



THE HUMAN COST OF CRIME

The Harrowing Link Between Drug Trafficking and Human Trafficking

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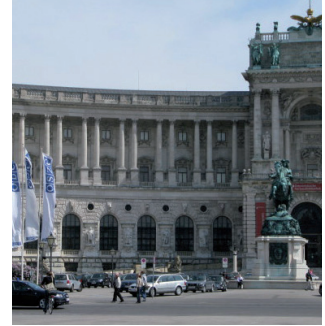
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Foreword

Knowledge of the use of illicit drugs by human traffickers is not new for the anti-trafficking community. It is a long-standing and deeply entrenched tactic of traffickers, particularly to control and exploit victims in sex trafficking. However, the scale and complexity of the nexus between drug trafficking and human trafficking have evolved significantly. Across the OSCE and beyond, drug markets have expanded and are increasingly intertwined with human trafficking. What was once treated as separate problems are now often a single, interconnected system, one in which drug trafficking and human trafficking are increasingly linked and interdependent.

This research shows how vulnerable individuals, particularly youth and minors, are at high risk of being compelled by criminal networks for the transportation, harbouring, storage, and production of different types of drugs. Traffickers target different vulnerabilities of these individuals to lure them into criminal networks and once recruited they are trapped in a cycle of exploitation. As our research outlines, criminal networks are driven by the motives of maximizing profits, minimizing the risk of detection, and continuously expanding their drug markets.

The drug types, routes, and governing policies this research examines are essential data points for understanding how different substances and related activities are criminalized across jurisdictions. They help identify where trafficking victims coerced into drug-related offenses may be misidentified as criminals rather than victims. Mapping these routes helps identify hotspots where vulnerable individuals are at higher risk of exploitation and reveals overlaps between drug and human trafficking operations.

The existing data shows that final destinations, especially major ports across the OSCE, are key focal points. They are not only transit hubs but also environments where criminal groups frequently target minors and young people for recruitment into low-level distribution roles. A clearer understanding of these legal and operational dynamics supports more accurate identification of trafficking victims and crimes, better protection measures, and more effective prevention strategies.

Importantly, over the past year, several OSCE participating States have explicitly identified this phenomenon. They have reported a growing overlap between drug trafficking networks and the recruitment or coercion of individuals, particularly minors and young people, into drug-related and other violent crimes. These findings have also allowed us to move beyond theory to better understand what is happening on the ground, highlighting emerging patterns, identifying gaps in current responses, and confirming the links between drug trafficking routes and the exploitation of vulnerable individuals in human trafficking.

This recognition of growing links between human trafficking and drug trafficking operations marks a significant step forward. Nevertheless, there are several areas that require urgent attention across governments by both agencies responsible for drug enforcement and those in the anti-trafficking field. The recommendations put forward in this report are designed to strengthen action across the board, from more comprehensive data collection of recruitment patterns, vulnerabilities, and victim and perpetrator demographics to proactive identification and inclusive protection, as well as effective criminal justice and prevention responses. These challenges cannot be tackled in isolation; they demand a co-ordinated and integrated approach. It is my hope that this research and the recommended actions to combat this growing problem contribute to reinforcing and advancing such responses at all levels. Through strategic, proactive actions we can improve our efforts to combat both human trafficking and drug trafficking, thereby reducing the egregious harm these crimes wreak to individuals and societies across the OSCE region.

Dr. Kari Johnstone

OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings

Abbreviations

4MMC	Mephedrone, 4-methylmethcathinone
AI	Artificial Intelligence
Alpha-PVP	α -pyrrolidinopentiophenone, 'flakka'
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ATS	Amphetamine-Type Stimulants
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CKM	The Centre against Child Trafficking and Human Trafficking (Netherlands)
CoE	Council of Europe
CTHB	Combating Trafficking in Human Beings
ECHR	European Convention of Human Rights
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EMCDDA	European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
EUDA	European Union Drugs Agency
Europol	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Co-operation
Frontex	European Border and Coast Guard Agency
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRETA	Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings
IBA	International Bar Association
NCA	National Crime Agency (UK)
NPP	Non-punishment Principle
NPS	New Psychoactive Substances
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OSR/CTHB	OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SUD	Substance use disorder
THB	Trafficking in Human Beings
UNGASS	United Nations General Assembly Special Session
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Methodology and Scope

→ This research is grounded in an extensive review of existing literature, policy papers, reports and evidence published by international organizations, national authorities, academic institutions and civil society organizations. The review focused on drug markets, trends, policy developments, patterns of consumption of various types of drugs, and identification of potential risks faced by vulnerable communities, including children and adults at risk of exploitation for its distribution and production.

