

# Intelligence Notification

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## The recruitment of young perpetrators for criminal networks

*This intelligence notification is based on information contributed to Europol by national law enforcement authorities. This document aims to raise awareness of the ways criminal networks exploit minors, particularly through recruitment and tasking via social media. It highlights the use of targeted language, coded messaging, and "gamification" strategies in this process.*

The recruitment of minors into serious and organised crime and terrorism is not a new phenomenon; however, it has increasingly become a tactic used by criminal networks to avoid detection, capture, and prosecution. In recent years, this trend has expanded across more countries, with recruitment methods evolving and minors being tasked with violent acts such as extortion and killings.

Recent data contributed to Europol reveals that minors are now involved in over 70 % of criminal markets. These markets, which frequently exploit minors, include cybercrime and online fraud, drug trafficking and related violence, migrant smuggling, and property crime.

### Focus on: drug trafficking

Recent investigations supported by Europol confirm that minors play an active role in drug trafficking, primarily in the cocaine and cannabis markets, with lesser involvement in synthetic drug and heroin networks. These criminal networks employ minors aged on average between 13 and 17 for various roles, including local street dealers, couriers, warehouse operators, drug extractors from shipping containers, and participants in "rip-off" activities (removal of drugs from criminal distribution channels). The use of minors for rip-off activities was previously rare to non-existing, but now comprises nearly 10 % of cases in some countries. These young operatives are moved across regions or cities, limiting their visibility to local law enforcement and decreasing the likelihood of arrest.

Online platforms have become instrumental in recruiting minors for roles ranging from low-level drug couriers to drug extractors and even perpetrators of violent drug-related crimes, including murder. Social media posts often glamourise drug dealing, offering minors substantial financial incentives—ranging from a few thousand euros to as much as EUR 20 000 for killings. Typically, these minors lack direct contact with higher echelons of the criminal networks, instead being recruited through criminal



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service providers. Their limited awareness of the criminal network structure and no criminal records make them low-risk operatives, as they are less likely to provide information to law enforcement upon arrest.

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In several cases, violent attacks committed by minors are orchestrated remotely by a criminal service provider. They act via a network of coordinators who deliver assignments and instructions via messaging apps. In turn, runners provide weapons and ammunition, and transport the minors to the scene of the attack.

## Online recruitment

### Anonymity and encryption

Social media's encrypted messaging services and customisable privacy settings allow for the creation of anonymous groups and channels. These are often used to organise illegal activities with minimal risk of detection. Criminals can set messages to self-destruct, delete conversation histories, and restrict group access to verified members. These features make it challenging to monitor communications, as interactions can occur without creating a lasting digital footprint.

### Direct access to youth: reduced barriers to recruitment

Apps used by minors provide direct communication channels that eliminate the need for physical meetings. Many young people are active on these platforms, which allows recruiters to target a large audience with minimal effort. Criminals attract minors by using phrases such as "easy money" or "quick cash" to frame illegal activities as attractive opportunities. As a result, minors may perceive these interactions as harmless or low-risk, making them more likely to engage with these online recruiters.

### Tailored language and coded communication

Criminal networks use tailored language, including slang, emojis, and coded phrases, to communicate with minors in ways that are both appealing to them and difficult for outsiders to understand. These symbols and slang terms are common in youth culture and make their messages approachable for minors while obscuring the nature of the activities. For example, drug-related terms might be replaced with everyday language or symbols, such as snowflakes to represent cocaine or trees to signify marijuana. Terms like "job opportunity" or "business" are used to make illegal activities sound legitimate, further lowering the barriers for minors to engage in these activities.



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## Mimicking influencer language and “gamification” of criminal tasks

Criminal recruiters often adopt language and communication styles similar to those of social media influencers. Illegal tasks may be presented as “challenges” or “missions,” making them more engaging and less intimidating for minors. This approach, known as “gamification,” resonates with a younger audience familiar to social media challenges and online gaming. By framing these activities as part of a game or competition, criminal networks desensitise minors to the risks and encourage participation without revealing the true nature of the crimes involved. Sometimes videogames are used as instruction tools for teaching shooting or violent techniques. In some cases, recruiters may even offer rewards for completing specific tasks, enhancing the appeal of criminal involvement and fostering a sense of accomplishment among young participants.

## Emotional manipulation and grooming techniques

Criminals often use emotionally charged language that fosters trust, loyalty, and a sense of belonging, thereby grooming minors for participation in illicit activities. Recruiters may make minors feel “special” by framing illegal activities as exclusive opportunities for those with unique qualities. This type of language appeals particularly to minors seeking validation, protection, or a sense of community. By capitalising on these emotional needs, criminal networks effectively blur the lines between friendship and exploitation, making it difficult for minors to recognise the dangers of their involvement.

As these young recruits often lack knowledge of the broader criminal network and have reduced legal exposure, they serve as both resilient and low-risk assets for criminal networks. This demands targeted interventions and preventive measures to disrupt their recruitment and exploitation.



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