

Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice
(REPPP)
University of Limerick

NEWSLETTER

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Issue 1

**PROMISING APPROACHES,
OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS
FOR INTERVENTIONS TO PREVENT
YOUTH RECRUITMENT AND
PARTICIPATION IN EUROPEAN
DRUGS MARKETS**



A new project by the REPPP Team, in the University of Limerick, is bringing together policymakers, researchers, law enforcement agencies, and practitioners from across Europe to collaborate in a new Community of Practice for interventions to prevent Youth Recruitment and Participation in European Drugs Markets.

The project will review existing research and interventions, identify possible facilitators or barriers to the implementation of programmes, and develop a conceptual framework and model to inform development and implementation of future interventions.

For more information about getting involved, please read on....

WELCOME

Welcome to this first newsletter of the Project:

'Promising Approaches, Opportunities and Barriers for Interventions to Prevent Youth Recruitment and Participation in European Drugs Markets'.

This 2 year project is being led by the Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice (REPPP) team in the University of Limerick, on behalf of the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA).

Responding to youth recruitment and participation in criminal networks and drugs markets is a complex challenge. Scientific evidence in this area is limited. This project will build on existing initiatives to inform and design future responses to the problem of young people's involvement in drugs markets and drug-related criminal activities.

The project will bring together a core group of policymakers, researchers, law enforcement agencies, and practitioners from across Europe to collaborate in a new Community of Practice, to share practice knowledge and research, and to inform and design future interventions in this complex policy area.

This will be the first in a series of updates over the next two years. In this edition, we introduce the aims and objectives of the project and the REPPP project team. We review the recent Project Roundtable Discussion Event and outline some initial actions.

Helen Fitzgerald
REPPP Assistant Director
& Project Lead



European Policy Context

On July 2nd 2024, the new European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) was established, replacing the European Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). The EUDA's mandate is to *"strengthen the EU's preparedness related to current and future drug problems and support the EU and its Member States in addressing the drug situation"*. It will do this by providing services across 4 categories:

1. Anticipating new and future challenges (anticipate)
2. Alerting on emerging risks and drug-related threats (alert)
3. Assessing needs and available responses (respond)
4. Evaluating and disseminating new knowledge and best practices (learn).

In its fight against drug trafficking and organised crime, the **European Commission's Roadmap to Fight Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime** identifies 17 actions across 4 priority areas. Priority 4 focuses on measures to: *"prevent organised crime through exchange of best practices and guidance among Member States to prevent infiltration of these groups in the society and legal economy, **prevent criminal groups to recruit youngsters** and improve public safety and health, and to limit more effectively access to drug precursors"*.

Within Priority 4, Action 12 focuses on preventing criminal networks from recruiting children and young people.

The EU Drugs Strategy and Action Plan seeks to disrupt and dismantle high-risk drug-related organised crime and take action on drug demand reduction. Action 9 specifically seeks to reduce recidivism among young drug-related crime offenders.

It is within this policy context that the EUDA, following the completion of a tendering process, commissioned the REPPP Project in the University of Limerick to undertake a new 2 year project.

Project Objectives

The overall **purpose** of the project is to enhance drug-related crime prevention efforts in Europe by:

- Evaluating existing models and strategies for the prevention of youth involvement in drug markets and drug-related crime
- Supporting linked network building activities, and
- Identifying possible facilitators or barriers to the implementation of programmes in this area.

The specific **objectives** of the project are to:

- Establish a multi-disciplinary and jurisdictional Community of Practice to support and contribute to the Project activities.
- Conduct a Desk Review of literature on interventions, initiatives and evaluations
- Identify and review existing examples of practices and interventions
- Identify critical success factors and barriers to development and implementation of interventions
- Develop a conceptual framework and model to inform development and implementation of interventions



A New Community of Practice

The Community of Practice will comprise of 3 levels, representing different levels of involvement:

- A Core Group of 2-3 partner jurisdictions with a high level of investment will be engaged with the project on an ongoing basis, guiding and supporting the project activities.
- A Network Group of stakeholders will participate in bi-annual in-person meetings and events, and will share learning from existing or emerging research and interventions.
- Outputs and updates from the project will be disseminated to a wider network of EU jurisdictions and stakeholders through webinars, newsletters, reports.

In a first step to develop the Community of Practice, a Roundtable Discussion event was held in the University of Leiden, The Netherlands, on 11th December 2024, facilitated by the REPPP Team.

Policymakers and academics from Ireland, The Netherlands, and Sweden discussed opportunities to share learning from both research and practice in this complex policy area.

The attendees broke into small groups to discuss challenges, knowledge gaps, and examples of promising or innovative practices/initiatives in relation to youth recruitment and participation in European Drugs Markets.



