b).

The number of convictions for murder rose from an average of 1.7 convictions per 100,000 children per year during 2014–2018 to an average of 5.3 convictions per 100,000 children per year during 2019–2023. This increase is mainly driven by 2023, when there was a sharp rise from 13 convictions in 2022 to 48 in 2023. However, most cases in this category concern attempts or preparations to commit a crime or aiding and abetting. The increase in children convicted of serious crimes is also reflected in the Swedish Prosecution Authority's statistics on indictments against children for murder. For children who have reached the age of criminal liability (15 years), there were 8 indictments in 2022 and 39 in 2023. The increase has continued in 2024, with 48 indictments filed between January and July alone. (SOU 2025:11, 149.)

Moreover, according to findings from the Swedish School Survey on Crime 2023, among the students[4] who stated that they committed at least one crime, a large proportion also stated that they had been the victim of a crime. The proportion of victims was generally higher among girls and boys who had committed narcotics offences. Among boys, a fifth of those who had committed narcotics offences were victims of sexual offences and more than 40% victims of assault. Among girls

4 The respondents were in the 9th grade, i.e., around 15 years of age.

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who had committed narcotics offences, more than half reported being victims of sexual offences and almost 40% victims of assault. (Brå 2024, 8–9.) This indicates that children involved in criminality and in particular drug criminality are also to a high degree subjected to sexual crimes and violence. Similarly, in a report about the involvement of girls and young women in gangs, 68% of the girls concerned had been a complainant in a criminal case between 2014 and 2023 (Brå 2025c). This indicates that children involved in criminality and in particular drug criminality are also to a high degree subjected to sexual crimes and violence.

Based on the analysis of the data collected for International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD4) in the Nordic countries, street gang involvement among children aged 13–17 was significantly higher in Sweden (11%) in comparison to Denmark (7%), Iceland (6%), and Norway (6%). There were no statistically significant differences between Sweden and Finland (9%), however, the study was based on city samples, and thus, the results are not representative at the national level (Kaakinen et al., 2024). Young people who were involved in a street gang were more likely to commit property crimes, violent crimes (group fights and assault) and to sell drugs. The risk factors for street gang involvement were most strongly related to the criminal behaviour and pro-criminal attitudes of young people and their friends. (Ibid.) In another study focusing on street gang involvement for girls, unstable family situations, poor mental health and the involvement of a brother or boyfriend in a gang, were the most likely factors for joining a gang (Brå 2025c).

In Norway, the total number of crimes committed by children remained quite stable in 2020–2024, but the proportion of more serious crimes and younger perpetrators increased (Riksrevisjonen 2025, 6–7). According to Statistics Norway (SSB), approximately 9000 children under the age of 18 were suspected of committing a crime in 2023, the highest number since 2011 (Riksrevisjonen 2025, 6; SSB 2024). The increase has been greatest among those under the age of 15, where there has been a rise in violent crimes and robberies (ibid., 6–7; SSB 2024). However, in 2024, there was a slight decline in the number of registered crimes committed by children, especially among children under the age of 15 (Politidirektoratet og riksavkotainen 2025, 17). Although the total number of crimes committed by children is not historically exceptionally high, the Riksrevisjonen (2025) report shows that the authorities consider the development to be worrying, particularly due to

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the serious nature of the crimes, the recurrence of offenses, and the young age of the perpetrators. Economic inequality and recruitment by criminal networks are factors considered to increase children's susceptibility to committing crimes (Politiet 2025, 14, 39–40). Overall, youth crime in Norway has shifted to younger age groups and has become more serious.

There are no precise figures of the number of children exploited in criminality in Norway. However, in a survey of 190 respondents consisting of various professionals from authorities and other relevant actors, the large majority (76%) stated that they were aware of cases where children had been exploited to commit crimes in Norway. 71% of those surveyed believed that the exploitation of young people for criminal purposes is widespread, with 31% considered it "very widespread" and 40% "somewhat widespread". The respondents described how youth are exploited through various types of crimes, including drug trafficking, theft, shoplifting, robbery, and handling stolen goods. They also shared cases where young people had been manipulated into committing violent acts due to loyalty, debt, or threats. Some youths reported committing crimes against their will after being pressured or threatened. (Vollebæk 2024, 32–40.)

Violence and threats are common in criminal environments in general. In the Norwegian survey, 93 out of 190 respondents reported being aware of young people exploited for criminal activities being subjected to threats and coercion, while 69 respondents knew of cases where youth had experienced physical violence. Young people involved in criminal activity are at risk of being exposed to violence, not only from external individuals or rival networks, but also from within their own criminal circles. Fear of retaliation prevents many from leaving, seeking help, or reporting their situation to authorities. (Vollebæk 2024, 32–40.) In 2003–2024, there were eight cases which concerned exploitation for forced services. Six of these cases involved the exploitation of children. The cases include profit-driven crime, drug-related crime, exploitation for begging, or a combination of these. (KOM 2024.)

In Denmark, juvenile crime increased slightly between 2020 and 2023. The number of crimes committed by 10–14-year-olds increased from 4153 cases in 2020 to a total of 4190 cases in 2023. Among the types of crime, property crimes were the most common, accounting for 49–55% of all crimes annually. Violent crimes were next, increasing from 788 (2021) to 818 (2023). Sexual crimes were the third most

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common, with a number that varied between 2020 and 2023: the highest peak of 292 cases in 2022. Crimes were particularly concentrated among 14-year-olds, who account for more than half of all crimes committed annually. The proportion of 13-year-olds increased, while the crime rate for younger (10–12 years) remained stable. (Kriminalitet 2021; Kriminalitet 2022; Kriminalitet 2023; Kriminalitet 2024; Justitsministeriet 2024.)

During 2020–2023, crime among 15–19-year-olds in Denmark remained quantitatively high (around 12 000 people per year). Property crimes accounted for the majority of the convictions in all years: over 2000 cases per year, violent crimes were the second most common (874 cases in 2023), and the number of sexual crimes increased slightly over the years (165 cases in 2020 and 228 cases in 2023). Drug offences were also a significant part of crime among 15–19-year-olds, and their number remained high (1375 cases in 2023). (Kriminalitet 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024; Justitsministeriet 2024.)

In Finland, reported suspicions of crimes involving young people under 18 have increased in recent years, even though youth crime overall declined until 2018. Property and drug-related offences in particular are associated to repeated offending. Young offenders are often also victims of crime, and their victims are usually other young people. Recently, suspicions of violent and sexual offences by young people have also risen. (Sutela 2024.) In 2024, the number of crime reports involving street gang members decreased in Helsinki compared to the previous year. The police consider that this is the result of proactive measures by the authorities, as key members of street gangs have been the subject of criminal investigations and have been sentenced for various offences. (Valtioneuvosto 28.8.2025.)

According to police statistics, the number of suspects under the age of 15 in assault crimes increased by 54% in 2023 compared to the previous year, and in cases of aggravated assault, the increase was as high as 186%. For 15–17-year-olds, the corresponding figures were 17% and 63%. The growth was particularly notable among those under 15 and in aggravated forms of the offences. (Vauhkonen & Korhonen 2025.) In robbery crimes (including attempted robberies), the number of suspects under 15 increased by 63%, and in aggravated robberies by 94% during the same period. For 15–17-year-olds, the increases were 53% and 66%, respectively. At the same time, the victims of these crimes are increasingly younger. (Ibid.)

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However, while police statistics show a rise in youth-perpetrated violent crime, school-based surveys do not support this trend, suggesting the increase may reflect more cases being reported rather than an actual rise in violence. (Vauhkonen & Korhonen 2025.) Changes to the guidelines for the reporting of assaults could partly explain the increase. For example, schools have been instructed to report incidents of bullying and violence to the authorities more frequently. In addition, since 2015, there has been an increased obligation on those working with children to report suspected cases of assault involving children to the police, and it has been noted that at least a share of the reported incidents concern situations between two children and do not correspond to a situation of serious offending. (YLE 16.5.2024.)

Researchers also note that surveys tend to capture average youth behaviour and may miss those involved in repeated or serious offences. However, serious crimes are more likely to be reported to the police, so the observed increase in aggravated assaults may indicate a real growth in such incidents. Multiple factors, including a lowered threshold for reporting, may be influencing the data simultaneously. (Vauhkonen & Korhonen 2025.)

Iceland has traditionally reported low crime rates, but the statistics have also been affected by irregular reporting to the police, which means that the information provided by the statistics is limited (Gunnlaugsson & Galliher 2010, 9). Between 2011 and 2021, the number of child suspects aged 15–17 more than doubled from 150 to over 360 (Statista 2024). Reports to child protection services of children committing violence increased from 461 in 2016 to 1072 in 2023. Similarly, police reports of bodily harm involving children rose from 95 in 2016 to 186 in 2023. In 2023, children accounted for 18% of the suspects in major assaults, the highest share since 2016. (Government of Iceland 2024.) A government report from 2024 highlights increased weapon possession, rising violence among younger children, and the role of social media in spreading violent content. In response, Iceland has launched a 15-point national action plan focusing on prevention, cross-sectoral collaboration, early intervention, and support for at-risk youth. (Ibid.)

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What do victim statistics tell us about child trafficking trends in the Nordic countries?

CHILD TRAFFICKING CASES ARE identified in all the Nordic countries (Länsstyrelsen 2015; Tyldum, Lidén, Skilbrei, Dalseng & Kindt 2015; Lidén & Salvesen 2016; Socialstyrelsen 2018; Kervinen & Ollus 2019; Jämställdhetsmyndigheten 2019; Människorättsadvokaterna 2021; Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023; Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024). However, most identified victims of trafficking in the Nordic countries are adults, and children represent a small minority according to victim statistics.

In all Nordic countries child victims represent between 0–10% of the identified victims.

Trafficking in human beings is a form of hidden criminality which means that many cases do not come to the attention of authorities. According to available statistics, few victims of forced criminality are identified in the Nordic countries. However, criminal exploitation is likely far more widespread than official statistics suggest, indicating that many victims remain unidentified. As a result, these individuals are denied the protection and support they require, while the perpetrators continue to operate undetected, making the problem even more difficult to address (CKM 2022, 7).

In Sweden, the municipalities are responsible for assisting victims of trafficking. In 2023, the regional anti-trafficking coordinators identified 414 victims of trafficking and/or human exploitation, out of which 35 were children. 16 cases concerned exploitation in criminal activities; 5 men, and 11 boys were identified as victims. However, in 2023, fewer children were identified compared to the previous five years, during which the number remained consistently around 50. More than half of the identified boys had been exploited for criminal activities, while none of the girls had been exploited in this form of trafficking. (NSPM 2024, 4–6.) In 2024, the regional coordinators identified 430 victims of which 22 were children, including 15 girls and seven boys. Only 3 cases concerned exploitation in criminal activities and none of the victims were children. The statistics reflect the resources and conditions under which the regional coordinators have worked during the year. The work of identifying children is described as resource-intensive and often requires the regional coordinators to themselves take an active role in identifying children. (NSPM 2025, 4–7.) In 2024,

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the Swedish Migration Agency detected 684 cases of suspected human trafficking, 11 of victims were children (Migrationsverket 2025).

In Finland, the Finnish National Assistance System for Victims of Trafficking (NAS) is responsible for assisting victims who do not have a municipality residence. Regional well-being counties are responsible for assisting victims who have a municipality residence in Finland. Between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2023, nearly 70 children were admitted into the NAS. They were assessed to have been subjected to different forms of exploitation, including forced labour, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, and exploitation in begging and in criminal activity. None of them were Finnish citizens, and most were referred to the NAS during their asylum process. (Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024, 12.) In 2024, 207 new clients were admitted into the NAS, 10 of whom (5%) were child victims (Ihmiskaupan uhrien auttamisjärjestelmä 2025a). In the first six months of 2025, 102 new clients were admitted to the NAS, six of whom were (potential) child victims (Ihmiskaupan uhrien auttamisjärjestelmä 2025b, 6). There are no statistics available on how many victims of child trafficking have been assisted by regional well-being counties outside of the NAS. This includes also Finnish citizens of all ages. According to available statistics, very few children have been identified as victims of trafficking for the purpose of exploitation in criminal activities.

In Norway, municipalities are responsible for assisting victims of trafficking. From 1 January 2023, Norway's new Child Welfare Act introduced updated legal provisions for protecting children at risk of human trafficking. Emergency placements are regulated under Sections 4–5 and 6–6, depending on the level of risk, while protective measures are covered under Section 10–13. These placements are only to be used when necessary to meet the child's immediate need for protection and care. There are two child welfare institutions which provide such care for children at risk of trafficking. These institutions are operated by the national Child, Youth and Family Agency (Bufetat) and the Child and Family Agency (BFE) in the Oslo Municipality. In 2023, 16 children (eight girls and eight boys) were placed in various measures under the Child Welfare Act. Of these, eleven were from Asian countries, three from European countries, and two from other regions. Five of the children were placed in institutions under Section 4–5 of the Child Welfare Act (emergency placement due to risk of human trafficking). The Child Welfare and Health Appeals Board received four cases under

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Section 6–6 (placement due to risk of exploitation for human trafficking). In the remaining cases, the children were placed under Section 4–2 (emergency care orders) or Section 11–3 (care centres for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, including assessment and follow-up). (KOM 2024, 55–56.)

In the previous five years, the numbers ranged from 0 to 8 children. The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs notes that it is difficult to provide a clear explanation for the increase in 2023 in the number of cases involving suspected trafficking of children. One possible reason for the increase is improved awareness and understanding of trafficking indicators among services in contact with children. (KOM 2024, 56.) There are no available statistics on child victims of trafficking from 2024. However, in recent years, several police districts have seen an increase in children and young people being recruited into criminal environments (KOM 2025, 76).

According to statistics from the Center Against Human Trafficking, Center mod Menneskehandel (CMM) in Denmark, 78 individuals were assessed as victims of human trafficking in 2024. Nineteen of them were under the age of 25 at the time of assessment, among these, 4 were children under 18. The gender and exploitation patterns among those under 25 years of age differ from the overall picture. Nearly half were men and boys who had been exploited for criminal activities. (CMM 2025, 13.). A report by CMM in 2021 notes that a total of 56 children were assessed as victims of human trafficking in Denmark between 2009 and 2021. This includes 24 North African boys and young men, the majority of whom were exploited for criminal activities. (CMM 2021.)

According to data collected by the National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police, the Icelandic police investigated 71 suspected cases of trafficking in the period 2019–2022, involving 73 presumed victims, all foreign nationals. 38% of the presumed victims were female and 11% children, but exploitation in criminal activities is not mentioned as a purpose of exploitation. (GRETA 2023a, 9.) However, the most recent GRETA[5] evaluation report (2023a, 25) indicated the Icelandic police has encountered several drug trafficking cases, which sometimes involve

5 Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by the Parties.

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boys and girls used as body-packers, i.e. smuggling drugs by swallowing or inserting packets of narcotics into body cavities. Police suspected that some of them may have been trafficked. (Ibid.)

Under Article 16 of the Icelandic Child Protection Act, all persons who have reasons to believe that a child is a potential victim of human trafficking are required to inform the child protection services, who are responsible for ensuring accommodation and other services for the children. All presumed child victims as well as all unaccompanied and separated children are interviewed at Barnahús in Reykjavík in the presence of a representative of the child protection services. The child protection services reported several cases where there was a suspicion of child trafficking to the police, but it is not mentioned whether any of these cases concerned exploitation in criminal activities. (GRETA 2023a, 42–43.)

How do legislative frameworks in the Nordic countries address child trafficking, exploitation and recruitment of children into gangs?