To complement the desk research, a structured questionnaire was disseminated among OSCE participating States and civil society organizations. The questionnaire sought data on the types of drugs distributed and consumed domestically, the routes through which drugs enter the OSCE region, and the specific vulnerabilities associated with this form of criminal activity. It also aimed to assess the application and scope of the non-punishment principle in relation to trafficking victims subjected to exploitation during the commission of this offence. Respondents were additionally invited to submit case studies illustrating methods used to recruit and exploit vulnerable adults and children, as well as examples of criminal justice responses employed to identify, investigate, and address such cases.

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Executive Summary

→ This research paper examines the growing convergence of human trafficking and drug-related crime across the OSCE region and beyond, highlighting current trends and challenges to inform policy decisions and law enforcement strategies both from human trafficking and drug enforcement disciplines. It shows that trafficking for forced criminality has become a significant and expanding form of exploitation. Alongside sexual and labour exploitation, traffickers increasingly coerce adults and children into criminal activities such as in drug production, transportation and distribution, theft, online fraud, and financial crimes. This reflects an evolution of organized crime, whereby networks systematically exploit human vulnerability alongside expanding illicit markets.

Forced criminality has become an increasing feature of trafficking. Media reports across the OSCE region have increased, with children and young people, particularly boys, disproportionately targeted for roles such as couriers, street-level dealers, lookouts, gang violence and assaults. The rise of trafficking and exploitation as part of cyber scam operations demonstrates how criminal exploitation is rapidly evolving, using technological developments. Illicit drug trafficking is a key driver of human trafficking, using vulnerable individuals to carry, store, and sell drugs, while maintaining control through coercion, debt, violence, substance dependency, and psychological manipulation.

The current international drug control framework is shaped by the 1961, 1971, and 1988 UN drug conventions. Whilst this global framework regulates controlled substances, national approaches vary widely. Many States focus on punitive criminal justice responses. This report finds that solely punitive systems can increase individuals' vulnerability to human trafficking by marginalising individuals, discouraging engagement with protection services, and deterring victims from seeking help due to fear of arrest or deportation. A smaller proportion of States have adopted public health-oriented models that prioritize harm reduction, treatment, and reintegration. It is proposed that drug policy is therefore closely linked to anti-trafficking effectiveness, requiring integrated strategies to address both issues effectively.

Europe and Northern America remain a major destination and transit hub for illicit drugs, including cocaine, opiates, cannabis, and synthetic substances with European sea-ports consolidating their positions as main entry points. Trafficking routes continue to diversify across various regions of the OSCE and major maritime entry points. In Europe, the Balkan route remains central for opiates, while shifting geopolitical dynamics are reshaping supply chains and increasing the role of synthetic drugs. Vulnerable individuals are frequently used as couriers or "mules," highlighting the direct intersection between drug trafficking and human exploitation.

The report identifies vulnerability as multidimensional and cumulative. Individuals are at risk when a combination of factors align, such as homelessness, family breakdown, social isolation, prior abuse, mental health challenges, substance dependence, irregular migration status, and poverty. It is also noted that children in institutionalized care, migrants, and individuals with prior criminal justice contact are at increased risk. Finally, it is highlighted that organized criminal groups proactively target vulnerabilities.

Trafficking networks use increasingly sophisticated methods to recruit and control victims. Recruitment typically involves grooming, false promises, and digital channels such as social media and encrypted platforms. Control is maintained through psychological coercion, debt bondage, isolation, threats, violence, and exploitation of substance dependency. Victims are exploited in low-level, high-risk roles within drug supply chains, distancing higher-level actors from law enforcement. Practices such as taking over victims' homes, "cuckooing," for drug storage and distribution further deepen exploitation.

