

Preliminary findings

The use of social media for youth recruitment into organized crime

Trends, tactics and policy responses

Introduction

Across the OSCE area, organized crime groups (OCGs) are recruiting young people, including under the age of criminal liability. This is a deliberate tactic, with young people exploited as lower-cost labor, who are less likely to be detected by law enforcement and so shield core members from facing justice.

Such recruitment targets both boys and girls, with some practitioners reporting that girls may be perceived as less suspicious and therefore less likely to attract the attention of criminal justice authorities.

Amid this wider trend, social media has become a key entry point into OCGs for youth. Due to their age, young people are particularly vulnerable to manipulation and grooming, including online. Yet, reliable data on social media-based recruitment tactics remains limited across the OSCE area.

To address this gap, the OSCE Secretariat's Transnational Threats Department and Office of the Co-ordinator of Economic and Environmental Activities have conducted this study to explore why and how OCGs are exploiting social media to recruit young people. This document presents the preliminary findings of the study and sets out some initial policy implications. By the end of 2026, the OSCE plans to publish the full study, which will outline the detailed outcomes of the research, showcase prevention good practices and offer actionable recommendations for policymakers.

Methodology

To date, 15 OSCE participating States have contributed data to this assessment in the form of completed questionnaires, case studies and semi-structured interviews with selected criminal justice, social services, child protection and education practitioners. Those are: Albania, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, France, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Sweden, Tajikistan, the United Kingdom and Uzbekistan.

While the data received captures experience from a range of participating States, it does not necessarily constitute an exhaustive or representative overview of the situation across the OSCE area as a whole.

WHY are OCGs using social media for recruitment?

“ Social media enables offenders to identify vulnerable people, establish contact quickly and gradually build trust without the need for face-to-face interaction”

(Criminal justice practitioner from South-Eastern Europe)

Initial analysis of the data provided by participating States indicates that social media:

- **Offers anonymity and reduces detection risks:** Social media and messaging platforms — particularly encrypted services — provide criminal networks with a degree of anonymity and make recruitment harder to detect and investigate. Practitioners highlighted challenges in linking online accounts to specific individuals, proving criminal recruitment when activities are disguised as legitimate tasks (e.g. transporting “packages”), and obtaining digital evidence from platforms located abroad. The use of non-English languages, local slang, coded terminology, emojis and visual content further helps recruitment messages evade automated moderation and detection.
- **Is resource-efficient and lowers recruitment barriers:** Social media allows criminal groups to reach large numbers of young people quickly, cheaply and without the need for face-to-face contact. Criminal networks can simultaneously engage potential recruits across different neighbourhoods, cities and even countries. Data provided to the OSCE suggests that social media has made recruitment faster, more scalable and significantly less resource-intensive for criminal networks.
- **Helps to identify and target vulnerable youth:** Social media enables criminal groups to identify and approach young people who may be more susceptible to recruitment, including those from marginalized or socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Information provided by participating States indicates that features such as geolocation tools can help identify young people in specific neighbourhoods without the need for in-person meetings, while online activity, interests and engagement patterns allow recruiters to tailor their approach and target those most likely to respond.

HOW are OCGs using social media for youth recruitment?

The preliminary analysis suggests that:

Recruitment is not random, but deliberate, targeted and increasingly systematic

“ Recruitment is a structured process rather than a single event, typically involving stages of grooming, testing, escalation of responsibilities and the creation of dependency through money, recognition, fear or debt”

(Criminal justice practitioner from Western Europe)

OCGs use structured recruitment strategies designed to identify and attract increasingly younger recruits, including minors below the age of criminal liability and, in some cases, children as young as nine.

The online recruitment process includes:

- **Multi-channel recruitment:** Recruitment rarely occurs on a single platform. OCGs move between social media, messaging applications and gaming platforms, shifting conversations to more private channels as trust develops.
- **Direct recruitment and communication:** Criminal networks use social media to advertise specific “jobs”, communicate with recruits and provide instructions for illegal activities. In some contexts, recruitment processes have become highly sophisticated, including vetting procedures to detect potential law enforcement infiltration, mechanisms to exert control over recruits and requirements to provide proof that criminal tasks have been completed. Practitioners noted that only a few days can pass between a “job” advertisement and the commission of an offence.
- **Indirect recruitment:** Social media is also used to glorify organized crime and normalize criminal lifestyles. OCGs showcase wealth, luxury goods, weapons, power and territorial control, while portraying criminal involvement as a source of status, belonging and success.