THE CRIMINALISATION OF HUMAN trafficking is based on the definition of the UN Trafficking Protocol (2000) in all Nordic countries. The offence of human trafficking consists of three elements: the act, e.g. recruitment, transportation or harbouring; the means, such as deception or abuse of position of vulnerability; and the purpose, such as sexual exploitation or forced labour and services. If the victim is a child, the means element is not required. Initial consent is considered irrelevant if the person ends up in a situation of exploitation. Exploitation in criminal activities is not mentioned as a form of exploitation in the UN Protocol, but it is in the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive 2011/36/EU and the revised Directive 2024/1712/EU.

Out of the five Nordic countries, Denmark (Straffeloven § 262 a) and Iceland explicitly mention criminal exploitation as a form of exploitation in trafficking in their national legislation (Article 227.a. of the General Penal Code of Iceland). In contrast, Finland, Norway and Sweden do not explicitly mention exploitation in criminal activities as a purpose of exploitation in their trafficking legislation. It is, however, covered in their legislation under forced labour and services (Norway), under forced labour or state of emergency for the victim (Sweden) or under conditions contrary to human dignity (Finland).

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In 2021, Swedish courts of law considered two separate cases of human trafficking, where the prosecutors argued that adult perpetrators had recruited children for the purpose of exploiting them in selling drugs. In one of the cases, the prosecutor argued that the children had been threatened and stabbed with knives by the defendants.[6] In both cases the courts, however, rejected the charges of human trafficking, as they argued that the boys were not in a state of emergency ("nödläge"), and thus were not unable to decide for themselves on their actions. (Polisen 2021, 72–73.)

In addition to human trafficking, Sweden and Denmark have criminalised human exploitation. Human exploitation refers to situations where a person is exploited for forced labour, work under clearly unreasonable conditions or begging. Unlike human trafficking, human exploitation does not explicitly require severe distress as a defining element of the offense. (Swedish Penal Code, Chapter 4, Section 1b; SOU 2021:68, 250, 258.) Exploitation in criminal activities is not explicitly recognised as a form of exploitation under the human exploitation provision in Sweden. However, cases where individuals, particularly children, are coerced into committing crimes may still be prosecuted under other legal provisions, such as human trafficking laws or coercion statutes. (SOU 2021:68, 243–244.) For the exploitation of adults, criminal liability requires that the act involves unlawful coercion, deception, or exploitation of a person's dependency, defencelessness, or severe distress. However, for children under 18, these conditions do not need to be met. Criminal liability applies even if the perpetrator was merely negligent in recognizing that the victim was a child. (SOU 2021:68, 258.)

After the growing discussion about involvement of youth in gang crimes, the Swedish government considered the concept of "recruitment" under the human trafficking offense to be too narrowly defined to capture how the recruitment of young people actually takes place. To strengthen criminal law measures against those who involve children in criminal activity, the offense of involving a child in criminal activities was introduced in the Swedish Penal Code in 2023. (Prop. 2022/23:53, 82.) Under Chapter 16, Section 5a of the Swedish Penal Code, anyone who, in connection with a crime or criminal activity,

6 Sveriges Radio 24 November 2020: Lagen om människohandel prövas mot gängrekrytering.

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engages, pays, instructs, or hands over property to someone under the age of eighteen and thereby, or in a similar manner, involves him or her in the crime or criminal activity, shall be sentenced for involving a child in criminality to imprisonment for up to four years. The new offense in the Swedish Penal Code was intended to cover a wide range of actions that, in various ways, draw children into criminal activity. (Prop. 2022/23:53, 166.) The provision also applies if the offender acted negligently with regard to the child's age. Adults and older juveniles who encourage, plan, or assist a child under the age of 15 in committing a crime can also be prosecuted. This includes instigating, conspiring, or participating in an offense alongside a child, as well as failing to report or prevent such crimes under specific legal provisions. (Swedish Penal Code 1962:700, Chapter 23, Sections 2, 4, and 6.) In the background documents it was argued that the existing provisions on human trafficking are not suited to preventing the recruitment of children into gangs, especially as the trafficking paragraph requires proof of a situation of distress, or the use of direct violence or threats (SOU 2021:68).

The Swedish Penal Code has a specific aggravating factor for sentencing which applies when a person coerces, induces, persuades or pressures someone else into committing a crime by deception or by exploiting their youth, lack of understanding, or dependent position (Chapter 29, Section 2, Paragraph 5). In such cases, the affected individual may be granted a reduced sentence below the statutory minimum, or in less serious cases, be exempt from liability (SOU 2021:68, 242–243). Between July 1, 2023, and March 1, 2025, the district courts considered charges for the offense of involving a child in criminal activity in 25 judgments and the court of appeal in 25 judgments. Almost all charges resulted in a conviction. (Johansson 2025, 4–5.)

In Norway, there is no dedicated criminal provision addressing the exploitation of children for criminal activity. However, such cases may fall under the legal framework of human trafficking, specifically under Sections 257 and 258 of the Penal Code. Exploitation for criminal purposes is classified as a form of "forced services" (§ 257 b), and any exploitation of children is automatically considered aggravated human trafficking (§ 258), regardless of method. While Norwegian law offers more detailed regulations concerning sexual and labour exploitation, it lacks equivalent specificity for criminal exploitation. Still, it remains illegal to coerce or pressure anyone,

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through threats, blackmail, or other undue influence, into committing crimes, and sentencing guidelines treat the exploitation of vulnerable individuals, such as children or persons with disabilities, as an aggravating factor. (Vollebaek 2024, 21–22.)

In Finland, a reform of the Criminal Code entered into force in July 2025, introducing new provisions criminalising participation in street gang activity, the incitement of children under the age of criminal responsibility (i.e., under 15 years old) to commit a crime, and the use of humiliation as an aggravating factor in sentencing (Oikeusministeriö 2025). When a person incites a child to commit a crime on their behalf, they may be attempting to avoid criminal liability, and inciting a child may be easier than inciting an adult. In the Government's Proposal to amend the Criminal Code regarding the incitement of children, such an act is described as exploitation of the child. It is further noted that if the incitement involves elements of coercion or pressure, the act may also meet the criteria for coercion (Criminal Code Chapter 25, Section 8). However, possible links to the offence of human trafficking are not addressed in the preparatory materials for the law, it is only mentioned as an aggravating factor. (HE 219/2024.)

Under the human trafficking criminalisation, exploitation in criminal activities is covered by conditions contrary to human dignity in Finnish trafficking provision. Instances of exploitation in criminal activities have been identified in Finland concerning e.g., drug offenses and theft, but none proceeded to court under the human trafficking label (Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024). The exploiters may have blackmailed and intimidated the victims into more crime by threatening to tell the authorities what the child has done (Kervinen & Ollus 2019, 67).

Iceland amended their trafficking legislation in 2021 under Article 227.a of the General Penal Code (GPC) to include additional forms of exploitation, in particular forced marriage, slavery, servitude, forced service, begging and criminal activities (GRETA 2023a, 10). Icelandic police have indicated they may have come across children used as drug mules. Nevertheless, due to the absence of a reference to forced criminality in their trafficking legislation at the time of the detection of these cases, the children involved were not identified as victims of trafficking. The guidelines for the police on the identification of victims of trafficking were updated in June 2022 after an amendment of the legislation. The police reported that they struggle with identification nevertheless, because on the one hand, drug

couriers do not give sufficient information to identify the traffickers and on the other hand, the police have limited time and staff for investigating such cases. If the suspect is in custody, they should be indicted within 12 weeks or released. Therefore, persons arrested in drug trafficking cases are indicted for drug trafficking, without sufficient effort being made to identify trafficked persons among them. (Ibid., 25.)

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Part II

Findings

This part presents the key findings based on previous literature and the data collected on the recruitment and exploitation of children and young people in criminal activities in the Nordic countries via interviews, stakeholder meetings and consultations with Nordic experts. It explores the profiles of the recruited children, the mechanisms and motivations behind their involvement, and the broader social and structural factors that enable this phenomenon with special focus on Sweden, where the phenomenon is more widespread than in the other Nordic countries.

STARTING WITH THE QUESTION of who these young people are, the chapters outline the risk factors that make them vulnerable, the methods of recruitment, including the role of social media, and the gendered dynamics within criminal networks. Next, the types of offences young people are coerced into committing and the control strategies used by gangs to maintain their involvement are outlined.

The findings also address how children are identified, either as victims or perpetrators, and how authorities assess the situation. The subsequent chapters present an overview of prevention strategies, the barriers to seeking support, and the support systems available. The final chapters reflect on the application of the non-punishment principle and the implications of using the trafficking framework in cases involving young people in gang-related crime.

Readers are encouraged to navigate directly to the sections that are most relevant to their interests, as each section can be read independently, without needing to read the report in its entirety.

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Profiles and Vulnerabilities of Recruited Youth

Who are the young people recruited into criminal activities?

RECRUITING CHILDREN INTO CRIMINAL networks is a relatively new phenomenon in the Nordic countries. The young persons involved include persons of various backgrounds and origins: both citizens of the Nordic countries, as well as children of foreign background and of multiple different migration statuses.

In Sweden, the phenomenon emerged mainly after 2014 (Brå 2023, 41–42). Organised crime groups have been found to predominantly target young people from marginalised backgrounds, recruiting them through street gangs and subcultures, including those associated with football hooliganism (EUCPN 2024, 7). According to the Swedish Police Authority, the number of people assessed to be active in criminal networks amounts to 14,000 individuals. Approximately 1,700 are under the age of 18. The majority have a Swedish citizenship (88%) and they are men (95%). The number of people assessed to have links to criminal networks amounts to 48,000 individuals. (Polismyndigheten 2024, 6–11.)

> **Earlier discussions about young people exploited in criminality primarily revolved around foreign children who arrived in in the Nordic countries unaccompanied.**

Already in 2012, there was an influx of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Sweden, particularly boys from North African countries like Morocco, who became involved

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in criminal activities such as drug dealing (Barnrättsbyrån 2016, 17). Especially alarming was the situation for children and young people who were living on the streets, where daily life was often marked by exploitation, criminality, and drugs (Barnombudsmannen 2017, 22).

In 2015, Sweden experienced a significant increase in the arrival of unaccompanied children, particularly boys, from Morocco and other North African countries. Approximately 35,000 unaccompanied children, around 90% of whom were boys, applied for asylum that year, a sharp rise from the roughly 7,000 who applied in 2014. (GRETA 2018, para. 80.) Many of the unaccompanied or separated children were exploited during their journey to Sweden (ibid., para. 81). Some of the children were placed in institutional care due to their involvement in criminal activities. Although there were suspicions that they might have been victims of trafficking, they were not formally identified as such. (Ibid., 187.) Concerns were raised regarding children in institutional care, including reports of violence, sexual abuse, and child prostitution (ibid.).

In 2018, the Swedish Police reported that criminal gangs actively recruit young unaccompanied asylum-seeking men from Afghanistan to sell drugs, often through threats and violence. One witness described being physically assaulted to sell drugs and stated that many refugees who came to Sweden in search of a better life have been misled and exploited. In exchange for a place to sleep, they were forced to sell drugs. (Sveriges Radio 4.12.2018.) Also, seven unaccompanied children from Afghanistan were reported missing from care homes in northern Sweden and later found in an apartment in Uppsala, where they had been forced into theft and collecting deposit-refund cans (GRETA 2018, para. 187).

Denmark has also identified Noth African boys as particularly vulnerable to trafficking for the purpose of criminal exploitation. Red Cross Denmark has noted that since 2018, more North African boys report being exploited to commit criminal offences such as theft, burglary and sale of drugs. These boys describe the criminal organisation as a hierarchical system where the older boys control the younger boys. Some are trafficked already in North Africa, while others are recruited on the streets or in the asylum system in Europe. Violence, threats, drug addiction and often a debt for travelling to Europe keep the boys in the exploitative relationship, with no real possibility of escaping the exploitation. The exploitation described by the boys is characterised by a demand for a constant flow of

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benefits from the network, and punishment if this flow stops. (Rettrup Mørch & Rasmussen, 2020, 20.)

Norwegian research found that young people involved in criminal networks often come from disadvantaged backgrounds, increasing their susceptibility to both criminal behaviour and exploitation.

However, these vulnerabilities do not necessarily mean they willingly choose the crime; rather, they may be recruited or controlled in ways that align with legal definitions of human trafficking. Conversely, those subjected to human trafficking frequently come from difficult socio-economic conditions, reinforcing the overlap between criminal exploitation and broader social disadvantages. Initially, children and young people may believe their involvement is voluntary, but exiting the criminal network can be difficult. Many experience loyalty pressures, accumulate debt, or become trapped through threats and violence. (Vollebæk 2024, 24.) These results echo those of a recent longitudinal study of Finnish youth demonstrating that cumulative adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are strongly associated with an increased risk of future delinquent behaviour and crime victimisation (Ellonen et al. 2025).

Vulnerable young people in Denmark are also exploited by experienced criminals to commit drug-related crimes. Increased competition in the illegal drug market, growing social inequality, and the spread of labour-intensive sales models (such as mobile drug delivery) have created new opportunities for exploitation. (Søgaard 2022; Søgaard, Bræmer & Pedersen 2021, 11–13).

What are the risk factors for the recruitment of young people into criminal activities?

THE LIKELIHOOD OF CHILDREN becoming involved in criminal environments is shaped by a combination of risk and protective factors operating at individual, familial, and societal levels (Socialstyrelsen 2020, 60–64; Bris 2025, 48). Young people recruited into criminal networks often share certain vulnerabilities, particularly those from unstable homes marked by absent fathers, low social control, exposure to abuse, or parental struggles with addiction or mental illness. Children in institutional

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care or those with disabilities face heightened exposure (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten 2024; Vollebæk 2024, 19; FHI 2020, 24; Baidawi et al. 2020, 5; Isoniemi 2019). These family-related risk factors are often interconnected and reinforce one another, increasing the likelihood of developing antisocial behaviour and becoming susceptible to recruitment. Criminal networks may exploit this vulnerability by offering a sense of validation and belonging (Brå 2023, 40).

Particularly so-called runaways and children who live without a guardian or permanent residence are vulnerable to criminal exploitation according to Finnish sources (e.g. Lehtinen & Rossi 2022, 128; Isoniemi 2019; 2024; Haapala et al. 2023; Kekkonen & Pekkarinen 2024). According to Isoniemi (2019; 2024), during periods of unauthorised absence from institutional care, young people may be subjected to a range of criminal activities, and their victimisation spans the entire spectrum of criminal offences, from minor property crimes to homicide. The 2023 report by Haapala, Kaijanen, Minkkinen and Westerlund found that children missing from foster care in Finland were exposed to serious exploitation and violence. While on the run, many experienced sexual abuse, including being forced into sex in exchange for drugs, alcohol, or shelter as well as threats and coercion to commit crimes. Professionals described these children as “easy targets” for sexual and criminal exploitation, with some older teens even recruiting younger runaways (Haapala et al. 2023). Kekkonen and Pekkarinen (2024, 26–29) found that the risk factors for human trafficking increased in cases where children on the run were staying at strangers’ homes or other unfamiliar locations. Also, according to crime statistics, violent crime among children and youth placed in out-of-home care is higher than in the general population, and their share among crime suspects has increased in recent years. In particular, violent offences as well as alcohol- and drug-related crimes are associated with placements outside the home. (Pitkänen et al. 2024.)

In addition to family dynamics, broader living conditions and societal factors further intensify the risk of becoming exploited in criminal activities.