The twin objectives of profit maximisation and criminal accountability risk reduction for criminal networks mainly drive human trafficking for forced criminality in drug-related crime. The exploitation of vulnerable individuals lowers operational costs, increases profit, whilst creating distance for criminal networks, allowing leaders to avoid detection by law enforcement and criminal accountability. Victims are simply treated as a disposable asset, making human exploitation a “cost-effective” tool for criminals, integral to the drug trade’s business model.

A central focus of the report is the non-punishment principle, which provides that trafficking victims should not be prosecuted for unlawful acts committed as a direct consequence of their exploitation. This principle reflects the reality that victims often act under coercion or abuse of vulnerability and therefore lack genuine autonomy. It is widely recognised in international law (including OSCE commitments), and consent is irrelevant where trafficking means are present, and unequivocally irrelevant in the case of children.

Implementation of the non-punishment principle remains inconsistent at best. Victims are far too often misidentified as offenders and, as a result, may be prosecuted, detained, or deported. Barriers include narrow interpretations of force and coercion, weak human trafficking victim identification and protection systems, lack of training and understanding, overreliance on victim testimony, and limited legal environment and/or support. Even where legal provisions exist, there is often a gap between law and practice.

Failure to apply the non-punishment principle results in serious human rights violations, impunity for perpetrators, and victims’ reluctance to co-operate with law enforcement authorities. Effective implementation requires early identification, a broader understanding and definition of coercion, and diversion pathways for victims adapted to gender, age, and minority status from the criminal justice system at the earliest stage.

This report proposes a multi-disciplinary policy structured around a prevention, including preparedness, protection, and prosecution framework. This approach emphasizes the need for co-ordinated efforts. Each element delivers key aspects, i.e., a focus on reducing vulnerability through social support, improved victim identification, non-prosecution of victims, reintegration, prioritisation of high-level traffickers, greater use of financial investigations, and collaboration with the private sector to dismantle networks. In conclusion, trafficking for forced drug-related criminality represents a critical overlap of organized crime, security, and human rights abuse. Despite awareness and response to human trafficking increasing in recent years, victims of human trafficking continue to be penalized while traffickers exploit structural vulnerabilities with increasing sophistication. An effective response requires co-ordinated public health, social policy, law enforcement and criminal justice responses to reduce both human trafficking and drug-related harm effectively, whilst providing an enhanced victim-centric approach.

Trafficking for forced criminality has become a significant and expanding form of exploitation.

Introduction

→ In recent years, the convergence of human trafficking and its increasing connection with other crimes -- such as fraud and scams, money laundering, and drug-related offences – has become the focus of international and national research studies and interventions. This pattern also manifests itself in the rise in cases identified and reported by states where adults and children are trafficked for the purposes of exploitation in various criminal activities. Forced criminality and the converging forms of human trafficking have never spread so widely, nor embedded themselves so deeply within states and communities.

The results of the survey conducted by the OSR/CTHB among its participating States in 2021 noted forced criminality as the most notable emerging trafficking trend, which increased from 276 reported cases in 2018 to 1,394 in 2019 and further to 1,748 at the time of reporting in 2020. In percentage terms, this was an increase from 2 per cent in 2016 across all cases to 24 per cent in 2021.¹ While many of these cases were concentrated in a few States, the data provided by the OSR/CTHB's recently released 2026 survey report² shows that forced criminality now accounts for 17 per cent (4,924 cases) of the cases reported by participating States.

According to the EU progress report of 2025,³ this form of exploitation has been on the rise and is often associated with theft, petty crime, pickpocketing, shoplifting, and selling drugs.

