



United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Topic A. Strategies to prevent children's involvement in organized crime

Introduction:

The problem regarding children's involvement in organized crime is growing and it affects various societies around the world. Many minors in vulnerable contexts are co-opted by criminal groups that exploit them to complete tasks such as trafficking or extortion. They are often forcibly recruited into gangs, which is even listed as one of the six severe violations of children's rights.¹ These children, often coming from backgrounds of poverty, inequality, family disintegration or lack of opportunities, get trapped in a vicious cycle of violence that is difficult to break in the long term, affecting both their personal development and their social future.

In addition, most children involved in organized violence nowadays are members of Generation Z. Said generation, in many countries, is the first one to have been born into and to have grown up within a digital world and to struggle with an increased tendency of mental health challenges. These factors significantly influenced their development. Similarly, the next target to be potentially drawn into organized crime is Generation Alpha, which includes people born from 2014 onwards, so it is important to consider the way in which they will develop during their adolescence and what will influence them.

Moreover, the current global dynamic has worsened conditions that affect children and their families locally. The positioning of non-State transnational actors and their access to new weapons creates a build-up of tensions that sometimes increases organized violence. These specific situations often take place in environments with weak governance and inefficient systems to protect children and their rights, further increasing their vulnerabilities. Simultaneously, children's participation in criminal activities perpetuates violence in communities, creating surroundings where new generations are born and grow

¹ UNICEF. *Six grave violations against children in times of war*. United Nations, New York. "No update date". In: <https://www.unicef.org/children-under-attack/six-grave-violations-against-children> (02/12/2024).





up amid fear, insecurity and mistrust. This undermines social cohesion and perpetuates existing inequalities.

In sum, the phenomenon regarding children involved in organized crime is a direct consequence of the vulnerability of minors, who, due to poverty, lack of education and the absence of family or community support structures, are attracted to criminal groups. Drug cartels and other illicit organizations take advantage of these circumstances, offering them a sense of belonging, protection and quick money, and these aspects are often more appealing to them than the legal alternatives available, if any. This way, the recruitment of minors has become a systematic strategy of organized crime groups, who not only use children as messengers or 'soldiers' in their operations, but also as a tool to secure their influence on future generations.

Also, on a specific level, it is essential to recognize that the participation of girls in organized crime translates into stories of truncated lives, extinguished dreams and wasted human potential. Various investigations have shown that criminal structures take advantage of marginalization, the lack of socioeconomic opportunities and the precariousness of family environments to manipulate young women, presenting criminality as a mean to escape or as a form of belonging.² This not only undermines their personal and social development, but perpetuates patterns of violence and inequality that result in lasting impacts for generations to come. By ignoring these differentiated effects, the international community is failing in its responsibility to protect the most vulnerable and to work towards a future where all girls can dream and achieve their aspirations without the fear of being caught in the clutches of illicit activities.³

Likewise, the involvement of girls in organized crime imposes an additional challenge: social stigma and the misperception that these young women are, for the most part, to blame for their circumstances. This exclusionary narrative not only dehumanizes the girls trapped in these networks, but also ends up reinforcing a cycle of violence and exclusion.

² UNICEF. *Children's Involvement in Organized Violence: Emerging trends and knowledge gaps*. United Nations, New York, 2024. (02/12/2024).

³ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. *Child Recruitment and Use*. United Nations, New York. "No update date". In: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations/child-soldiers/> (03/12/2024).





Hence, it is imperative to advocate for initiatives and programs that contemplate the active inclusion of girls in the discussion about this phenomenon, as well as in the implementation of prevention and rehabilitation strategies that recognize their specific needs.

Therefore, it is extremely important to protect these generations of children from becoming involved in organized crime. It is a relevant issue that should be addressed urgently and effectively since minor's entanglement in criminal activities interrupts their emotional, intellectual, and social development. Childhood is a crucial stage for the shaping of values and skills that will determine a person's future. Because of this, children's fundamental rights must be guaranteed, including their right to education, health, and a safe environment for their development. Exposing them to organized crime is a serious violation of these rights. Consequently, policy must focus on protecting them through a comprehensive approach that combines social intervention, education, access to opportunities, labor and effective legal action.