Swedish sources have noted that children growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, characterised by violence, poor housing, and weak public services, are more exposed to

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criminal environments. (Socialstyrelsen 2020, 48–49; Bris 2025, 48; CKM 2022, 14.) Young people may feel that entering criminal spheres was a voluntary choice, but that it is difficult to get out again. This may be due to a culture of loyalty within criminal groups, or because they are subjected to violence or threats (KOM 2025, 76). Structural issues such as segregation, low educational attainment, unemployment, and experiences of war-related trauma also contribute significantly to the risk of future criminal involvement. (Socialstyrelsen 2020, 48–49; Bris 2025, 48; CKM 2022, 14.)

At the individual level, young people with certain psychological or mental health conditions are more prone to being recruited into criminality, especially if these conditions limit the development of pro-social skills. Conditions such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD) have been suggested to be particularly associated with increased vulnerability to drug use and involvement in crime. (EUCPN 2024, 8–9.)

Also, studies from the Netherlands point to mild intellectual disabilities as a recurring vulnerability among victims of criminal exploitation. Individuals with learning difficulties are considered particularly at risk, as they may be more easily influenced and less able to understand or evaluate the consequences of their actions. (CKM 2022, 14; Bekkers et al. 2020, 12.) Similar finding have been made in Sweden outlining that children and young people with disabilities, as a group, have higher levels of mental ill-health, substance abuse issues, problematic peer relationships and more experiences of violence and abuse. Children and young people with neuropsychiatric or intellectual disabilities may also be more likely to experience feelings of social isolation and may have a desire to be part of a social context. They may also have low self-esteem and traits that make them easier to manipulate. (Myndigheten för delaktighet 2025, 7–8.)

The recruitment process itself has become faster in recent years, heightening the risk for impulsive individuals.

Those with neurodevelopmental disorders, such as ADHD, may be especially targeted, as difficulties with impulse control and emotional regulation make them more susceptible to criminal

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influence.[7] Young people with a low threshold for violence are at high risk of being recruited by criminal gangs, likely because they are more easily persuaded to take on violent tasks. Many young recruits have also experienced challenges in school, such as concentration difficulties, social exclusion, bullying, conflicts, and truancy, further increasing their risk. (Brå 2023, 34; Vollebæk 2024, 19.)

Lastly, a vulnerability frequently highlighted in the literature is the young age at which victims are first recruited. Research indicates that individuals exploited in drug-related crime are often approached during early adolescence, and in some cases, even earlier. In cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht, children as young as 12 years old have reportedly been targeted by criminal networks and asked to perform tasks. (CKM 2022, 14.)

While certain conditions increase the risk of harmful or criminal behaviour, others can reduce it. These protective factors help steer children away from destructive paths. Examples include a positive relationship with school, strong academic achievement, healthy ways of managing stress, involvement in meaningful social activities and the presence of supportive adults. Supportive family relationships play a key role, especially when parents are attentive, engaged, and responsive to their child's needs. Identifying these protective elements is important for identifying the right support and preventive measures for vulnerable children. (Bris 2025, 49.)

7 The association between ADHD and a heightened risk for delinquency is well-established in both children and adults, see for example (Young et al. 2015). In an Icelandic sample of male prisoners, it was found that half met the criteria of ADHD in childhood and that this was associated with a heightened compliance, which increases the risk of being manipulated (Gudjonsson et al. 2008).

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Recruitment Mechanisms and Influences

How are young people recruited?

ACCORDING TO THE SWEDISH National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå), recruitment is commonly carried out by (older) children already involved in these networks, reflecting how criminal groups minimise risk by drawing in individuals who are already familiar or embedded in their environment (Brå 2023, 6). Since bringing in new members poses a risk, networks tend to recruit individuals who are already familiar to them. Many are already involved in a youth gang before establishing a relationship with older members of the criminal network, and these gangs can serve as recruitment pools for criminal networks. The young people recruited typically fall into one of three groups: those who are already involved in crime, those who live in or spend a lot of time in areas where the network operates, or those with close personal ties to individuals active in the network. (Ibid., 25–26.)

According to research by Brå, older children usually recruit younger ones. Typically, individuals aged 15–20 recruit younger children (12–15 years old) for criminal activities. The influx of children and young people is driven within drug distribution chains, where continuous recruitment is part of the business model. For older teenagers to advance within the networks, they need to recruit younger children as errand runners. By gathering a group of two to five so-called "own younger ones" (egna yngre), they can move larger quantities of drugs and increase their earnings. As a result, most individuals operating at the lower levels of these networks are actively involved in recruitment. (Brå 2023, 6.)

The recruitment process often begins with the glamorisation of criminal lifestyles (EUCPN 2024, 13). Influential older individuals within the criminal network make themselves visible, both in residential areas and on digital platforms. They do so by showing off flashy jewellery, clothing, cars and connections to artists.

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This display of wealth and status is not only a symbol of power but also a deliberate strategy to attract and influence young people. By presenting an extravagant lifestyle and showing generosity toward local children and residents, these individuals position themselves as role models in communities where alternative sources of status or success may be lacking. This visibility fosters admiration and a desire for belonging, making the promise of financial gain, respect, and identity within the criminal network particularly appealing to vulnerable and motivated youth. (Bris 2025, 49; Brå 2023, 31; EUCPN 2024, 5, 10, 13.)

Danish research found that criminal groups and individual dealers recruit vulnerable youth, often those facing poverty, homelessness, or addiction, to perform risky tasks such as selling, transporting, or storing drugs. Many are drawn in by promises of money, excitement, or belonging (pull factors), while others are coerced through manipulation, threats, or debt bondage (push factors). Some young people as young as 10–14 years old have been involved in these activities. (Søgaard 2022; Søgaard et al. 2021, 14–17.)

In some cases, young people actively seek out older individuals, asking for drugs via encrypted platforms or looking for quick ways to earn money. Others are approached by adults who see their potential and offer them opportunities. Some describe feeling pressured or blackmailed from the outset, but more commonly, the coercion is described as gradual, starting with small demands that slowly escalate into more complex or risky tasks. Children also explain that the more they see, learn, or become aware of, the more they are forced to participate. Regardless of who initiates the contact, the process tends to move quickly, with agreements often formed within minutes or days, depending on the recruit's level of interest. (Bris 2025, 48; Brå 2023, 32–33.)

One method to recruit young people is through grooming and building a sense of belonging (Polismyndigheten 2023, 43).

Older members use tactics such as sharing personal experiences of marginalization, engaging in social activities like football, and offering gifts such as cash and expensive clothes. These gestures create the illusion of an equal relationship, making the younger individual feel valued and included. Gradually, the process transitions into criminal activities, such as delivering drugs. Ultimately, young people are recruited through promises of financial gain and social belonging, while

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the long-term consequences are deliberately hidden. The power dynamics remain unequal, and young recruits often lack the ability to understand what their involvement truly entails. They are generally unaware of the restrictions on their autonomy and the difficulty of leaving the network until they are already deeply embedded. (Brå 2023, 32–33.)

> **Starting as early as primary school, criminals trick children into picking up and dropping off a package somewhere. Secondary-school students are asked to give someone a lift on their scooter. One day, they hear shots, and they are suddenly involved in a liquidation. Young people are thus drawn into a life of crime, and their futures turn to dust. We need to prevent little boys from becoming big criminals.**
>
> — CKM 2022, 7.

Some children are coerced into criminal networks through various threats if they refuse to carry out tasks assigned by older criminals, including the risk of severe consequences for both themselves and their families. One common method of manipulation involves assigning young recruits a fabricated debt (known as bötning) which they are told must be repaid by selling drugs, committing robberies, or hiding weapons. In many instances, older members deliberately set them up to fail by, for example, instructing them to deliver drugs and later falsely accusing them of losing the package. This tactic causes the child's debt to grow before they have any real opportunity to repay it. The pressure placed on these young individuals can be so intense that some families have been forced to relocate after attempting to intervene. (Brå 2023, 35–36; Polismyndigheten 2023, 43.)

> **Another common way children and young people become involved in criminal structures is through social and family ties.**

Many grow up together as friends, while others are "raised" into criminality by family members or older siblings. In some cases, young people are directly recruited into networks led by their own relatives, often under intense pressure. They may be expected to take over criminal operations or seek revenge when a family member is arrested, killed, or forced to withdraw due to threats. (Ibid.)

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A model developed by The Children's Society in the UK in 2018 outlines a four-stage process used by criminal networks to groom individuals into exploitation. The first phase, known as targeting, involves selecting individuals based on their vulnerabilities, such as young age, difficult family circumstances, or mental health issues. In the second phase, grooming through experience, the perpetrator builds trust by fulfilling emotional or material needs, gradually drawing the victim into the group's lifestyle through seemingly minor criminal tasks. The third phase, hooked, marks a shift in dynamic, where the victim begins to feel a sense of belonging, yet is already being exploited. The increasing demands placed upon them and the difficulty in refusing tasks signal growing control. Finally, in the trapped stage, the victim becomes fully dependent on the exploiter and realizes that leaving is no longer a safe or realistic option. At this point, coercion intensifies, often involving threats, blackmail, or violence, and the criminal activity becomes more frequent and dangerous. (The Children's Society 2018, CKM 2022, 17.)

How is social media used in recruitment?

CRIMINAL NETWORKS ACTIVELY USE social media both to recruit young individuals and to assign them tasks, such as transporting weapons and carrying out shootings. Popular social media platforms such as TikTok, Roblox, Instagram and Snapchat serve as entry points where criminals establish initial contact, often by following a child on social media and sending direct messages. The children are encouraged to download encrypted messaging services like Signal and Telegram, where criminal assignments are posted. (Tyresö kommun 2025, Dagens Nyheter 15.2.2025; CKM 2022, 16.) Youth are often required to share personal information to prove their commitment and if they attempt to back out, they risk blackmail or other forms of retaliation against themselves and their families (Tyresö kommun 2025). The increased digital visibility allows criminal networks to reach beyond their local areas, making recruitment easy, cost-free, and requiring no physical interaction (Brå 2023, 27).

There has been a recent development wherein children and young people in Sweden are being recruited by Danish criminal networks to commit serious crimes, including shootings and attempted murders (Regeringskansliet 2024; Bris 2025, 46; SVT 15.8.2024). The recruitment is primarily done through social media and encrypted messaging platforms, with promises of large payouts. According to Danish police, this marks the

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beginning of a new pattern. The police has identified 32 cases involving Swedes hired to commit crimes in Denmark. The trend is believed to be linked to internal conflicts among Danish gangs, and to avoid direct involvement and reduce risk, these groups recruit vulnerable Swedish youth to carry out their attacks. (SVT 15.8.2024.)

Case example – Sweden

A 15-YEAR-OLD BOY CONVICTED of preparing a murder at a funeral in Malmö had gone to the police just a few weeks earlier, asking for help to back out. During an interrogation, the boy explained how he had received a murder assignment via Snapchat worth 150,000 kronor (~14,000€). He later wanted to withdraw and went to the police to tell them what had happened. In the interrogation, he said the police confiscated his phone, but he does not know what happened after that. (Sveriges Radio 2.4.2025.)

When the boy later logged into his school computer, he was contacted again by the people who gave him the assignment, who threatened to harm his family if he did not carry it out. He was picked up and driven to Malmö, where he then took a taxi to the funeral with two loaded pistols. Other funeral attendees grew suspicious, overpowered the boy, and took his weapons. He then disappeared for nearly two weeks. The police opened a kidnapping investigation but later dropped the suspicions. The 15-year-old has now been sentenced to nine months of closed juvenile care for, among other things, serious weapons offenses. (Sveriges Radio 2.4.2025.)

Europol (2025) has highlighted that an internationally active online community – The Com – which is known for its extremely violent blackmail and exploitation methods targeting vulnerable youth groups, such as LGBTQ+ people, ethnic minorities and individuals with mental health issues. The Com consists of multiple online groups that approach their victims on various social media platforms and gaming channels, like Discord and Telegram. On those online platforms perpetrators often use youth-oriented online support communities to find vulnerable individuals. Once they have created the relationship, the perpetrators begin to manipulate, isolate, blackmail, and coerce children and young people into committing violent acts such as self-harm, animal cruelty, violence against others, and

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the production of child sexual exploitation material. Victims are forced to film or record these acts, which are then uploaded to The Com network. Perpetrators use the material to blackmail victims to commit even more serious acts. (RCMP 2024; Europol 2025; The Washington Post 13.3.2024.)

Internationally, there are several hundred cases under investigation in which young people have harmed and killed others and committed suicide under the influence of The Com network. The Com ties children and young people tightly to exploitation, and victims have no opportunity to report it or break free from it. (RCMP 2024; Europol 2025; The Washington Post 13.3.2024; The Guardian 11.5.2025.) The Finnish police have also expressed concerns about the community's impact in Finland (Poliisi 23.7.2025; 7.5.2025; Ilta-Sanomat 25.7.2025; Ilta-Sanomat 29.7.2025). They are investigating a case under the label of aggravated human trafficking, where the perpetrator is member of the 764 group which is known for their extremely torturing methods of child abuse. The group has been associated with sadistic, satanic elements (ibid.).

What is the role of girls in criminal networks and what are the gender differences?

IN TERMS OF GENDER, girls and young women are generally less likely than boys and young men to participate in violent acts associated with organised crime, however, both boys and girls are recruited, though their roles within criminal networks may differ (EUCPN 2024, 7). A study by Brå (2025c; 2025d) found that girls are often neither part of nor recruited into the hierarchies of criminal networks. They are usually not part of the hierarchical structures in which boys and young men are expected to prove themselves, rise in status and gradually earn more money. (Ibid.) While boys are more frequently involved in direct criminal activities, girls are often tasked with transporting, storing and packing drugs. They are also considered an asset when it comes to perpetrating fraud and lethal violence for example, by luring victims. Girls are considered more difficult to detect by law enforcement which creates demand for their services. (Brå 2025d, 5.) Also, according to statistics by the Swedish police, women are primarily used as facilitators of crime and are also engaged in operational roles especially at the

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lower tiers of the criminal network (Polismyndigheten, 2024, 10).

Girls involved in criminal networks face risks characterised by violence, economic exploitation and an expectation of sexual availability.

According to Brå's 2025 study, girls tend to engage in criminality in three different ways: in temporary operations, paid or unpaid (e.g., storage of a weapon), in ongoing assignments that function as a full-time job (for example, drug transport) or they may be involved in independent activities such as selling drugs. Various forms of exploitation and violence are normalised, and to manage risks, many girls must walk a fine line between stereotypical femininity and proving their capacity to go beyond what is expected. Girls involved in criminal networks have often encountered many adverse experiences in their lives such as having parents with substance abuse, economic disadvantage, exposure to domestic violence, a history of school failure. They also often have different neuropsychiatric or mental health problems. Many have also received interventions (e.g. foster care placements), both early in childhood and during adolescence. (Brå 2025d, 5–7.)

Girls may be led into criminal networks through deceptive romantic relationships, believing they are in a genuine partnership while they are being exploited.

Girls may also be recruited through manipulation and coercion. (Brå 2023, 38–39.) Girls and women aged 15–25 may be lured into romantic relationships or invited to parties where they are drugged, gang-raped and filmed for blackmail purposes. The perpetrators then threaten to share the footage unless the girls continue to comply. Girls are also sexually exploited to generate income through prostitution or used as payment for debts or in drug trafficking. (ECPAT 2023; SVT 19.3.2024; Brå 2023, 38–39; Brå 2025d, 6–7.) One case involved a young girl who was lured to a friend's home, only to be met by a group of boys belonging to a criminal gang who raped her. The assault had been set up by her so-called friend to repay a debt. (SVT 19.3.2024.) In some cases, it is not a relationship but rather experiences of sexual

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violence or exploitation that led to girls' involvement in criminal activities. (KSAN 2025, 14.)