The UNODC 2022 Global Report documented the prevalence of forced criminality in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, with traffickers targeting mainly boys for the commission of various types of offences. This data was further elaborated in its 2024 Global Report, which recorded 16 per cent of victims who are globally identified as targeted for exploitation in criminal activities, primarily affecting boys. Depicting drug cartels' trafficking of children for exploitation in criminal activities across Western Europe, the report provided alarming data on how Europe's criminal networks recruit and exploit youth and children to act as spotters, distribute drugs or carry out violent attacks during the process in several European states. An analysis of Unseen hotline calls in the UK in 2023⁴ showed that of the 385 potential victims, over half were in situations relating to exploitation in drug-related offences (220, 57%). These cases commonly include situations of forced cannabis cultivation or "county lines" (distribution of A-class drugs). Assessment of the phenomenon carried out by the Centre for Child Trafficking and Human Trafficking⁵ in the Netherlands revealed that about 10,940 young people in Rotterdam, aged 8 to 23, are considered at high risk of involvement in drug-related crime. In some neighbourhoods, this affects more than one in nine youths. With a 9.1 per cent risk rate, Rotterdam faces one of the highest vulnerabilities of youth exploitation in criminality in the country. Reportedly, a portion of these young people eventually move into organized crime, becoming involved in serious offenses such as contract killings and extortion. While forced criminality comprised 16 per cent of reported cases by The Dutch Centre for Co-ordinating Human Trafficking (GoMensha)⁶, drug-related offences constituted 76 per cent of all forced criminality cases recorded between 2019-2023 in the Netherlands.

Against the backdrop of rising vulnerabilities of adults, youth, and children targeted by drug and trafficking networks, the OSR/CTHB launched this research study to explore the scale and scope of this form of exploitation. To understand the context in which human trafficking occurs within drug-related crime, this paper delves into understanding the legal framework governing the prevention and fight against illicit use of drugs, its patterns and distribution and delivery routes in the OSCE region, the vulnerabilities that are targeted by drug and human traffickers, and the modus operandi of trafficking networks in targeting adults and children for exploitation. This evolution poses complex governance challenges, demanding co-ordinated policy and operational responses that address not only the criminal networks involved but also the systemic vulnerabilities that enable their proliferation.

Forced criminality and the converging forms of human trafficking have never spread so widely.

SECTION 1

DRUGS

International law has shaped national responses to drugs, particularly the supply ban by preventing the production, supply, and use of specific drugs for scientific or non-medical purposes, and the control of drugs for legal use. To understand this crime type, this section analyses types of drugs, their delivery routes, and emerging discourse governing public debate around drugs. As the demand for the consumption of illicit drugs continues to grow in the OSCE region, criminal drug networks target vital logistical infrastructure, especially major seaports.⁷ Drawing on the findings of the global and regional reports, the section cross-examines the exploitation of infrastructure and individuals in the distribution of illicit drugs.



Definition of ‘Drug’ in International Law

→ The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 (“1961 Convention”), as amended by the 1972 Protocol, along with the Convention on Psychoactive Substances of 1971 (“1972 Convention”) and the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 (“1988 Convention”), form the bedrock of global drug control policy with each addressing different aspects of drug regulation. Together, these treaties aim to balance the regulation of legitimate medical use of narcotic and psychotropic substances with the prevention of their abuse and illegal trafficking.

The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 began by creating a unified system to regulate the cultivation, production, and trade of narcotic drugs. It focuses on controlling substances like opium, coca, and cannabis, ensuring that they are used strictly for medical and scientific purposes, while the 1972 Protocol further emphasized the treatment and rehabilitation of drug abusers. It established four schedules, classifying drugs based on their potential for abuse, medical utility, and the risk they pose to public health. Under Article 1(1) of the 1961 Convention, the term “drug” refers to any of the substances included in Schedules I and II of the Convention.

Schedule I represents the most restricted category and contains drugs with a high potential for abuse and no, or limited, accepted medical use. It includes heroin, cannabis and cannabis resin, cocaine, morphine, opium, fentanyl, and synthetic opioids and other potent narcotics.

Schedule II is less restrictive, since it contains drugs with a lower potential for abuse than Schedule I, but that still pose risks. It lists certain codeine preparations, some dihydrocodeine-based products, and other opioid derivatives.

The 1961 Convention mainly focuses on narcotic drugs, meaning substances that cause significant physical dependence and are prone to abuse, such as opium and its derivatives, as well as synthetic drugs with similar effects.