“ By combining luxury visuals, pop culture references and interactive elements, recruiters make the offers seem desirable and low-risk. Overall, the careful selection of images and videos is designed to be emotionally engaging, culturally relevant and attention-grabbing, lowering psychological barriers”

(Young person from Central Asia)

Recruitment is tailored to individual vulnerabilities

Criminal networks adapt messaging to the specific circumstances and aspirations of young people. Data collected by the OSCE finds that promises of quick money and financial success are directed to youth experiencing poverty or economic hardship, while messages emphasizing belonging, friendship, recognition and validation are used to attract young people from unstable family environments, including those affected by domestic violence, abuse and neglect.

“ The communication frequently creates the impression of an opportunity rather than a criminal proposition. Young people may be approached with references to making money, helping friends, gaining respect or becoming part of a close-knit group”

(Criminal justice practitioner from South-Eastern Europe)

Online recruitment methods include:

- **Tailored youth language:** Recruiters use attention-grabbing messages, transporting a sense of urgency, promises of quick income, youth slang, coded language, emojis and hashtags to appeal to young audiences.
- **Gamification:** Criminal tasks are framed as “missions”, “assignments” or “challenges”, masking the associated risks and creating a sense of achievement through rewards, praise and progression. This approach can be particularly attractive to young people seeking validation, attention or belonging.
- **Peer-to-peer style:** Recruiters often present themselves as peers or slightly older role models who appear relatable to and familiar with the young person’s background, neighbourhood or challenges. This helps to build trust, lowers perceptions of risk and conceals the criminal nature of the recruitment process.

“ Recruiters are often skilled in social engineering techniques and capable of identifying and exploiting the needs, vulnerabilities and motivations of potential recruits”

(Criminal justice practitioner from Central Asia)

Preliminary takeaways from the data collected

- Social media is expanding opportunities for OCGs to reach, recruit and exploit young people perceived as low-risk and -cost operatives.
- Online recruitment is targeted and systematic, through applying tactics such as youth-tailored language, gamification and peer-to-peer communication.
- Online recruitment exploits the same vulnerabilities as offline recruitment — including poverty, neglect, social exclusion and the search for belonging — while enabling OCGs to scale their efforts, reaching large numbers of young people without the need for face-to-face contact.
- Online recruitment remains difficult to detect, investigate and prosecute. The use of coded language, emojis, hashtags and visual content creates significant challenges for law enforcement and platform moderation systems.
- AI-based moderation systems are primarily trained on English-language content, making it more difficult for them to identify harmful content, recruitment messages and coded texts in other languages, local dialects and slang.
- The online dimension of recruitment makes effective public-private and international co-operation increasingly important, requiring closer collaboration between governments, law enforcement, social media platforms and civil society actors across jurisdictions.

Policy implications

The full assessment report will include detailed recommendations and good practices for prevention. The preliminary findings indicate the need to:

- **Address underlying vulnerabilities to online recruitment**, including poverty, domestic violence and abuse, and neglect.
- **Improve early identification and intervention and strengthen interagency co-operation** through practical capacity-building initiatives based on real cases.
- **End impunity for recruiters** by strengthening capacities for detecting, investigating and prosecuting online recruitment, and increasing public-private partnership and information-sharing across borders.
- **Promote counter-narratives to the perceived glamorization of online crime**, including by leveraging the voices of people with lived experience and positive role models, showcasing the realities and dangers of involvement in OCGs, and promoting alternatives to criminality.

This study was conducted under the OSCE Secretariat project on “Enhancing youth crime and drug use prevention through education on legality and awareness campaigns addressing threats of organized crime and corruption”, funded by Germany, Italy and Norway. Upon request, the project provides targeted capacity-building support and technical assistance to participating States in the field of youth crime prevention, with a focus on strengthening early identification and intervention, case management and prioritization, and enhancing interagency co-operation.