According to multiple sources, criminal networks actively use sexual violence not only to force young girls into criminality but also to maintain control over them.

Threats and coercion are frequently described as contributing factors that either lead girls into crime or deepen their involvement, with sexual violence and exploitation being deeply embedded in the criminal environment (Barnombudsmannen 2024, 3). In one case a young woman was sexually exploited for several years by two criminal gangs. She was sold to incarcerated men who had sex with her during prison visits. (SVT 19.3.2024.) Criminal networks also sell girls to one another for sexual acts, offer them to members of rival gangs, or use them as payment to settle debts, such as those owed by a boyfriend. (KSAN 2025, 26, 27; SVT 18.3.2024). Swedish media has also reported of cases of girls being subjected to rape and gang rape by individuals connected to criminal networks (SVT 19.3.2024; SVT 5.5.2024). Girls may also be used to sleep with young boys to induct them into gangs (CSJ 2018, 16).

According to Brå's 2021 school survey, 66% of the girls who had committed drug offences had been victims of sexual offences, and nearly half had experienced physical assault (Brå 2022, 9). Brå's (2025c; 2025d) analysis of victim histories of 10,000 girls found that 40 per cent were victims of crime during the period 2021–2023. The interview material and the police intelligence analysis also indicated that many of the girls engage in violence themselves. Almost six in ten had been suspected of at least one violent offence (Brå 2025d, 6). Despite these high levels of victimization, girls are often overlooked within criminal networks. Their involvement in crime may overshadow the fact that they themselves are being subjected to sexual violence and exploitation. (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten 2024.)

Among identified victims of human trafficking, it is relatively common for both women/girls and men/boys to be subjected to multiple forms of exploitation at the same time, e.g. exploitation for both criminal activities and sexual purposes (e.g. Vollebæk 2024, 35; see also Pekkarinen & Jokinen 2023). Empirical research and practical experience indicate that girls are severely affected by criminality, and the impact

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of risk factors as well as the consequences of criminal involvement often differ from those experienced by boys. Girls face particular vulnerability in relation to sexual and gender-based violence. Criminal networks also tend to use their prior experiences of vulnerability, such as family problems, substance abuse, financial debt, threats or experiences of sexual abuse, and control through digital surveillance, to control these girls. (Arnell et al. 2024, 18.)

Girls and young women being involved in relationships with violent men creates a dual vulnerability, as they are both involved in criminal networks and at risk of becoming victims of intimate partnership violence (KSAN 2025, 59). These factors underscore the importance of adopting a gender-sensitive approach when identifying risk factors, understanding pathways into criminality, motivating disengagement, and providing tailored support and interventions (KSAN 2025, 23).

> **He would tell my mom that I had also used W (weed) if I didn't do what he said, it could be absolutely anything, like carrying his stuff or having sex with him even though I didn't want to.**
>
> — (SVT 25.11.2024)

Women and girls in gang contexts who experience physical and sexual violence are particularly vulnerable also when they seek support from e.g., from social services. The girls who reach out to the women's shelters in such situations are between 13 and 25 years old (SVT 25.11.2024). Social services are obliged to report serious crimes, which the women or girls may have been guilty of themselves. This hinders them from accessing support, such as protected housing or access to shelters. Women are also afraid of losing child custody if they seek help. There is thus a need for services that do not have mandatory reporting obligations, which would enable women and girls to seek safety from male violence without fear of legal consequences. Persons who are themselves suspected of crime but simultaneously also victims of gendered violence need specialised legal counsel and preferably also specialised prosecutors. Civil society actors thus emphasise the importance of understanding how gender, power, and violence are interconnected and how this has impact on their agency. (Lindström & Ström 2023.)

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Why do criminal networks actively recruit children?

IN RECENT YEARS, THE increasing involvement of children in criminal networks appears to be linked to a shift in how these organisations operate. While criminal groups previously avoided recruiting very young individuals, often perceiving them as unpredictable or lacking reliability, this reluctance has decreased. As organised crime has moved away from traditional hierarchical models toward more decentralised, cell-based structures, the recruitment of young people, including children, has become more common. These looser organisational forms allow for greater flexibility and reduce internal control mechanisms, making it easier to involve children in various criminal roles. (EUCPN 2024, 9.)

Criminal networks actively recruit children and young people due to a combination of strategic, economic, and legal advantages.

Young people are used to generate profit for others, including through drug sales. As part of profit driven crime, they are also used for other high-risk criminal activities that influential criminals seek to avoid. (SOU 2021:68, 253.) Children are seen as valuable assets because they attract less attention from law enforcement and face significantly milder legal consequences if caught. Police rarely check children in the same way as adults, and those under 15 cannot be prosecuted, making them ideal for high-risk tasks with minimal repercussions. (Polisen 2025b; Brå 2023, 11; Krisinformation 2025.) Older criminals delegate dangerous or high-stakes tasks to children to distance themselves from direct involvement while keeping control over illicit activities. Young people occasionally serve as “human storage units”, hiding weapons or drugs on their person to protect older criminals from being caught during police interventions. Children are also used as “scape goats”, assigned to confess and take punishment for crimes they did not commit. The manipulation often relies on the false reassurance that, due to their age, they will receive only minor punishments if arrested. (Brå 2023, 57–58.)

Young recruits are seen as cost-effective as they are often willing to work for little or no pay.

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Some are compensated with small amounts of money, gifts, or social recognition rather than substantial financial rewards, increasing the network's overall earnings. Another reason for recruiting children is the expansion and competitiveness of criminal networks. Young people help broaden the network's reach by identifying new drug buyers, and they can move undetected in certain social circles, and take on physically demanding or time-intensive tasks such as prolonged drug-selling shifts. Some are also recruited for their willingness to use violence, making them useful in conflicts between rival groups. Additionally, criminal organizations strategically recruit large numbers of children from specific neighbourhoods to strengthen their territorial control and prevent young people from being recruited by rival gangs. (Brå 2023, 58–60.)

Children's reflections on their involvement in criminal activities reveal varying degrees of perceived agency. Some report being motivated by the pursuit of status, financial gain, or a sense of belonging. Others refer to a lack of knowledge or understanding at the time of their involvement. In cases where children feel they had no control over the situation, initial threats are frequently mentioned. Substance abuse is also cited as a contributing factor, with some individuals becoming involved in gang-related crime as a consequence of addiction. A common theme in these narratives is the experience of reaching a point where refusal no longer feels like an option. This moment may coincide with the onset of their involvement or mark a stage of escalation. Importantly, it is often described as a reason why exiting the criminal environment appears impossible. (Bris 2025, 49.)

In reflecting on their experiences, children frequently question whether they ever had a real choice. Since these accounts come from individuals who are already embedded in criminal networks, their reflections tend to be retrospective. Some describe having made a conscious decision to comply with what was asked or expected of them. Others portray their involvement as the result of a gradual process, while a few explain that they made a deliberate but constrained choice, believing that no better alternatives were available. Many, however, express that they never felt they had an opportunity to choose, due to the potential consequences for themselves or their families. (Bris 2025, 49.)

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The Nature of Exploitation and Control

What types of offences are young people forced to commit?

YOUNG PEOPLE INVOLVED IN criminal networks are often not assigned specific tasks but rather are expected to step in and participate when crimes take place. Many begin with minor errands, which gradually escalate into more dangerous activities. Nearly all are involved in drug-related crimes, as drug sales and distribution serve as the foundation of these networks. They are frequently used to transport, store, and sell drugs, as well as acting as lookouts to warn of police or rivals. (Brå 2024, 44–46; Polisen 2024a.) Beyond drug crimes, they are also involved in violent offences, including assault, extortion, armed robbery, shootings, and even bombings. Some are forced to carry and hide weapons or take part in acts of violence as part of debt repayment or to prove their loyalty. (Brå 2023, 47–51.)

According to Norwegian police (2022, 8), some criminal networks, involved in drug-related, weapon-related, and violent crimes, have established themselves in the business sector, engaging in financial and labour market crimes. These criminal businesses are often used for money laundering, including through the real estate market. (Politiet 2022, 8.) The networks use young people in fraud schemes, such as phone scams and acting as money mules (Brå, 2023, 50; CKM 2022, 13). They are being recruited to assist in and conceal the movement of money from criminal activities. It is estimated that 70% of the money mules in Sweden are children, teenagers, or young adults. Young people often have limited knowledge about money laundering, and those who are targeted and allow their accounts to be used are not always aware of the consequences. (Polisen 2024b.) Moreover, the Finnish police has reported that criminals may recruit especially teenagers and young adults

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as money mules approaching them in bars, shopping centres, messaging platforms, or social media. Offenders typically ask them to receive money into their bank account and withdraw it for a fee, often providing a quite credible backstory. Young people may not realise that by doing so, they are participating in money laundering. (Poliisi 9.10.2024.) If a bank flags a transaction as suspicious and freezes the account, the money, often belonging to criminals, may be lost, and the young person can be held responsible. This debt can then be used by the criminal network to pressure the individual into committing further crimes to "pay it off". (Johansson 2025.)

In phone scams, young people are not the ones deceiving victims but are instead recruited to launder the stolen funds.

After a victim is tricked into giving access to their bank account, large amounts of money are transferred and then distributed across the accounts of several young money mules. These mules withdraw the cash and deliver it to the scammers. Criminal networks often have individuals specifically tasked with recruiting money mules, typically targeting young people between the ages of 15 and 25. (SVT 21.11.2019.) Danish research found that a growing form of exploitation involves using young people as drug couriers and digital "money mules", who help conceal financial transactions related to drug sales via their own bank accounts or mobile payment apps. These practices allow organised criminals to hide their profits and reduce the risk of police detection (Søgaard 2022; Søgaard et al. 2021, 28–30). Young persons may also commit property crimes, including theft and burglary, sometimes independently and sometimes under the direction of older criminals (Brå 2023, 47–51).

In 2022, the Swedish Policy Authority identified a trend of recruitment with false promises of employment into criminal networks for the purpose of committing crimes. Once the persons arrive, they are instead coerced into criminal activities, particularly for theft and similar offenses. (Polisen 2022, 16). No specific details were provided regarding the origin or identity of these individuals. During 2021, several Swedish police regions also reported cases where teenage boys were exploited by gang criminals to commit drug and weapon offenses, thefts, and robberies. According to the police, it is a challenge for police investigators to get the boys to talk about what they have been

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subjected to, as they fear both reprisals from the perpetrators and legal consequences for the crimes they have committed. There was no information of girls being subjected to similar exploitation. (Polisen, 2021, 71–72.)

There have, however, been cases where girls have been coerced into hiding drugs and carrying out other illicit tasks through the threat or use of sexual violence, including gang rape, by members of criminal networks. In some cases, the sexual violence is recorded and later used as blackmail. (ECPAT 2023, 21, SVT 19.3.2024.) The extent of the offenders' actual ties to organised crime is not always clear, but even an alleged gang affiliation can be enough to silence victims through fear. However, in drug-related cases, the connection to gangs is typically more apparent. Girls have also been involved in criminal activities by luring individuals into paying for sex or explicit images and then collaborating with gang-affiliated boys to extort or blackmail the victims. (Brå 2023, 52; ECPAT 2023, 21.) There is a rise in children producing and selling their own sexualised content. These children are both boys and girls, but young boys are also among the buyers. (Politiet 2022, 8.)

Similar patterns are evident in the Netherlands. Research shows a notable overlap between criminal exploitation and subversive crime among Dutch youth. Victims are mostly coerced into drug-related offences, such as the transport, production, and trafficking of drugs. Soft-drug dealing is frequently reported in cases involving students, often accompanied by threats of physical violence or psychological manipulation. There are also ongoing concerns about the recruitment and coercion of children into delivering and dealing drugs, with knives or firearms sometimes used as tools of intimidation. Even when children appear to enter these activities voluntarily, coercive tactics often prevent them from leaving, with threats or violence used to maintain control. (CKM 2022, 12.)

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UK Case law example – coercion to carry out fraud

IN 2022, THE UNITED Kingdom witnessed its first human trafficking prosecution involving the use of coercion to carry out fraud. A criminal network was found to have recruited at least 30 underage girls, compelling them to participate in a refund scam involving counterfeit receipts and barcodes. The method involved attaching fraudulent barcodes to retail products, allowing the items to be purchased at a reduced price, and then returning them for a full refund at the original price. For instance, a phone purchased for £20 might be refunded for £120. Over a two-year period, this scheme generated an estimated £500,000 in profit, although authorities suspect the actual figure may be significantly higher. The average age of the girls involved was 14, and many were contacted through social media platforms. A majority came from vulnerable circumstances, with some living in assisted care or experiencing psychological difficulties. (CKM 2022, 12; Independent 10.2.2022.)

How do gangs maintain control over young people once they have been recruited?

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE in criminal networks are controlled through hierarchies, manipulation, fear, and financial exploitation (Brå 2023, 32, 70). Younger recruits are often referred to as "your kids" (dina ungar) or as an elder's "own younger" (egna yngre) reinforcing the idea that older members have full authority over them. Recruits often end up in a subordinate position, treated as the property of older members, who dictate when and how they participate in criminal activities. They are expected to be constantly available, leaving them with little to no control over their own lives. (Ibid., 24.) Loyalty is constantly tested, and young recruits' personal boundaries are gradually broken down to ensure they follow all types of orders (ibid., 68–69). Some older members enforce discipline by verbally or physically reprimanding younger recruits who make mistakes or fail to follow orders (Polismyndigheten 2023, 43).

Older members maintain control over young recruits by balancing violence with warmth, fostering a sense of attachment and loyalty.

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Such "loverboy" or grooming types of methods are often reported to be used in cases of trafficking for sexual exploitation (e.g. Pekkarinen & Jokinen 2023) but could be relevant also when it comes to girls involved with members of the criminal groups. Generally, manipulation relies on gifts, money, and status, but also on indebtedness and psychological control. Many young individuals view older members as father figures or older brothers, feeling both cared for and protected. However, this relationship is deeply ambivalent, as recruits also experience exploitation and fear, consequently realising that the older members do not genuinely care about them. In some cases, young recruits live with older members in shared housing, allowing for constant oversight and ensuring they follow instructions. (Brå 2023, 69–70; Vollebæk 2024, 37.) These types of relationship dynamics are usually referred to as trauma bonding (e.g. Korkman 2024).

While drug trafficking is only one component of the broader criminal economy, it plays a key role in drawing young people into criminal networks. It not only facilitates the continuous recruitment of new members but also serves as a tool to retain and exert control over those already involved (KSAN 2025, 28). Danish research noted that North African boys exploited in criminal activities often describe how traffickers systematically make them dependent on drugs in order to control them, which is argued to be a significant part of the exploitation. (Rettrup Mørch & Rasmussen, 2020, 24.)

Recruitment may also be framed as an employment opportunity, creating a deceptive illusion of choice.

In one interrogation, a child suspect described how he was offered a "job" by a gang with the promise of a monthly salary. When he initially declined, he was threatened with violence. His "working hours" were set from 3 PM to 11 PM, and he was supervised by a 16-year-old who ensured he followed orders. The money he collected was handed over at various locations, and the salary he was originally promised was eventually cut in half. (Brå 2023, 48.)

The network structure makes older members financially dependent on the income generated by younger recruits, which is why leaving the network is strictly controlled. In the case of drug sales, reports indicate that young dealers are often trapped in a cycle where they are unable to stop

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generating income to older criminals. Whether due to intimidation, demands for repayment of debts, or other forms of coercion, they are left with little choice but to continue selling drugs. (SOU 2021:68, 253.)

To maintain control, exploiters use a variety of methods that often go beyond physical means. Psychological and emotional manipulation are central tools in their strategies.