→ The Convention on Psychoactive Substances of 1971 was subsequently introduced to extend international control to synthetic psychotropic substances, such as hallucinogens, stimulants, and sedatives, which became increasingly popular after the 1960s. Its objective is to regulate the use of these substances to prevent misuse while still allowing their use for medical and scientific purposes. Article 1(f) defines “psychotropic substances” as any substances listed in Schedules I to IV of the Convention. These include various hallucinogens, stimulants, sedatives, and hypnotics.

Lastly, the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 focuses on combating illicit drug trafficking. It addresses issues such as money laundering and the diversion of precursor chemicals used in the manufacturing of drugs. Article 1 of the 1988 Convention incorporates both definitions of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, adding regulations on “precursor” chemicals, which are substances frequently used in the illegal production of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances. The 1988 Convention also addresses the broader issue of illicit drug trafficking. It provides legal frameworks for international co-operation in criminal matters, such as extradition and asset seizure related to drug crimes.

It is important to highlight that the term “drug” is one of varied usage. For example, in medicine, it refers to any substance with the potential to prevent or cure disease or enhance physical or mental welfare.⁸ In pharmacology, it means any chemical agent that alters the biochemical or physiological processes of tissues or organisms.⁹ Therefore, the definition of “drug” – i.e. any of the substances included in Schedules I and II of the 1961 Convention – is only applicable in the context of international drug control, in which it is the commonly accepted definition.¹⁰

The definition of a “drug” in national legislation is far more varied. Iceland and Bosnia and Herzegovina’s national legislation adopt the definitions of drugs set out in the 1961, 1972, and 1988 UN Conventions. However, for many participating States, it refers to a substance that adversely affects the health or changes the emotional state of the user and/or has addictive properties that may cause mental or physical dependence.¹¹ Some States take a more simplified approach, including the aforementioned effects within the classification of narcotic or psychotropic substances, which are subsequently criminalised as a “drug.”¹² In both approaches, the exact substances criminalised as drugs are listed in domestic laws, to which each State refers.

Decriminalisation amongst OSCE Participating States

Interestingly, an increasing number of OSCE participating States are beginning to view drug use as a public health issue, rather than only a criminal one, and are moving towards decriminalising personal possession of small amounts of illegal drugs in specific circumstances. Portugal was one of the first (and most well-known) countries to adopt this innovative approach in an attempt to decrease drug offences, overdoses, and other associated harms. In 2001, the country decriminalised all drugs and introduced robust drug treatment and harm reduction programmes instead.¹³ This move has led to a dramatic shift in the profile of the country's prison population. In the year of decriminalisation, over 40 percent of the sentenced Portuguese prison population were held for drug offences, considerably above the European average, and 70 percent of reported crime was associated with drugs.¹⁴ While the European average has gradually risen over the past twenty years (from 14 to 19 percent), the proportion of people sentenced for drug offences in Portuguese prisons has fallen dramatically from the former 40 percent to the European average of 19 percent in 2023.¹⁵ Just a couple of years prior, after a 1999 statutory amendment to the country's laws, Slovenia's legal framework no longer imposed legal or administrative sanctions on those caught in possession of a "smaller quantity of illicit drugs." Instead, the person risks confiscation, a fine of between 42 and 209 euros, or up to 5 days' imprisonment. If the person agrees to voluntarily undergo treatment or social security programmes approved by the Health Council of the Ministry of Health, or by the Council for Drugs within the Labour Ministry, the fine will be lower.¹⁶ Slovenia's national legislation also allows the use of cannabis and cannabinoids for medical use.¹⁷ In Estonia, since 2002, possession of a "small quantity" of any scheduled drug risks confiscation, a fine of up to 1,200 euros (usually determined by the Police), or an administrative sentence of up to 30 days. Due to drug use being a misdemeanour, the fine or detention can be replaced by participation in a "social programme," which is reportedly more common.¹⁸ Poland's model of decriminalisation is codified in the country's laws through the Amendment to the Act on Counteracting Drug Addiction 2011.¹⁹ If caught in possession of a "small quantity" of a scheduled drug for personal use, one risks confiscation of the drugs and/or a fine, referral to an education course or voluntary referral to treatment. The possession of new psychoactive substances remains criminalised. Still, the decision not to prosecute is within the prosecutor's or the judiciary's discretion.