Roundtable Event - Key Messages

Key messages from the Roundtable Event included:

Importance of Understanding the Problem: Understanding the problem to be addressed is critical. This includes recognising that the understanding or definition of a problem can differ depending on the specific context (including political context) and/or the perspective of the stakeholder. Young people's involvement in organised crime is a 'wicked problem', difficult to adequately define, and operating at multiple levels from individual up to systems levels.

Young People: It is important to understand the mechanisms by which young people are recruited into organised criminal activity and how and why they move in and out, and up and down, the structures. Most young people involved in criminal networks are nested in a multitude of harms, including engaging in fear-driven crime. Incorporating the voice of young people in research and programmes is important.

Collaboration between Research and Practice:

The challenge of translating scientific research into operational programmes was recognised, with recommendations from academic research sometimes being considered too abstract for implementation. It was suggested that multi-disciplinary collaboration between researchers, policymakers and practitioners from the outset is needed. This applies to both programme and evaluation design and implementation.



Need for Nuanced Evaluations: Evaluation frameworks need to be sufficiently robust yet nuanced enough to measure progress in both the short and long term.

Fidelity v. Flexibility: Finding a balance between fidelity to a programme versus the need for flexibility in a given context was recognised as a challenge.

Conflicting Timelines: It was recognised that different stakeholders have different timelines. A community/municipality may have an immediate timeline for a project or intervention but for researchers, the timeline may be more long-term. Finding ways to bridge these timelines would be beneficial.

Sustainability: This relates to both funding of programmes as well as to sustainability of knowledge as individuals move on from roles (in academia and in practice). Identifying ways of preserving institutional knowledge is important.

Information Infrastructure: It is important to know what data we have and what data we need, as well as knowing what has worked and in particular what has not worked. It was noted that part of “not re-inventing the wheel” is knowing what others have tried and failed and understanding why an approach did not work.

Online Recruitment and Participation: There is a need to more fully understand the role of online platforms in recruiting and engaging young people in criminal activity. It is important to understand the role it has in contributing to the problem and to the solutions.

Community-based, Targeted Interventions are Needed: Focused deterrence strategies in particular were recognised as being effective. However, there is also a need to address the levels of violence in the wider community. Specifically, there is a need to reduce the overall level of violence so that supportive or targeted interventions can be operative in the community.



Next Steps

Interested partners are now invited to contact the Project Lead to express their interest in supporting the project, and to identify the level of commitment or involvement to the project. The first meeting of the Core Group is planned for Quarter 1 2025, and an in-person Kick Off Event is planned for Quarter 2 2025.

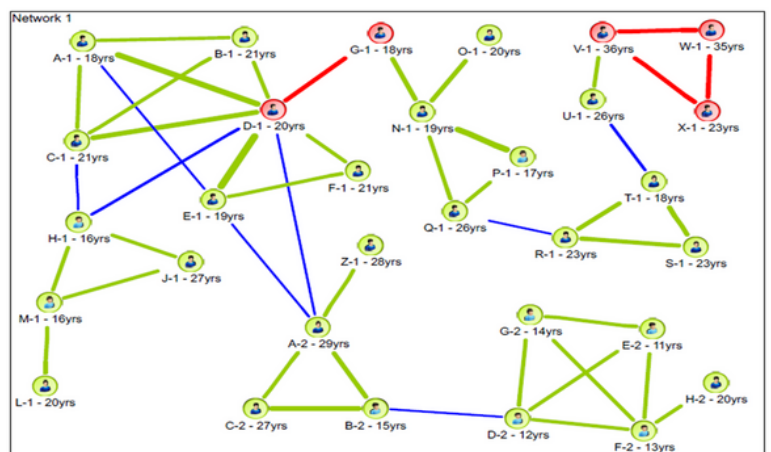
Throughout 2025 and 2026, we will issue updates on the progress of the project as we move from project planning to delivery, and as we establish the Community of Practice.

Stay tuned for further details....

About REPPP

REPPP is a research collaboration between the School of Law in the University of Limerick, Ireland and the Irish Department of Justice. Its aim is to improve the evidence base in relation to youth crime and youth justice policy and practice in Ireland.

REPPP's Greentown Project has studied children's involvement in criminal networks in 5 locations in Ireland. The study has informed the development a community-based response to tackling the challenge of children's engagement in criminal networks.



Funded by the Department of Justice, and delivered by community-based organisations, the Greentown Response Programme is currently being trialled in 2 locations in Ireland.

The Greentown Response Programme aims to reduce the influence of criminal networks on child offending and improve pro-social outcomes for children involved in criminal networks. It does so by implementing 4 interrelated pillars:

- Network Disruption
- Community Efficacy Programme
- Intensive Family Programme
- Pro-Social Opportunities Programme

A framework for the evaluation of the Programme is currently being developed by REPPP.

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