For instance, repeated abuse allows the perpetrator to establish ongoing dominance, leaving the victim feeling powerless and unable to resist. Victims may also be manipulated through threats, such as warnings that contacting the police will lead to their own arrest or detention. By exploiting the victim's position of vulnerability, the perpetrators ensure that the individual feels they have no real or acceptable alternative but to comply with the demands placed upon them. (Piotrowicz & Sorrentino 2018, 175.)

The strategies used by perpetrators to control victims in criminal exploitation can generally be categorised into 'hard' and 'soft' forms of coercion, soft referring to more subtle forms of control and hard referring to physical violence. Research consistently indicates that the use of violence or threats of violence is a common method for compelling individuals to engage in criminal activities. According to a study, one-third of frontline professionals had encountered cases where physical force or threats were used to pressure victims into offending. (CKM 2021, 26; 2022, 17.) Older members may also spread rumours and show videos of violent punishments to intimidate younger individuals into refusing to cooperate with authorities. Members may also be witnessing extreme violence, such as amputations and beatings, reinforcing the belief that speaking to the police has severe consequences. (Brå 2023, 83.)

> **I'm scared because they've forced me to do things, and if I don't, they do things to me. I said no, and it didn't go well. One time I said no, another time I didn't respond at all when they messaged me. Then they found me, forced me into the trunk of a car, drove me out to the woods, and did things to me because I didn't want to shoot someone.**
>
> — Bris 2025, 61.

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Identification and Legal Assessment

How are children identified as victims of trafficking or as perpetrators?

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN VICTIM and perpetrator is not always clear, particularly in cases of criminal exploitation (Socialstyrelsen 2020, 29). Unlike other forms of trafficking, such as sexual exploitation, forced begging, or labour exploitation, where victims are clearly identified, those exploited for criminal activities are often classified as offenders at least initially. When children engage in illegal activities, they are frequently perceived as perpetrators rather than victims, making it less apparent that they may have been coerced or manipulated. (Vollebæk 2024, 23.) Nordic experts consulted for the project confirmed that identifying such children as victims of trafficking is not easy for the authorities.

Danish research has noted that while Danish legislation contains several provisions that aim to protect victims of human trafficking by dropping the charges against them, as well as cancelling and reducing sentences when the individual has been subjected to criminal exploitation, these are rarely applied when it comes to the previously mentioned North African boys. In many cases, they are given prison sentences or deportation orders despite the fact that they have also been identified as victims of human trafficking. (Rettrup Mørch & Rasmussen, 2020, 22.)

In Finland, the police seldom investigate all the underlying factors behind a young person's criminal behaviour, and potential cases of human trafficking are thus not investigated. Experts noted that children involved in criminality do not always necessarily get adequate support during the police investigation, and the path forward can become difficult if the child is treated as a criminal, eventually also leading to them

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actually becoming perpetrators. (SafeBorders stakeholder meeting 28.5.2025.) It may also be more challenging for the authorities to identify potential cases involving children who are residents of the country in question rather than foreigners (see also Vollebæk 2024). Similar findings were made in recent research covering Northern Ireland (Kane & Chisholm 2025, 42–44).

According to Pihlaja (2024a; 2025), efforts to identify human trafficking should be strengthened, particularly in cases where a child is suspected of criminal involvement. Differences in how the law enforcement view young people's cognitive development and their understanding of consequences may affect both the approach to and outcome of the investigation (Pihlaja 2025). Moreover, it has been suggested that often exploited youths do not recognise themselves as victims, believing instead they are making independent choices, even when they are being used for someone else's benefit. (Ibid.) Young people in such situations may feel that participating in criminal acts brings benefits through a sense of belonging to a group, and criminals themselves downplay and glorify the criminal lifestyle, and the risks involved (KOM 2025, 76). If these youth are perceived and encountered as criminals by the criminal justice process actors, it is highly unlikely that they will be forthcoming and give details about their abusive situation and they may, for good reasons, fear the consequences. Identifying children who are coerced or manipulated into criminality thus requires the criminal justice system to see the whole picture and the context of the child. (Korkman 2024, 29.)

It should be also remembered that legally, consent is irrelevant if the victim of trafficking is under 18 years old, or if consent was obtained through coercion, threats, or manipulation. Interviewed Finnish law enforcement officers noted that often it is difficult to get the children to open up about their situation when they are suspected of committing crimes.

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> **A major issue is that the youth don't want to talk about being recruited, tricked, or forced into something. […] And of course, there's also the real or perceived fear of what might happen if they do speak up. That's completely understandable – if someone has committed crimes themselves, they probably have to be in a pretty tight spot before they start talking about those crimes and expose the people behind it all.**
>
> – Expert interview 12, Finland

However, Pihlaja (2025) emphasises that the reluctance of children and young people to disclose their experiences to the police is not solely due to issues of trust or a lack of special interview techniques. Rather, it reflects a broader structural problem: there are very few, if any, effective mechanisms to protect the children from retaliation or other negative consequences that may follow disclosure. If a child perceives that the criminal justice system cannot intervene swiftly or punish the perpetrators, they may view the risks of speaking out as outweighing any potential benefits. (Pihlaja 2025, 422.)

Interviewed Finnish law enforcement and criminal justice authorities noted that in child trafficking cases it is important to ensure that the child has access to a competent legal counsel as well as an adult/support person whom the child perceives as safe right from the start of the investigation. They can help ensuring that the full picture of the situation and what has occurred is brought up during the interviews.

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Good practice example – handbooks targeting law enforcement

IN 2023, THE FINNISH University College developed a handbook into human trafficking investigation which provides concrete tools for different actors in dealing with human trafficking and related phenomenon. In relation to child trafficking, the handbook outlines that it is important to investigate, for example, whether the perpetrator was aware of any vulnerabilities the child may have had—such as mental health issues or difficult home circumstances—who the child spoke with about, for instance, selling sex or drugs and their need for money before the situation arose, how the decision to act came about, what would have happened if the child had not acted as they did, and how the child would describe their relationship with the other individuals involved. (Pihlaja 2024b, 311.) For supporting professionals in carrying out investigative interviews in presumed cases of trafficking in children, there is also a recent handbook published by HEUNI and the Council of the Baltic Sea States. The handbook is based on research and experiences of practitioners, outlining commonly agreed best practices in child investigative interviewing and applying these to different contexts of child trafficking. The handbook acknowledges, however, that there is no "one size fits all" -method for the various situations children may find themselves in, including when they may themselves be suspected of committing crimes in relation to their exploitation. (Korkman 2024.)

Many children and young people who commit crimes may themselves have been victims of abuse, neglect, or exploitation as was pointed out by Nordic experts consulted for the project.

Additionally, some children experience honour-related threats, violence, or oppression, further complicating their legal and social status. In some instances, they may be both victim and perpetrator within the same event, such as in assault, drug-related offenses, or human trafficking. (Socialstyrelsen 2020, 29.) In legal proceedings, it is possible for an individual to be recognised as both a victim and a defendant within the same trial. When assessing cases of criminal exploitation, it is important to distinguish between the act of exploitation itself and the offence committed. (SOU 2021:68, 254.)

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In the case of exploitation in criminal activities, the distinction between coercion, deception, and voluntary participation in crime is often unclear, which challenges the traditional binary view of victims and offenders (Vollebæk 2024, 25). According to national laws in the Nordic countries and international conventions, when it comes to children, the means of trafficking are not required for their exploitation to be classified as human trafficking. This applies equally to criminal exploitation as it does to other forms of abuse, including sexual and labour exploitation. Nordic trafficking experts pointed out that often the threshold for applying the trafficking provision seems high, even in cases involving children, where technically the simple act of recruitment and exploitative purpose would fulfil the definition. This is problematic from the point of view of safeguarding the rights of potential victims of trafficking.

How do authorities establish whether the child had a realistic alternative not to comply with the recruiters/exploiters?

THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF recruitment and control discussed previously highlight the blurred line between voluntary involvement in criminal activities and exploitation in criminality. While some young people may appear to engage willingly in criminal activities, closer examination reveals the structural pressures, manipulation, and coercion that often underpin their involvement. This ambiguity has important legal implications, which the criminal justice system struggles with in many European countries, including the Nordic countries.

For example, in the Netherlands, a landmark ruling determined that any involvement of children in organised crime should automatically be regarded as criminal exploitation, offering a more protective and nuanced understanding of their circumstances under the law (EUCPN 2024, 10). Although this ruling is not directly applicable in the Nordic countries, it raises important questions about how youth involvement in crime is legally understood in the region. A challenge within the broader European context is the lack of a consistent definition of organised crime. While some countries define it based on specific offences like drug trafficking, others require proof of a structured, hierarchical organisation. (Ibid., 10.) These definitional differences can affect how youth involved in criminal networks are identified, categorised, and protected, especially in legal proceedings.

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Leaving a criminal network is often significantly harder than joining one, which means that a child who has consented to criminal activities in the first place, may be unable to leave the exploitative situation later.

Exiting is viewed as betrayal, and those who attempt to leave may face threats, humiliation, or violence, while fear tactics ensure their silence (Bris 2025, 51–52; Brå 2023, 7, 82). In some cases, young people manage to leave the network when older members die or are imprisoned for long periods. However, leaving is often temporary, as young people are monitored even when placed in care or detention, and may be re-recruited upon release, sometimes directly from youth homes or institutions. (Brå 2023, 7, 83, 86.) In many cases, those who manage to leave must do so by disappearing from their previous environment, relocating to another city, and cutting all ties to former social networks, sometimes with protected identities to avoid retribution (Bris 2025, 52).

The criminal behaviour of a child must be understood in the context of their circumstances.

For instance, an unaccompanied child exposed to high-risk environments who engages in theft, threats, robbery, drug possession, or substance abuse should not only be taken into protective care but also be asked whether they are being coerced by others to commit such offenses (Länsstyrelsen 2018, 26). For example, in a Finnish case, a child of 14–15 years of age had been instructed by his own parents to participate in drug dealing operations. He was sentenced by the district court for drug offences. However, the Court of Appeal reached a different conclusion, noting that the child had not acted on their own initiative but had become involved in the parents' drug offence without independent agency. (Toivonen et al. 2022, 872).

It is important that the child receives appropriate support from trusted adults to feel safe enough to disclose any exploitation or abuse they may have experienced. (Länsstyrelsen 2018, 26.) There should be enough time to engage in discussing the circumstances and creating a rapport during which the child may choose to open up about possible coercion by others (Korkman 2024).

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Moreover, the absence of a clearly defined legal scope contributes to a legal grey area when determining whether an individual should be regarded as a victim or a perpetrator.

This legal uncertainty underscores the complex intersection between criminal exploitation and subversive crime. Since individuals subjected to criminal exploitation are inherently involved in unlawful activities, it is essential that such cases are assessed through the lens of the non-punishment principle which asserts that individuals who have been compelled to commit offences as a result of exploitation should not be held criminally responsible for those actions. (CKM 2022, 10.)

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Prevention and Support Responses

What strategies are in place to prevent child criminality and recruitment into criminal activities in Sweden?

IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES, the juvenile justice system is based on the principle that responsibility for young offenders lies primarily with social services. When working with children at risk, for example in Sweden, social services are legally obliged to collaborate with other key actors, such as healthcare providers, schools, and the police. Children who exhibit antisocial or disruptive behaviour may require support measures that go beyond addressing specific risk behaviours. (Socialstyrelsen 2023.)

In response to the increasing recruitment of children, often by older youth seeking to exploit them, the Swedish government tasked several authorities with creating a coordinated approach at the national, regional, and local levels to prevent youth involvement in organised crime (ibid., 23–24). The national council include the Swedish Police Authority, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå), the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, the Country Administrative Boards, the National Board of Health and Welfare, the National Board of Institutional Care (SiS), the Swedish National Agency for Education, and the Swedish Prosecution Authority. The national council is led by the Swedish Police Authority. The council convenes monthly and oversees the establishment and development of the BOB structure at all levels. To support its work, the council has established several cross-agency working groups focusing on key areas such as legal frameworks, knowledge sharing, communication, and coordination with civil society, aiming to ensure a unified and effective national approach. (Polismyndigheten et al. 2023, 29–31.)

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Good practice example – Sweden's BOB model

SINCE THE END OF 2023, the County Administrative Board of Stockholm has been working closely with six other county administrative boards and seven national agencies to prevent and address the recruitment of children and young people into criminal networks. Regional cooperation is now established across Sweden, with local initiatives underway in the most high-priority areas. The collaboration is carried out within the framework of BOB (Barn och unga i Organiserad Brottslighet, i.e., Children and Youth in Organised Crime), a national initiative launched by the Swedish government. (Polismyndigheten, Socialstyrelsen & Statens institutionsstyrelse 2023.)

The purpose of the BOB structure is to strengthen and streamline efforts to prevent children and young people from becoming involved in serious crime. It also aims to ensure effective and appropriate measures for those already involved, identify and share successful methods, develop new approaches tailored to the needs of individuals or target groups, and connect efforts through collaboration councils at the national, regional, and local levels, with a focus on practical actions and interventions (Polismyndigheten et al. 2023, 24.)

The regional councils in Sweden are organised according to the seven police regions. County administrative boards lead the regional councils in close collaboration with the police and other relevant authorities. These councils adapt the national strategy to regional conditions and act as a link between national leadership and local implementation. The local level is where the most hands-on, operational work takes place. Local BOB councils are established based on assessed need, with a focus on concrete interventions for individual children and youth. Their role is to complement, rather than replace, existing collaboration models, such as social intervention groups (SIG) and the SSPF model (school, social services, police, and leisure). Local BOB councils are supported by regional actors through templates, guidance, and participation in initial meetings. (Polismyndigheten et al. 2023, 24–27.) Sweden has also established the Family Law and Parental Support Authority MFoF,

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which oversees the implementing of an action plan for crime prevention parental support.[8]

What are the barriers for seeking support?

AS OUTLINED PREVIOUSLY, EXITING a criminal gang or exploitative situation may be difficult, especially for children and young people. The consequences of seeking assistance may pose a significant threat to the victims' safety, or lead to other consequences which are considered serious from the point of view of the child. Victims of trafficking rarely identify themselves as victims due to multiple barriers, including fear of stigma, lack of awareness about their rights or that their experience constitutes trafficking, and ignorance of available assistance. Feelings of guilt or shame, fear of retaliation, imprisonment, deportation, or fines and dependence on the exploiter(s) further discourage help-seeking. (Jokinen et al. 2016, 29.) Disclosing their situation may lead children to be taken from their homes to be placed in institutions, or to them losing contact with their friends or being isolated from their communities, having poor reputation and other consequences which are considered very dire by the young people themselves as pointed out by several Nordic consulted stakeholders.

> **Perpetrators are often well-versed in identifying vulnerabilities and abusing them in such a way that the victims do not disclose their experiences to others due to e.g. fear of consequences.**

Victims of human trafficking are often controlled through psychological coercion rather than physical force (e.g. Korkman 2023). Traffickers and exploiters build personal relationships with the victims, use threats, isolation, and degradation, while occasionally showing kindness to manipulate victims. These tactics create fear, dependency, and confusion, making victims believe exploitation is normal and preventing them from recognising themselves as victims. (Pekkarinen & Jokinen 2023, 56.)