Concepts and definitions:

- **Children exploitation:** use of minors in illegal activities, such as drug trafficking, robbery or money laundering, amongst others, taking advantage of their lower capacity to defend themselves before the law.
- **Forced recruitment:** practice in which criminal groups force minors to join them through threats, coercion or physical and psychological violence. It is common in areas of armed conflict and in vulnerable communities.
- **Indoctrination:** process by which criminal armed groups instill ideologies or behaviors in children that make them more susceptible to participating in illicit activities, including violent acts.
- **International legislation on children:** legal frameworks which establish standards to protect minors from exploitation, abuse and participation in criminal activities.
- **Organized crime:** illegal activities carried out by structured and hierarchical groups that operate in a sustained manner with the purpose of obtaining economic benefits or controlling territories.





- **Primary prevention:** strategies aimed at addressing the root causes that expose minors to organized crime, such as poverty, inequality and lack of access to education.
- **Risk factors:** social, economic and family conditions that increase the probability of children being attracted or forced to participate in criminal activities.
- **Smuggling:** the illegal movement of goods or people into or out of a country.
- **Social reintegration:** process of helping children who are former members of criminal or armed groups to reintegrate into society through psychological, educational and economic support.
- **Stigmatization:** social marginalization of children who have participated in criminal activities, which complicates their reintegration into the community and makes them vulnerable to reoffending.
- **Structural violence:** social, economic and political conditions that perpetuate the exclusion and vulnerability of certain groups, facilitating their recruitment by criminal organizations.
- **Trafficking:** the act of buying or selling illegal goods.
- **Transnational crime:** criminal activities that cross international borders, such as drug trafficking or human trafficking, in which children are often victims or used as transporters or distributors because they face fewer legal consequences.
- **Vocational training:** technical or professional training programs aimed at vulnerable children and youth to provide them with legal work alternatives and reduce their risk of recruitment.

Current issue:

The recruitment of children into organized crime is one of the most serious threats to the peace, security and well-being of future generations. They are particularly vulnerable in contexts of poverty, violence and lack of access to educational and social opportunities. This problem, which affects both boys and girls, is not only limiting their development and fundamental rights, but is also perpetuating cycles of violence and social disintegration.





Children are especially vulnerable to recruitment networks due to their dependency status and lack of resources to resist external pressures. These criminal groups, often operating in environments of extreme marginalization, exploit the desperation and fragility of minors, deceiving them or forcing them to participate in illicit activities. Moreover, the recruitment process notably has devastating consequences on their mental and physical health, as they are exposed to situations of abuse, violence and manipulation.

In this regard, the involvement of children in organized crime is an alarming phenomenon that affects various regions of the world, especially Latin America.⁴ In contexts of armed conflict, the recruitment of minors mainly impacts regions of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. However, in Latin America, organized crime, such as gangs and cartels, employs children to carry out low-risk or violent acts. Children can be used as messengers, spies, drug traffickers, or even perpetrators of violent acts.⁵ This problem not only involves the exploitation of minors but also has profound social and economic implications.

According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), the average age of recruitment is usually between thirteen and fifteen years, although cases of children as young as seven, eight or nine years old who are already involved in criminal activities have been documented. In some contexts, girls and boys are recruited to take advantage of their legal incapacity in countries such as Guatemala and Honduras.⁶

⁴ IACHR. *CIDH presenta informe sobre crimen organizado y derechos de niñas, niños, adolescentes y jóvenes en el norte de Centroamérica*. OEA, Washington D.C. 26/04/2023. In: <https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=%2Fes%2Fcidh%2Fprensa%2Fcomunicados%2F2023%2F077.asp> (03/12/2024).

⁵ Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México. *Hasta 250 mil Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes en riesgo de ser reclutados o utilizados por grupos delictivos en México*. REDIM, Ciudad de México, 07/09/2021. In: <https://derechosinfancia.org.mx/v1/hasta-250-mil-ninos-ninas-y-adolescentes-en-riesgo-de-ser-reclutados-o-utilizados-por-grupos-delictivos/#> (03/12/2024).

⁶ IACHR. *CIDH presenta informe sobre crimen organizado y derechos de niñas, niños, adolescentes y jóvenes en el norte de Centroamérica*.





■ Crime and punishment

Minimum age of criminal responsibility, years, at March 2017

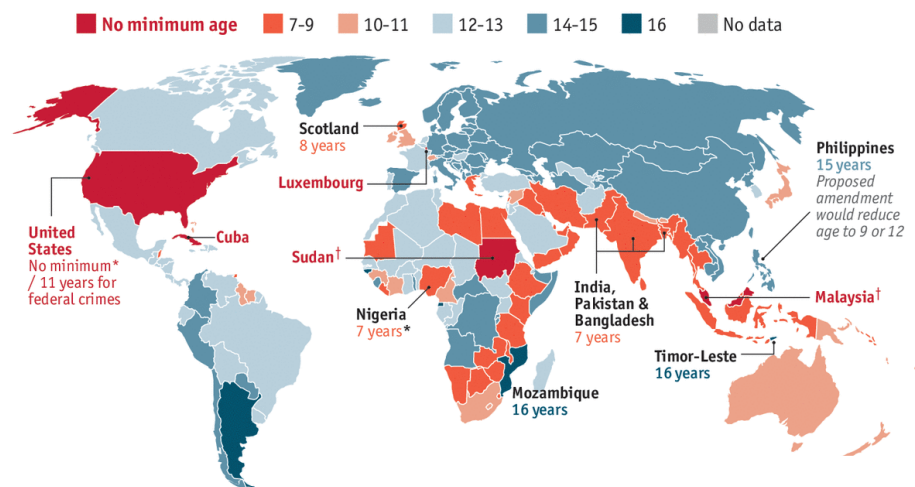


Figure 1. Minimum age of criminal responsibility around the world.⁷

Meanwhile, in countries such as El Salvador and Mexico, gangs recruit children through threats, coercion, or promises of money. It is estimated that more than 30% minors in certain communities are at risk of being recruited by criminal groups. In Honduras, gangs also recruit young people under similar conditions. On this matter, the IACHR has noted that these groups take advantage of institutional weakness and corruption to perpetuate their influence. In these regions, structural conditions such as extreme poverty and lack of access to basic services create a breeding ground for recruitment.⁸

In this sense, the causes of child recruitment are complex and can be separated into individual, community, social, economic, political, and even organizational factors. Some of these factors include poverty and marginalization, as many children are forced to join criminal groups to escape their economic situation. Likewise, the lack of educational opportunities is an important cause, as school dropouts and lack of access to quality education are factors that contribute to recruitment. Also, on a domestic level, certain family structures can lead to children to be more vulnerable to violent ideas and behaviour. These

⁷ The Economist. The minimum age of criminal responsibility continues to divide opinion. The Economist. 15/05/2017. In: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2017/03/15/the-minimum-age-of-criminal-responsibility-continues-to-divide-opinion> (03/12/2024).

⁸ UNICEF. *Death threats and gang violence forcing more families to flee northern Central America – UNHCR and UNICEF survey*. United Nations, New York, 17/12/2020. In: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/death-threats-and-gang-violence-forcing-more-families-flee-northern-central-america> (03/12/2024).



elements, in addition to the internal organizational factors of violent groups, gangs and cartels, make children more vulnerable to being involved in organized crime.⁹