Since 2022, calls to the children's rights organisation Bris (2025) in Sweden have tripled, with most of these calls made

8 Crime prevention parental support (mfof.se).

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by children who themselves are worried about their participation in gang-related activities. Some children are on the fringes of gang involvement, while others are deeply embedded and have committed serious crimes. Many children express a desire to disengage from gang involvement, yet they may struggle to envision a viable path out as fear for themselves and their family members prevents them from taking the necessary steps. At the same time, children fear the repercussions of staying involved. This dual threat often results in a profound sense of hopelessness and the perception that there is "no way out", regardless of the choices available to them. Moreover, many of these children exhibit a lack of trust in adults and institutions, and do not perceive any credible source of support capable of facilitating their exit from the situation. (Bris 2025, 12.)

Children involved in criminal networks describe having no safe opportunity to seek help, along with a constant sense and awareness of being monitored. Within these environments, reaching out for help is equated with "snitching", as it is nearly impossible to receive support without disclosing sensitive information. According to the children, snitching inevitably leads to consequences. As a result, even when a child wants to seek help, the constant surveillance and fear of consequences make it extremely difficult to do so. (Bris 2025, 55.) When a child or young person believes the criminal justice system cannot act quickly or hold perpetrators accountable, they may conclude that speaking out carries greater risks than potential benefits (Pihlaja 2025, 422).

On July 1, 2025, a new Social Services Act (SoL) came into effect in Sweden, further clarifying the responsibility of social services to engage in preventive and crime prevention work. The support provided by social services to children wanting to leave criminal networks is governed by the same legal provisions in SoL and the Care of Young Persons Act (LVU) that apply to work with children and young people in general. However, certain aspects may differ in these cases, particularly the need for close cooperation with the police due to the specific threats these children may face. When social services become aware that a child is involved in a criminal network, they are required to immediately initiate an investigation according to the law.

Finnish NGOs have reported a growing number of cases in which young adults seek support years after having been subjected to e.g. sexual exploitation or situations where they think they themselves have done something criminal while they were still underage (Pihlaja & Piipponen 2023). Many of these young

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people were attending school and receiving various public services at the time when the exploitation occurred, which point to challenges among professionals to recognise the signs of abuse as well as the lack of trust and/or fear among children to disclose their experiences to various adults in their lives. This was found problematic also by Finnish stakeholders consulted for the scoping study.

What support do young people involved in gang crimes receive?

IN SWEDEN, SOCIAL INTERVENTION groups (SIG) were developed to help youth at high risk of committing crimes to shun the criminal lifestyle (Socialstyrelsen, Polisen, Brå, Skolverket, MUCF, & SKR, 2022, 2). It is a collaborative working method where actors, such as social services, police and schools, work together to support young people at high risk of continued criminal behaviour. With the individual's or guardian's consent, they share information to provide coordinated and timely interventions. For each young person involved in SIG, a unique SIG group is created. In 2021, 109 municipalities reported that they work with SIG. Work within social intervention groups is carried out in different ways across municipalities. What originally started as a form of collaboration has increasingly come to be used as a needs assessment intervention. (Socialstyrelsen et al., 2022, 4.)

Collaboration in social intervention groups is organised into different groups and functions. The steering group, usually consisting of representatives from the police, schools, social services, and mental health care services, holds overall responsibility. The steering group clarifies priorities, defines roles and responsibilities, and oversees the work of social intervention groups. The preparation group typically includes managers from child and family social services, the police, and the principal of the relevant school. The preparation group maintains an overview of the local SIG work, coordinates resources and discusses individual cases, such as the young person's support needs, suitable interventions, and appropriate actors to involve in the case. The Social Intervention Group is the operational group that works directly with the young person and tailored to their individual needs. Core members typically include social services, the police, the school health services, or child and adolescent psychiatry. The coordinator is involved in all the groups and may also function as a key contact for the young person and their parents. Key responsibilities include organising and leading network and SIG

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meetings, bringing relevant actors into the SIG, preparing cases, drafting action plans, and ensuring flexibility, so that support and interventions are adapted to the young person's situation and needs. (Socialstyrelsen et al., 2022, 5–6.)

The SIGs' knowledge-based work is grounded in the RNR (Risk-Need-Responsivity) principles (Socialstyrelsen et al., 2022, 8). The risk principle states that the intensity of interventions should match the individual's level of risk, meaning that youth at high risk should receive the most intensive support. The need principle highlights that interventions should target the specific risk factors that drive the individual's criminal behaviour. The responsivity principle involves using methods that, according to research, are the most effective, such as interventions grounded in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and social learning theory. It also stresses the importance of adapting interventions to the individual's abilities and potential challenges like language difficulties or neurodevelopmental disorders. (Socialstyrelsen et al., 2022, 9.)

The first step in the SIG-RNR model is to identify young people potentially in the target group and to actualize the process. The second step involves assessing and analysing the young person's risk and protective factors for criminal behaviour using a structured, standardised method, followed by an analysis based on the RNR principles to determine whether SIG support should be offered. The third step involves contacting the young person and their guardian to offer SIG, identifying necessary partners based on the young person's needs, forming a tailored SIG group, and obtaining consent for information sharing among all relevant actors, formalised through a signed agreement. The fourth step is to develop an individual written action plan based on the RNR principles, ensuring that the planned interventions are comprehensive, intensive, and multimodal, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and securing agreement from both the involved actors and the young person and their guardian. The fifth step is to implement the planned measures with clear responsibilities and a set timeline, hold regular follow-up meetings, ensure the interventions are comprehensive, intensive, and multimodal, and continuously track, document, and adjust the action plan as needed. The final step is to systematically and thoroughly follow up on the individual goals set in the SIG action plan, ensuring all sub-goals and main objectives are met before concluding the SIG process. (Socialstyrelsen et al., 2022, 10.)

Cooperation between schools, social services, police and leisure services (SSPF) was developed to identify youth at risk of

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committing crimes or who are showing early signs of criminal behavior but do not warrant a SIG which targets high risk individuals. (Socialstyrelsen et al., 2022, 2.) SSPF exists in at least 148 municipalities in Sweden. The work methods are adapted at the local level, and both target groups and implementation differ between municipalities. SSPF is inspired by the Danish working model SSP, which was established in Denmark in the 1970s. In Sweden, SSPF is used for both area-based and individual-based work. (Socialstyrelsen et al., 2022, 5.) When a young person becomes involved in SSPF, the reason may be that one of the collaborating parties has suspected that the youth has experimented with drugs, begun committing crimes, or has connections with criminal groups. It may also concern young people who, in other ways, exhibit norm-breaking behaviour. (Socialstyrelsen et al., 2022, 4.)

In Denmark, the Youth Crime Boards (YCB) is a system similar to Sweden's SIG, bringing children aged 10–17 into the criminal justice system. However, new adaptations of the model have shifted its emphasis from a welfarebased approach to a more punitive one, allowing under15yearolds to receive mandatory social measures. The YCB aims to prevent reoffending through structured programmes, but it has also been criticised for being very general and difficult to apply in different situations. (Østergaard Larsen et al. 2023.)

Norway has adopted a programme called the Coordination of Local Drug and Crime Prevention measures (shortened SLT in Norwegian). Approximately 200 municipalities have implemented a SLT model in their respective municipalities, a programme which aims to connect social workers, various public institutions, like the police, and NGOs, to prevent youth crime and drug use. The programmes are led by coordinators, who oversee collaboration with the various actors. (Riksrevisjonen, 2025.) The local police have an active role in SLT-models (National Police Directorate, 2020). As with the Swedish model, the Norwegian programme was derived from the Danish SSP-model. The main goal of the SLT-model is that existing preventative resources are used in an efficient and coordinated manner, thus improving prevention services for young people. (Konfliktrådet, 2021) An example of an SLT-model is the SaLTo programme in Oslo, which has a specific focus on preventing hate crimes and radicalisation (Oslo Kommune, 2025).

In Finland, Anchor Work (Ankkuritoiminta) is a nationwide model for early intervention with at-risk youth. It brings together police, social, health, and youth services in multidisciplinary

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teams to promote well-being, prevent crime, and break cycles of offending. Teams meet the children and their families as early as possible, offering support and referrals to essential services. Originating in Hämeenlinna in the early 2000s, Anchor Work has expanded through effective practices and now operates regionally under common national principles, adapted to local needs. A development group has published a handbook to guide implementation, development, and evaluation. (Ankkuritoiminta n.d.) While the Anchor model may differ somewhat in its implementation around the country, making follow-up of its success as an intervention complicated, an assessment indicates that on an individual level, the children who were targeted by the Anchor work were less likely to recidivate in the following year compared to the control group (Kaakinen et al., 2022).

In Iceland, children involved in cases of violence are referred to treatment services at the Children and Family Agency (BOFS). Temporary funding was provided to BOFS at the end of 2023 to strengthen its treatment efforts, with the goal of addressing the serious situation facing the agency's treatment system due to the increase in serious cases of violence among children and contribute to eliminating such behaviour. Work has been underway to develop a resource called Farvegurinn ("The Pathway"), intended for youth who are completing treatment at BOFS residential treatment centers or have been convicted of violent offenses to guide them onto a new path. The city of Reykjavík has also established a mobile youth centre Flotinn. The goal is to reach children aged 12–16 who do not participate in organised leisure activities, experience negative social interactions, display risky behaviour, and/or live in challenging social conditions. The work is based on close collaboration with the police and other child service providers. (Oddgeirsdóttir 2025.)

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Criminal Justice Responses

What is the age of criminal responsibility and how are offending children treated by the criminal justice system?

THE UN CONVENTION ON the Rights of the Child applies to all children in the Nordic countries, including those who have committed criminal offenses. It sets clear standards for how children in conflict with the law should be treated. Article 37 ensures that any child deprived of their liberty is treated with humanity and respect, while Article 40 guarantees that children accused or convicted of a crime receive treatment that upholds their dignity and encourages respect for the rights and freedoms of others.

In the Nordic countries, children under 15 are not criminally responsible and cannot be detained, arrested, or prosecuted, and are rather mainly dealt with child protective services. However, recent developments regarding youth crime are challenging this approach. Despite well-established evidence that the isolation and institutionalisation of children increase the risk of reoffending, for instance in Sweden there is an ongoing push to shift the responsibility for children who commit crimes from the social services to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. This represents a troubling development that risks exacerbating, rather than alleviating, the challenges of gang-related crime. (Bris 2025, 12.)

Most recently in Sweden, in September 2025 the government proposed to change the age of criminal responsibility to 13 years of age in cases of serious crimes such as murder, aggravated bombings, and aggravated rapes. The proposal is part of the government's "broader efforts to help children leave the criminal path, as well as to strengthen victims' rights and meet society's need for protection." The draft

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specifies that the new age limit applies to crimes with a minimum sentence of four years or more, including attempts and preparations. The changes would take effect on 1 July 2026. (Justitiedepartementet 2025a). This proposal, as well as the government's previous proposal to lower the age of criminal responsibility to 14 (SOU 2025:11) has been rejected by most consultation bodies because the proposals conflict with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Sweden would move further away from international standards, best practices and evidence-based criminal policies. Moreover, lowering the age risks punishing children who cannot reasonably foresee the impact of their actions and results in more long-term harm. (Justitiedepartementet 2025b.)

In Sweden, currently a legal procedure called a "bevistalan" is used to determine whether the child is responsible for the crime. Sweden is the only Nordic country that uses a procedure like bevistalan to formally determine guilt in court. In Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland, such cases are handled through police investigations and social services, without court proceedings to establish guilt. A bevistalan resembles a regular criminal trial: a prosecutor investigates the circumstances and intent, and a court ultimately decides on the question of guilt. No legal penalties can be imposed, even if the child is found to have committed the crime. (Åklagarmyndigheten 2023.)

Since a legal reform in 2023, which allows individual prosecutors to initiate a bevistalan, the number of cases involving criminal offenses committed by children has increased significantly in Sweden (Dagens Nyheter 8.11.2024). There have been arguments e.g. from prosecutors that Swedish legislation is not adequately adapted to the current challenges and there is the need for expanded legal options to detain youths to effectively combat organised and violent crime. (Aftonbladet 12.10.2024.)

In 2019, Denmark introduced a new approach to criminal law, the Youth Crime Act, which allows referring children aged 10–17 who have committed serious crimes to the criminal justice system at an earlier stage. This is a result of the Danish government's more punishment-focused policy, which saw the previous model based on social welfare and child protection as ineffective. The idea behind the new model was to bring children more directly into the criminal justice system, where children under the age of 15, who were previously outside the scope of criminal responsibility, can be ordered to undergo compulsory social measures that were previously voluntary. (Østergaard Larsen, Henriksen, Dyrvig Henriksen & Torbenfelt

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Bengtsson 2023, 332–333.) However, research has found no evidence that lowering the minimum age of criminal responsibility reduced the probability of committing crime among 14-year-olds. On the contrary, an increase in reported crimes during the reform was observed, most evident among 14-year-olds with prior offending record, whose educational results were also negatively affected. The 13- and 15-year-olds were not affected by the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility. (Østergaard Larsen 2025.)

In the Danish system, the key supervisory authorities include the Youth Crime Boards (YCB) and the Youth Probation Service (YPS), which have been integrated into the existing system. The YCB consists of three board members: a judge, a representative from the local police, and a representative from the municipal child welfare services. Its purpose is to decide on mandatory social measures to prevent future criminal activity. Also the child, the child's parents, a YPS probation officer, and the child welfare case manager are present. The child and parents are required to attend the meetings. Children aged 10–14 are referred directly to the YCB by the police, while those aged 15–17 first go through the court, from where they are transferred to the YCB if found guilty. (Østergaard Larsen et al. 2023, 334–335.)

Also in Norway, a growing concern has emerged about crimes committed by children below the age of criminal responsibility. Research by the Norwegian Correctional Service College and Training Centre highlights the need to avoid fearmongering and cautions against direct comparisons between Norwegian crime statistics and Sweden's gang- and organised crime figures (Lundeberg & Gaarder, 2025). Additionally, a recent report by the Norwegian Audit Office revealed significant shortcomings in government efforts to prevent crime among children, sparking public debate on whether the age of criminal responsibility should be lowered (Riksrevisjonen 2025).

In Finland, a new Government Proposal suggests establishing a new rehabilitative closed institutional care service under the Child Welfare Act to be provided by the State Reform School (VKK) from 1 August 2026. This would be implemented as 24-hour out-of-home care under child welfare services in a child welfare institution, where the freedom of movement and certain other fundamental rights of placed children would be restricted more intrusively and for longer periods than in other forms of child welfare out-of-home care. A child aged 12 or older could be placed in this closed institutional care if they

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pose serious danger to their own or others' safety through violent or other criminal behaviour, and if the service is deemed necessary to protect the child from behaviour that endangers their own and/or others' safety. The placement would be based on criteria set in the Child Welfare Act and would not be used as a criminal sanction. (HE 149/2025vp, 53.)

According to the Government Proposal, the aim is for the child to receive the rehabilitative services and long-term support they need from the institution, especially when other out-of-home care methods or services are not suitable alternatives. The closed institutional care service is intended to "strongly protect and rehabilitate the child". To prevent violent and criminal behaviour and fulfil the protective function, it would be "necessary to restrict the child's freedom of movement and other rights. Therefore, the service must be fundamentally closed in nature". (HE 149/2025vp, 53–54.)

At the same time, a recent report by Rantaeskola (2025) for the Finnish Ministry of Justice examined the needs to amend the provisions concerning the deprivation of liberty of children without criminal liability. The report calls for changes to how authorities handle children under 15 who commit criminal acts, emphasising support over punishment. It suggests closer cooperation with wellbeing services counties and improvements to the criminal investigation processes, where the seriousness of the act determines the level of police involvement. For minor or moderately serious offences, informal police interviews, mediation, and child protection measures would suffice. In cases of very serious crimes, the focus should shift to safeguarding the child and ensuring their legal protection. If a child under 15 is suspected of a very serious offence, the arresting official must notify the wellbeing services county, which assumes responsibility within 24 hours. Authorities should then balance child protection with the need to secure the investigation. (Ibid.)