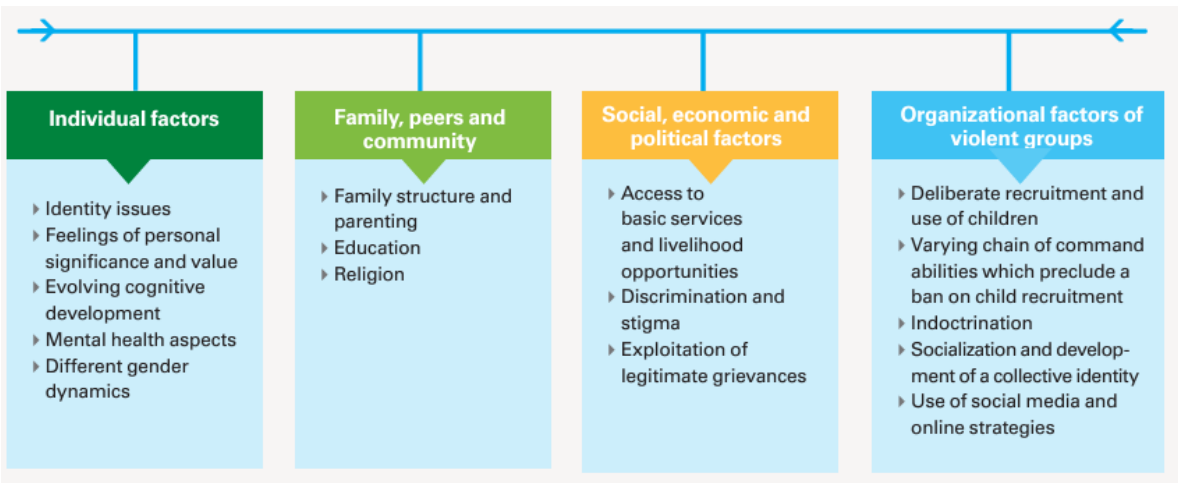


Figure 2. Vulnerabilities in children's protective environment.¹⁰

Overall, participation in organized crime has devastating consequences for minors. These children are not only exploited but are also exposed to continuous violence and trauma. Many young people, for example, begin using drugs at an early age due to their involvement in criminal activities. Furthermore, those who are recruited are often forced to commit violent acts from a very young age, which affects their psychological and social development. So, the psychological, physical and social impact of child recruitment is profound and long-lasting. Children involved in criminal activities lose their right to education, their emotional development is severely affected, and they often suffer irreparable trauma. Child recruitment not only harms the children directly affected but has devastating effects on the social cohesion and security of communities, perpetuating patterns of violence and destabilization that impact social and economic progress.¹¹

Therefore, this problem represents a serious violation of children's rights and, beyond condemning it, the international community must work together to develop comprehensive policies that stop their involvement in organized crime from continuing to

⁹ UNICEF. *Children's Involvement in Organized Violence: Emerging trends and knowledge gaps*.
¹⁰ *Ibid*.
¹¹ Save the Children. *Child Soldiers: The Tragic End of Childhood for Boys and Girls in Conflict*. Save the Children. "No update date." In: <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/child-soldiers> (03/12/2024).





happen. It is imperative to strengthen prevention mechanisms, guarantee the protection of minors at risk and work in close collaboration with international organizations, national governments and civil society organizations to offer real alternatives to children who are prone to fall into criminal networks. The only way to establish a future free of violence and exploitation for children, allowing them to grow up in a safe environment for their full development, is through a collective and coordinated commitment.

Initiatives taken by the international community:

For years, strategies have been proposed and implemented internationally to prevent and reduce children's participation in organized crime. UNICEF and UNODC are amongst the main organizations that work towards this purpose. To address the problem, the following actions stand out...

Adaptation and protection programs:

United Nations' committees such as UNODC have long been working on ways to empower young people through education, community support networks and employment opportunities. Some of these initiatives involve campaigns to reduce the demand for illicit substances as well as violence against youth, especially in countries where the risk is more alarming. The UNODC Youth Initiative, which is a program to encourage youth's development of skills in vulnerable zones, is an important example. It was created to provide job opportunities and thus try to reduce their probability of recurring to organized crime.¹²

International conventions and treaties:

In 1989, through the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations established that all children must be protected from exploitation and abuse.¹³ Years later, in 1999, the International Labor Organization released the Convention No. 182, which seeks to eradicate the worst forms of child labor, including the use of children in illicit activities and organized

¹² UNODC. *Youth Initiative*. United Nations, New York. "No update date". In: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/prevention/youth-initiative.html> (03/12/2024).

¹³ OHCHR. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations, New York, 20/11/1989. (03/12/2024).





crime.¹⁴ Meanwhile, in 2002, the United Nations published its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts, specifically prohibiting the recruitment of minors by armed groups. This document also settles the obligation of States to take measures to prevent any form of involvement of children in armed conflict.¹⁵

Intervention of international organizations:

On the one hand, UNICEF works to create child protection programs in high-risk areas, supporting governments in developing public policies to prevent children from falling into criminal networks, as well as offering direct support to recruitment victims, helping them reintegrate into society. On the other hand, UNHCR has implemented specific strategies to prevent child recruitment in conflict zones, providing education programs and psychosocial support, and promoting the disarmament and demobilization of so-called child soldiers.¹⁶