Finally, in Iceland, based on the child protection action plan for the years 2023–2027, efforts are underway to establish a treatment facility in the capital area for youth dealing with serious behavioural and/or substance abuse issues, or who are serving unconditional prison sentences. (Oddgeirsdottir 2025.)

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What are the links between involvement of youth in criminal activities and child trafficking according to recent Swedish research?

MÄRTA JOHANSSON (2025) STUDIED involvement and exploitation of youth in criminal activities in examining Swedish court cases on human trafficking and the new offense of involving children in criminal activities. As part of the study, nine cases, a total of 15 judgments, were identified in which charges of human trafficking for the purpose of exploiting a person in criminal activity have been tried. The only two convictions on trafficking in children for the purpose of criminal activities are from the years 2010 and 2011 and they concerned children from EU countries who were exploited by being made to commit thefts. (Johansson 2025, 17.)

Case law example – Sweden

IN 2009, TWO ROMANIAN men recruited two 16-year-old boys to travel to Sweden under the pretext of finding jobs. After arriving, the boys were forced to steal. The crime came to light when they stole a car the day after arrival and were arrested in Nyköping. Initially, the court ruled against human trafficking charges, noting the boys were not locked up, had phone access, and did not seek help. However, the Court of Appeal overturned this, finding the men had decisive control: the boys spoke only Romanian, had no money, and were fully dependent on the men. Consent to steal was deemed irrelevant. The men were sentenced to one year in prison and ordered to pay 60,000 SEK in damages.

According to Johansson (2025, 24–26), the assessment of 'recruitment' in human trafficking cases involving exploitation in criminal activity shows that the courts have required proof of actions that are not typically present in the ordinary recruitment of young people into criminal activity. Courts seem to require clear recruitment measures for membership in a criminal organization, which does not reflect the way in which children are most often recruited into these looser networks. For example, in one case, the court's requirements regarding what is considered to constitute recruitment appear to have been based on a formal recruitment process, involving various

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measures leading into a more structured criminal activity. (Ibid.)

Between July 2023 and March 2025, a total of 25 appellate court decisions addressed the offense of involving a child in criminal activity along with the corresponding 25 district court rulings. In 21 of the 25 cases tried in the district courts, one or more individuals were convicted of the offense of involving a child in criminal activity. The appellate courts generally upheld the district court rulings, except in one case where, contrary to the district court's judgment, the appellate court delivered a conviction for the offense. (Johansson 2025, 39.)

Johansson (2025, 46) found that the circumstances in five of the 25 cases suggest that charges for human trafficking could have been brought, based on the exploitative purposes of either forced labour or activity in a situation that constitutes an emergency for the victim. In one case, the court found that the boy recruited into criminal activity had been in an emergency situation, as he had not intended to commit the offence but only played along because he was threatened. In another case, a boy had received serious threats to force him into committing a crime that, if completed, would have put his life at serious risk. In a third case, the court found that a boy recruited into criminal activity had accepted instructions from criminals because he had been subjected to unlawful threats. Another case concerned a boy who had expressed fear of being forced to commit more crimes and had repeatedly asked for help to escape the situation. In the last case, two boys were convicted, among other things, for creating a danger to others by transporting an explosive device in a taxi, an act the court considered to constitute an emergency situation for the boys. (Johansson 2025, 46–47.)

In all 25 cases except one, the charges for the offence of involving a child in criminal activity concerned situations where the child, by being involved, had committed one or more concrete crimes. The children' responsibility for the offences was examined at the same time as the charges for involving a child in criminal activity. In 23 cases, the children were also found responsible for one or more crimes they had committed, or their responsibility was established through a bevistalan, to establish that a child under 15 has committed a crime. In half of the cases, they were convicted of, or it was established that they had committed, multiple crimes. (Johansson 2025, 41.)

Johansson further notes that current Swedish case law interprets the exploitation purpose of "engagement in a

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situation that constitutes an emergency for the victim" too narrowly. High demands are placed on the child either lacking freedom of action or being in a very difficult situation by the Swedish courts. Factors such as initial voluntariness are also allowed to affect the evaluation. If this interpretation excludes children recruited into criminal activities, then another legal purpose must be introduced to cover their circumstances. Without such a provision, Sweden risks failing to meet its obligations under the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive. In her analysis of eleven cases, Johansson found that the act and means elements of trafficking were present, but the cases could not be prosecuted as trafficking due to the absence of a specific exploitation purpose related to criminal activity. Including "exploitation in criminal activity" as an explicit form of exploitation in the Swedish trafficking offence would make the trafficking framework applicable to these cases, ensuring proper legal response and better protection for exploited children.

Moreover, Johansson (2025, 4) argues that in the Swedish human trafficking cases, the young person's consent has affected the court's assessment of whether they have been subjected to human trafficking, which goes against the UN Trafficking Protocol formulation which outlines that consent should not be used to determine exploitation. The use of means, such as coercion or deception, demonstrate that any consent to the exploitation is not valid, as the person's free will has been overridden through the undue influence they were subjected to. When it comes to children, it is not required in cases of human trafficking to prove that any means was used against the child. According to Johansson, this should not be understood to mean that children, unlike adults, can consent to exploitation. Rather, it means that children can under no circumstances consent to being exploited. (Johansson 2025, 31.)

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Case law example – Sweden

IN 2021, TWO 15-YEAR-OLD boys were allegedly forced to sell drugs in a municipality in Bohuslän, Sweden. Four individuals were charged in connection with the case, including on counts of human trafficking. According to Prosecutor Malin Melin, the case was seen as an important step in testing the legal boundaries of human trafficking laws in relation to the exploitation of children in organised crime. (SVT 7.7.2021.)

Charges were brought at Uddevalla District Court. Two of the accused were charged with serious drug offenses and human trafficking, with one also facing an extortion charge. A third person was charged with aiding and abetting a serious drug offense or, alternatively, serious money laundering. A fourth individual, who was not in custody at the time, was charged with serious money laundering. The suspects were alleged to have handled large sums of money. (Ibid.)

Investigators stated that the two boys, who had recently moved to the area, were approached by the accused, who allegedly offered them small amounts of money and drugs. The boys were lured into selling narcotics, primarily cannabis and tramadol, and according to the indictment, became trapped in the situation with no way out. Over time, they were subjected to increasing pressure, threats, and physical violence. One of the accused men allegedly physically abused the boys and sent death threats via Snapchat, saying he would kill them. (Aftonbladet 7.7.2021.)

The charges of human trafficking were based on alleged coercion and exploitation of vulnerability. Prosecutor Melin noted that the case tested the application of the human trafficking statute in a new legal context. (SVT 7.7.2021.) However, none of the suspects were convicted of human trafficking. Instead, they received sentences for aggravated drug offences and/or aggravated money laundering (Nyhetersto 17.8.2021).

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How has the trafficking framework been applied by the Nordic criminal justice authorities in cases of youth criminal exploitation?

THE TRAFFICKING FRAMEWORK OFFERS significant advantages in responding to young people involved in gang-related crime. A principal benefit is its potential to reframe these individuals as victims of exploitation rather than as offenders. This re-conceptualisation grants access to protection mechanisms embedded in international and regional legal instruments, including the victim-centred approach and the principle of non-punishment. The latter holds that individuals should not be prosecuted or penalised for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of their exploitation – a safeguard formally recognised in both the Council of Europe's Warsaw Convention (Article 26) and EU Directive 2011/36/EU (Article 8). Under international and EU law obligations, EU Member states are also required to develop policies addressing all forms of human trafficking.

> **Adopting a trafficking perspective can also broaden the scope for investigation and prosecution by providing new tools for law enforcement in terms of resources and the use of coercive measures, for example.**

At the same time, the criminal justice is challenged by the trafficking provision, which is often considered difficult to prove because of the challenging definition. The consulted Nordic stakeholders have pointed out that the threshold for applying the trafficking provision is considered high in the Nordic countries. Child victims of trafficking would receive assistance regardless of how their experience is defined, if they are seen as victims, but if they are only identified as offenders, this can result in situations where their possible victimisation experiences are not identified by anyone and they would not receive support in that regard. From a crime prevention perspective, it also means a less efficient prevention from future delinquency.

The phenomena of criminal exploitation of children as a form of trafficking is especially difficult to identify, and define, as pointed out by various consulted Nordic experts. Few cases result in convictions, and the attrition rate is high. So, although recent research points to a growing trend of young people being coerced into serious criminal behaviour through exploitation

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by gangs, they frequently remain unidentified as victims and continue to be criminalised. As a result, they experience what has been termed "double victimisation", first by their exploiters and then by the criminal justice system that fails to recognise their victim status. (Villacampa & Torres 2017, 4–5.)

Previously presented research shows that many young people at least initially enter the criminal activities voluntarily but then have difficulties leaving. As per the definition of human trafficking, initial consent is irrelevant if violence, threats, or abuse of a vulnerable situation have been used to gain that consent. Vollebæk (2024) therefore argues that if a child commits crimes on someone else's behalf and finds it difficult to withdraw because of pressure, debt, violence or threats, there is a need to see the person not primarily as a criminal, but as a child in need of protection and assistance. Applying this approach in practice is another thing, given that young people often are unwilling to disclose the full extent of their experiences to the police, as pointed out by interviewed Finnish law enforcement officers. They may also fear the consequences of said disclosure.

According to GRETA's latest evaluation over Sweden (2023b), child trafficking cases continue to go undetected or remain misclassified, with insufficient proactive identification of unaccompanied and separated children at risk. There are gaps in timely registration, appointment of guardians, and access to specialised resources across municipalities (GRETA 2023b, 46). During the evaluation, Swedish NGO representatives informed GRETA that presumed victims of trafficking for forced criminality, including children, risk being deported or convicted, despite evidence of their victimization. For example, a Moroccan child, recognised as a victim of trafficking in Denmark, was later convicted in Sweden for a robbery he was forced to commit by a criminal network in Sweden. (Ibid., 27.)

According to Johansson (2025, 54) the newly introduced Swedish offence of involving a child in criminal activity is a promising legal tool, effectively covering a wide range of youth involvement in crime. However, it lacks a human trafficking perspective, which was also echoed by Swedish expert interviewees and Nordic stakeholder meeting participants, who pointed out that rather than the child, the victim in this offence is the state (Nordic meeting 25.4.2025). While the new offence is easier to process, it lacks a victim perspective, which was found problematic by some of the Nordic trafficking experts consulted.

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The findings of this scoping study show that application of the human trafficking framework remains difficult for Nordic courts in general, and in particularly in cases concerning the exploitation of children in criminal activities (e.g. Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024; Vollebæk 2024; Johansson 2025).

The issue has almost exclusively been evaluated in relation to migrant children rather than children with the nationality or residency of the country of destination. Finnish research analysing case law from 35 child trafficking convictions given by the district courts and courts of appeal in 2012–2024, did not identify any cases concerning criminal exploitation (Valovirta & Kainulainen 2024, 39). In 2024, there was one trafficking conviction concerning criminal exploitation in Denmark. This concerned a case in which the adult victim was forced to commit thefts. (Government of Denmark 2024, 61.) Similarly in Norway, there was one trafficking conviction in 2024 concerning exploitation in criminal activities, including driving an illegal taxi in a case involving a Norwegian adult (KOM 2025). The previous convictions on trafficking for the purpose of criminal exploitation in Norway are from the 2010s and involve migrant children exploited in drug-related crimes.

Rettrup Mørch & Rasmussen (2020, 23) point out the high threshold for applying the human trafficking offence in cases concerning criminal exploitation of North African boys in Denmark. In one case, a District Court judgment was appealed to the High court, which questioned the credibility of the defendant. The High Court stated that the defendant's statement on being a victim of human trafficking appeared contradictory to his statements in the district court and deviated from what he had previously explained to the Danish Immigration Service. According to the Court, these circumstances, regardless of an assessment by the Danish Centre Against Human Trafficking, weakened the credibility of the defendant's statement that the crimes were committed as a victim of human trafficking. As a result, the original judgment and deportation order were upheld. (Ibid.)

In another Danish case, the possibility of human trafficking was acknowledged by the court, but still the court did not independently assess the trafficking aspect. In its reasoning, the court concluded that, regardless of whether the defendant had been a victim of human trafficking, the crimes were not a direct

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consequence of such exploitation, as the defendant stated that the offences were committed to obtain drugs and pills. In both cases, the court sentenced the defendant to imprisonment, ordered deportation, and imposed an entry ban of six years. (Rettrup Mørch & Rasmussen, 2020, 23.)

Rettrup Mørch & Rasmussen (2020, 24) note that the lack of recognition by the Danish courts in these cases is justified by the argument that the offences appeared random and did not indicate any underlying organisation. Furthermore, courts may have been inclined to be more doubtful of the boys' credibility because their trafficking situation had not been disclosed immediately. Questions were also raised regarding the degree of coercion, even though the individuals were children and the legal requirement for coercion therefore does not apply. (Rettrup Mørch & Rasmussen, 2020, 24.)

In fact, according to Johansson (2025), the Swedish human trafficking provision has become quite unusable in cases where young people are exploited in criminal activities. This gap in applicability stems from how recruitment is interpreted in the criminal justice process. To prosecute such cases under the human trafficking framework, the concept of "recruitment" must be understood in a way that reflects the realities of how children are engaged, often through informal or occasional assignments. Johansson argues that this broader interpretation is necessary to ensure alignment with the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, which requires member states to criminalise all exploitation in criminal activities. She suggests that Sweden should introduce a new, explicit purpose of exploitation including the use of children in criminal activities. This would ensure that such exploitation is recognised as trafficking. (Johansson 2025, 55.)

How should the non-punishment principle be applied?

UNDER THE UN TRAFFICKING Protocol, the Council of Europe Convention, and the EU Trafficking Directive, it is not necessary to prove coercion or abuse for a child to be considered trafficked. It is enough to show that the child was recruited, transported, transferred, harboured, or received for the purpose of exploitation. This reflects the understanding that children, due to their age and inherent developmental vulnerability, are not expected to resist or avoid such exploitation in the same way as adults.

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When child victims of trafficking are involved in offences connected to their exploitation, the non-punishment clause should be applied in line with the international definitions of child trafficking.

The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005) states that victims of trafficking should not be penalized for unlawful acts they were compelled to commit as a direct consequence of being trafficked. Similarly, the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive 2011/36/EU refers to criminal acts that victims were compelled to commit as a direct consequence of being trafficked. However, there are still many uncertainties regarding the scope of applying the non-punishment principle in practice, which is not only irregular, but also quite restrictive and, consequently, very narrowly applied in Europe. (Rodriguez-Lopez 2024.)

None of the Nordic countries have included an explicit non-punishment provision in their national legislation. Moreover, when implementing the non-punishment principle, most EU States focus only on criminal sanctions, disregarding the possibility that human trafficking victims may also face many other administrative or civil sanctions. (Rodriguez-Lopez 2024.)

Children lack full legal and practical autonomy and depend on adults in their environments. Piotrowicz & Sorrentino (2018) point out that children should not be required to prove that they were compelled to commit a crime to benefit from the non-punishment principle. Under human rights law, a child is defined as anyone under the age of 18. However, in numerous jurisdictions, children can face criminal accountability from the age of 15, or even younger in some contexts. This discrepancy creates practical difficulties when applying the principle of non-punishment in cases involving children as their involvement in unlawful activity must be understood within the context of their trafficking experience. The primary focus should be on protecting the child, assessing their best interests, and ensuring they receive immediate support and legal assistance rather than punishment. (Piotrowicz & Sorrentino 2018, 176.)