Community strengthening projects:

On a community level, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) created a program for young people called “Resilient Balkans” in the Balkans territory. It is an interesting case study because, with the support of non-governmental groups that work for the benefit of young people, the program incorporates collective and formative activities, encouraging the development of safe spaces for teenagers to stay away from illegal substances and criminal influences. In addition, UNICEF has implemented training and education programs to prevent their participation in illicit actions.¹⁷

Improvements in juvenile justice systems worldwide:

The United Nations encourages member States to modify their juvenile justice systems to reduce the percentage of minors or young people who are in prison. The idea of

¹⁴ ILO. *C182 - Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)*. United Nations, New York, 01/07/1999. (03/12/2024).

¹⁵ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. *Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict*. United Nations, New York. “No update date”. In: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/tools-for-action/opac/> (03/12/2024).

¹⁶ UNHCR. *Refugee Children at Highest Risk of Forced Recruitment*. United Nations, New York, 01/03/2012. In: <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/refugee-children-at-highest-risk-of-forced-recruitment/> (03/12/2024).

¹⁷ GI-TOC. *Strengthening resilience of youth to organized crime*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Switzerland, 2022. (03/12/2024).





implementing a juvenile justice system that prioritizes reintegration is an important step in creating an effective system of crime reduction. Taking this information into consideration aims to prevent young people from being exposed to criminal networks while they are locked up in prison.¹⁸

Prevention and education of values:

International organizations in coordination with UNICEF have developed programs and campaigns based on strengthening the education of values and having as a priority the creation of a culture of integrity that rejects violence. In terms of education, programs are being implemented to raise awareness about the negative consequences of organized crime for young lives. The aim is to effectively reduce the interest of engaging in criminal activities by giving children and adolescents adequate information and skills to use critical reasoning and make informed decisions about their future.

Nonetheless, despite the efforts made by international organizations, governments and non-governmental organizations to eradicate this problem, the effective implementation of protection policies remains insufficient. Criminal networks continue to operate with impunity in many areas, while prevention and rehabilitation policies for recruited minors remain limited and fragmented. Difficulties continue to delay the achievement of sustainable results.

To tackle these challenges, there needs to be a greater integration of public policies and a specific application of resources in vulnerable communities. On the one hand, governments should work directly and more closely with local and international organizations to obtain a comprehensive approach that addresses the main causes of children's vulnerability to crime, such as poverty, lack of education and unemployment. On the other hand, efforts to prevent juvenile delinquency should not be concentrated in large

¹⁸ UNICEF. *15 years of Juvenile Justice Reforms in Europe and Central Asia. Key results achieved for children and remaining challenges*. United Nations, New York. "No update date". In: https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org.eca/files/2018-11/Key%20Results%20in%20Juvenile%20Justice%20in%20Europe%20and%20Central%20Asia_0.pdf (03/12/2024).





cities but also include rural communities that are critical areas for specialized organizations to promote social cohesion and offer an alternative to organized crime.

Guiding questions:

1. What are the main social, economic and political circumstances in your delegation that lead children to become involved in organized crime?
2. How do structural conditions, such as poverty, inequality, lack of opportunities and violence, influence the recruitment of children by criminal organizations in your delegation?
3. Which areas or zones in your delegation are most affected by the recruitment of children into criminal groups and why is that?
4. What are the most common forms in your delegation for children to get involved in organized crime? (Forced labor, drug trafficking, human trafficking, extortion, etc.)
5. In your delegation, how does this problem have a differentiated impact on girls?
6. Which national policies has your delegation implemented against organized crime and are some of them created specifically to ensure children's rights on this matter?
7. What security and violence prevention policies are being implemented by your delegation within its territory to reduce child recruitment?
8. How can your delegation's education system help children resist the influence of criminal groups and what other educational programs exist in your delegation to prevent children from becoming involved in criminal activities?
9. What regional efforts or institutions does your delegation is part of to protect children from criminal recruitment? (Including treaties, campaigns, programs, etc.)
10. What international initiatives or institutions does your delegation is part of to protect children from criminal recruitment? (Including treaties, campaigns, programs, etc.)

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