Authorities should also consider the broader circumstances: whether the child's freedom was restricted, whether they were dependent on their trafficker for basic survival, and whether they feared consequences like detention, deportation, or retribution. Children often face threats, manipulation, or

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shame that prevent them from seeking help or disclosing their situation. Due to this vulnerability, there is a strong presumption that their actions were not voluntary and that they lacked a safe or realistic alternative to compliance. (Ibid.) For example, GRETA (2024, 64) has noted that in Denmark even when information that victims were compelled to commit unlawful acts as a result of being trafficked comes to light during trial, no efforts are made by the police or prosecution to look for evidence that they were trafficked.

In practice, trafficked children should not be criminalised for acts directly related to their trafficking situation, and procedural safeguards must be in place to ensure their rights are respected.

The emphasis should be on early identification, separating child victims from criminal justice processes, and prioritising their protection over prosecution. International bodies like UNICEF have stressed that the non-punishment clause should apply regardless of the child's specific role in the offence or the outcome of any criminal proceedings. The focus must remain on ensuring that children are treated first and foremost as victims in need of care, not as offenders. (Piotrowicz & Sorrentino 2018, 175–178.)

According to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in the case of V.C.L. and A.N. v The United Kingdom, the ECtHR considered that the UK had violated Article 4 (prohibition of slavery and forced labour) and Article 6(1) (right to a fair trial) of the European Convention of Human Rights. The UK authorities had prosecuted a victim of human trafficking for drug trafficking, without having conducted an adequate investigation into their circumstances, despite the existence of credible suspicions that the defendant had been trafficked. The ECtHR notes that, although there is no general prohibition of the prosecution of trafficked persons, international law creates an obligation on States to consider if prosecution is pertinent when the authorities are aware that they are facing a trafficking case. The decision to prosecute a potential victim of human trafficking before the process of identification is complete undermines States' duties to adopt protective measures and consequently violates the European Convention of Human Rights. (Mennim 2021.)

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Piotrowicz & Sorrentino (2018, 181) also note that to ensue transparency, fairness and due process when authorities encounter a suspect who might be a victim of trafficking, two separate investigating units should deal with the matter: i.e. one with the trafficking and one with the other offence. Rodriguez-Lopez (2024) highlights that the application of the non-punishment principle is dependent on the success of the identification processes by the authorities or the otherwise designated organisation and that these processes are especially insufficient when it comes to identifying victims of trafficking for the purposes of exploitation in criminal activities. For example, GRETA recommends developing guidance to prosecutors and other relevant professionals and improving information exchange between judicial authorities in different departments. These measures would encourage police officers and prosecutors to be more proactive in establishing whether an accused person is a potential victim of human trafficking, making sure that all actors in the criminal justice system are able to identify such cases at as an early stage as possible. (GRETA 2024, 62–64.)

Moreover, the application of the non-punishment principle often excludes more serious forms of crime typically associated with gang activity. It is also more difficult to apply in cases involving serious violent crime and lethal violence (e.g., Hannonen & Kainulainen 2022). For example, in a case where a young Indian girl was exploited in domestic servitude and forced to neglect and punish an infant she was taking care of, the girl was sentenced for manslaughter in the Netherlands (see Dettmeijer-Vermeulen & Esser 2017). Several scholars and institutions have, however, openly disapproved the exclusion of any offences arguing that any trafficking-related unlawful activity carried out by a victim of trafficking must be covered by a guarantee of non-punishment, regardless of the gravity or seriousness of the offence committed (Rodriguez-Lopez 2024, see also Mullally 2021; Muraszkiewicz 2019).

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This scoping study has explored the complex interconnections between youth recruitment into organised crime, criminal exploitation and child trafficking in the Nordic countries. The focus has been on describing and outlining youth involvement in gang crime, as well as background factors and vulnerabilities, and exploring ways in which this complex phenomenon may be linked to of the crime of human trafficking.

THE REPORT HAS ALSO attempted to show how youth criminal exploitation and organised gang crime are understood and addressed by various criminal justice and other actors, and to assess the added value that a human trafficking framework could bring to understanding and addressing these phenomena.

The report has drawn on diverse materials such as academic research, official reports, media coverage, and sources on youth crime, gangs, criminal exploitation, and child trafficking alongside Nordic consultations to shed light on emerging patterns and concerns. Particular attention was given to Sweden, where public and policy debates on youth crime, gang involvement, and violence are more prominent, and which are often used by other Nordic countries as examples. Ultimately, the report has explored how the recruitment and involvement of children in gangrelated crime overlap with child trafficking, and how adopting a trafficking perspective reframes views of the children affected and the implications for prevention and operational responses.

Identifying situations where children involved in crime as perpetrators might in fact be victims of exploitation is undoubtedly complex.

Proper identification demands specialised understanding of features of human trafficking as well consideration for each child's individual circumstances. Research on human trafficking frequently uses the concepts of vulnerability and exploitation. While these terms often evoke images of individuals being

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violently forced or even abducted into exploitative situations, the reality is often more nuanced. In legal and policy contexts, vulnerability refers to characteristics or circumstances making individuals more susceptible to exploitation and highly dependent on their exploiters. Such vulnerabilities beyond young age may include a lack of understanding of the consequences of one's own actions, neuropsychiatric and -developmental disorders, adverse childhood experiences, or even financial vulnerabilities or other perceived debt. When these vulnerabilities are taken advantage of to place someone in a position where they can be controlled or abused, the situation is inherently exploitative. The exploitation of children in criminal activities is also gendered, girls and boys may be vulnerable to different types of recruitment and have different roles in the criminal networks, though both face significant risks in terms of exploitation.

More attention should be paid in the criminal justice system to the power imbalance in relations between adults and children (e.g., when evaluating whether the child had other alternatives or a possibility to detach themselves from the situation) and factors which may limit the agency of the child in question. However, the presence of vulnerability and exploitation does not necessarily mean that victims are completely without agency, or that they always perceive themselves as victims (e.g. Viuhko 2013; 2019). Some individuals may initially appear to voluntarily engage in criminal activity, often as a means of coping with difficult circumstances, but gradually find themselves in exploitative situations without clear moments of recruitment or force (CKM 2022).

The process-like nature of the human trafficking offence facilitates understanding that the situation of the exploited child may change over time and that the exploitation itself can comprise of multiple abusive behaviours and acts rather than single incidents such as assaults or unlawful threats.

In line with the international definition of human trafficking, trafficking in children does not require proof of deceptive or coercive means to fulfil the definitional elements of the offence. Instead, the act (such as recruitment, accommodation or taking control of a person) and the purpose of exploitation are sufficient. Even an attempt is sufficient to fulfil the definitional elements of the trafficking crime. From this perspective it seems

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evident that the recruitment of children into criminal activities could fulfil the elements of the crime of human trafficking. In line with the definition, exploitation in criminal activities should be seen as a form of human trafficking when an exploiter recruits the victim to commit offences on their behalf.

When it comes to children who are compelled to commit crimes, the principle of non-punishment should automatically be applied if the child is under the age of criminal liability, but for children over the age of criminal liability as well as adults, the application of the non-punishment principle is trickier. As outlined previously, very few jurisdictions have adopted specific legal provisions to deal with the non-punishment of victims of trafficking, and in most cases, the application of the provision is limited to certain types of less-serious offences (Piotrowicz and Sorrentino 2018, 177; Rodriguez-Lopez 2024). A growing number of Nordic cases where children have been involved in serious violence, including murders, challenges the application of the principle and its extent. These are concrete problems that the criminal justice authorities must deal with when evaluating how the principle should be applied in individual cases. There are no easy answers to such problems, according to the various Nordic experts consulted.

The recent adoption of the offence of involving a child in criminal activities in Sweden and an analysis of the convictions following this change, shows that the low evidentiary threshold and simper legal process has already led to over 20 convictions in cases, some of which have also indicators of trafficking present. However, in this offence, the child is treated solely as a defendant and may also be charged for the crimes they have committed. Consequently, the child is not recognised as a victim or an injured party with specific procedural rights, including the right to seek damages. This has been seen as a highly problematic development, as pointed out by Johansson (2025).

Recognising children exploited in criminal activities as victims of trafficking is, however, crucial, not only for ensuring access to appropriate support and protection, but also for safeguarding their rights, allowing them to seek damages and preventing further harm or re-trafficking (see also Pihlaja 2025). The trafficking framework also allows placing the responsibility on the (adult) perpetrators rather than on the children, who according to research are highly likely to be in a context of heightened vulnerability, both due to their age and other background factors. Proper identification and qualification of a potential case allows for a more accurate understanding of the coercive circumstances

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under which the children are recruited and involved in criminal activities, and it shifts the focus from punishment also to rehabilitation and recovery.

When assessing the situation of an individual child and whether it amounts to human trafficking, authorities should look at the wider circumstances around the child and evaluate the following factors:

- ☑ **IDENTIFY INTERSECTIONAL** vulnerabilities, such as substance use, neuropsychiatric and -developmental disorders, mental health conditions, gender and minority backgrounds.
- ☑ **NOTE IF** the child depended on the perpetrator/adult for basic needs such as food, shelter, or safety.
- ☑ **ASSESS WHETHER** the child feared consequences like retaliation, detention, or deportation if they did not comply.
- ☑ **EVALUATE WHETHER** the child was controlled through violence, threats, manipulation, intimidation, or feelings of shame or fear.
- ☑ **CONSIDER WHETHER** the child's freedom of movement was in any way limited or controlled.

If one or more of the listed factors can be identified, this may be an indicator that the child's actions were not voluntary. It is fundamental that law enforcement conducts a rapid intervention in such situations. Children who are criminally exploited but over the age of criminal liability may end up with criminal records, sometimes for offences they did not knowingly or willingly commit. Interviewed Nordic experts pointed out that misidentifying these children as offenders rather than victims can have serious and lasting consequences which could e.g. result in them being placed in foster care or youth institutions, disrupt their educational pathways and thus impact their future, lowering their life expectations, and increase the risk of re-offending but also of re-trafficking.

Moreover, as Pihlaja (2024a; 2025) highlights, children and young people who become victims of human trafficking have often already experienced other forms of exploitation, violence or abuse. They may only be able to process their experiences in adulthood and may seek support after turning 18. Therefore, preventing human trafficking must be closely linked to broader efforts to prevent various forms of harm and violence against children, and to strengthen the identification of such phenomenon among various professionals who come into contact with

children. The most effective way to prevent exploitation is to invest in reducing adverse childhood experiences, strengthening protective factors, and providing timely support to children and families. These measures can also help prevent children from engaging in criminal behaviour and lower their susceptibility to exploitation in the future.

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Recommendations for strengthening the application of the human trafficking framework in situations concerning youth criminal exploitation

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Legislative frameworks

- **FINLAND, NORWAY AND SWEDEN** should include exploitation in criminal activities as an explicit purpose of exploitation in their national human trafficking provision, including a clear definition.
- **ALL NORDIC COUNTRIES ARE** encouraged to develop practical legal guidance on the phenomenon of criminal exploitation of children and circumstances under which it could constitute human trafficking.
- **ALL NORDIC COUNTRIES ARE** encouraged to develop guidance on the application of the non-punishment principle in cases where a person has been forced to commit criminal activities due to being trafficked. It is important that police, prosecutors and judges receive training to better understand the non-punishment principle and apply it in practice. The training should focus particularly on the question of consent in the context of exploitation in criminal activities.

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Criminal justice process

- **THE POLICE AND PROSECUTORS** should develop clear guidelines for identifying and documenting indicators of recruitment, control, links to organised crime, peer-to-peer exploitation, and coercion into criminal activities. They should ensure these guidelines are applied consistently throughout investigations to better capture risk factors and patterns of exploitation, and to identify and investigate potential indicators of trafficking in human beings in relevant cases.

- **THE POLICE AND PROSECUTORS** should ensure that any changes in charges during the investigation, such as upgrading the offence label to human trafficking, are systematically recorded for evidence.

- **THE POLICE AND PROSECUTORS** should place stronger focus on intersectional vulnerabilities—such as substance use, intellectual disabilities, neuropsychiatric disorders, mental health conditions, and minority backgrounds—when working with potential victims. They should develop practical tools, such as checklists, screening templates, and interview guidance, to help frontline officers and prosecutors identify these factors early and accurately and to document these factors consistently throughout all stages of the criminal justice process.

- **THE POLICE AND PROSECUTORS** should consider introducing stronger protective measures for children who disclose exploitation. This could include e.g. facilitation of anonymous discussion and reporting options.

- **THERE SHOULD BE TARGETED** training for social workers embedded in police departments who support young people during processes such as investigative interviews.

- **TRAINING SHOULD ALSO BE** provided to defence lawyers handling criminal cases involving children, as they often maintain the longest and most consistent relationship with the children.

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Capacity building

- **ADDRESSING CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION** in the context of human trafficking requires specialist knowledge and insight among criminal justice professionals but also among various professionals who may come across children and child perpetrators in their line of work, such as child protection specialists, social workers, psychologists, school staff, youth workers, NGOs and other actors.

- **THE NORDIC COUNTRIES ARE** encouraged to develop training materials and offer regular training to key actors on the identification and referral of trafficked persons, including children, to ensure that more cases are identified and that there are procedures in place to guarantee rights for trafficked children. These actors include criminal justice authorities, social and health care authorities as well professionals working in child protection services, in youth services and schools.

Support to victims and prevention

- **THE NORDIC COUNTRIES ARE** encouraged to ensure there are low-threshold services available to children who may be reluctant to share their exploitative experiences with the authorities. The Nordic countries should ensure there is proper funding available for NGOs working, for instance, with children involved in or at risk of being involved in delinquency.

- **THE NORDIC COUNTRIES ARE** encouraged to implement prevention measures that actively equip children with practical skills to recognise and avoid criminal exploitation. This includes providing age-appropriate information in schools and online about their rights, common exploitation tactics, and where to seek help.

- **THERE SHOULD BE EFFECTIVE** mechanisms to protect the children from retaliation or other negative consequences that may follow disclosure of exploitation.

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Research

- **THE NORDIC COUNTRIES ARE** encouraged to fund and commission more research on human trafficking, youth crime and criminal exploitation of children and to evaluate the consequences of legislative changes and amendments. This would increase the evidence-base of criminal policies, and support in the development of more cohesive prevention strategies and ensure a more accurate understanding of the dynamics and contexts involved.

- **JOINT NORDIC RESEARCH INITIATIVES** are encouraged to share results of the various attempts to address child recruitment in criminality

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Annex 1.

Stakeholder meetings, interviews and conferences

Country	Type of data
Sweden	Expert interviews for handbook for Swedish Gender Equality Authority (N= 9). Bilateral meetings with experts (N= 2). Participation in 7 seminars on youth crime at the Almedalen discussions 2025.
Finland	Expert interviews (N=16), focus group discussions (N=3) and one stakeholder meeting for SafeBorders project on child trafficking in Finland. NGO network meeting on child trafficking in Helsinki on 26 September 2025 (N=30).
Nordic countries	Bilateral meetings with experts in Copenhagen 27 February 2025 (N=6). Meeting of the Nordic anti-trafficking coordinators and police network organised in Helsinki on 24 April 2025 (N=30). Roundtable meeting for Nordic youth crime experts and Nordic seminar on youth crime Hanaholmen 2-3 October 2025 (N=20). Scoping emerging forms of trafficking conference in Helsinki on 26 November 2025 (N=140 live participants and 66 online participants). European Forum against Trafficking in Human Beings organized by the Council of the Baltic Sea States in Stockholm on 3–4 December 2025 (N=250).

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