- OSCE participating States that have decriminalised possession: Italy, Germany, Kyrgyzstan, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland
- In the Czech Republic, possession of a "small amount" of any scheduled drug and/or cultivation of a "small amount" of cannabis for personal use leads to potential confiscation and a fine of up to 15,000 CZK (597 euros). However, threshold amounts are not clearly or firmly defined by law, often leading to misunderstanding among the public and some law enforcement officials.²⁰
- The Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and Switzerland are also among a handful of countries that have both decriminalized drug use and possession for personal use and invested in harm reduction programmes for drug users.²¹

Despite some participating States beginning to move towards a more human-centred, holistic response to drug offences (namely possession), there are still too few States that also view drug use as a public health issue and risk factor for exploitation. In Europe, drug offences remain the most common "main conviction" among prisoners, constituting 19 percent of the total sentenced population.²² This makes widespread decriminalisation and investment in health and support programmes arguably all the more important, as the fact that drug offences account for the highest proportion of prisoners suggests potential underlying issues of widespread drug misuse in the European population. This makes it a top priority for criminal policy, as reflected in the European Union (EU)'s response to drug trafficking in recent years.

In December 2020, the Council of the European Union adopted the EU Drugs Strategy for 2022-2025, structured around three pillars: reduction of drug supply, drug demand, and harm.²³ The EU Drugs Action Plan 2021-2025,²⁴ like the EU Drugs Strategy, draws on the UN Conventions that form the international legal framework to address, inter alia, the use of illicit drugs, as well as the provisions of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Figure 1

Number of “juveniles” (<18 years) reported to have been arrested for drug possession and/or trafficking in OSCE countries, 2010-2023 (UNODC)

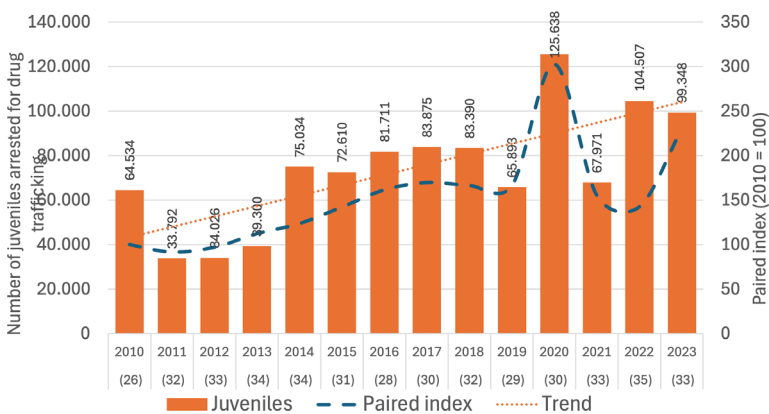


Figure 2

Offenders by age in Albania for criminal offences of production and sale, cultivation, incitement to drug use, adaptation of premises for drug use, possession and transport of chemical substances

Year	Victims Under 14 Years Old	Victims Aged 14–18	Offenders Under 14 Years Old	Offenders Aged 15–17
2019	1	1	11	64
2020	0	0	4	93
2021	0	0	7	105
2022	0	2	11	116
2023	0	2	16	146

Figure 3

Albania’s juvenile justice in figures

Year	Criminal Proceedings	Defendants or Persons Under Investigation	Pre-trial Detention (Arrest in Custody)	Defendants in Cases Sent to Court
2019	397	388	41	141
2020	478	525	31	146
2021	704	744	32	210
2022	821	572	25	206
2023	891	746	16	195
2024	835	720	27	207

The challenge posed by drug use and abuse throughout Europe extends to all demographics and impacts millions of individuals. While drug use generally affects all societal groups, its criminalisation has a proven disproportionate impact on marginalised and already vulnerable communities. The former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right of Everyone to the Enjoyment of the Highest Attainable Standard of Physical and Mental Health, Anand Grover, noted this as early as 2010.²⁵ In the United States, for example, African Americans were found to be arrested at consistently higher rates than white Americans, although the rates of offences committed were comparable between the two groups.²⁶ Additionally, a staggering 80 percent of arrests were for possession of drugs, rather than sales.²⁷ Not only does this approach fail to tackle the illicit drug trade, but it also further pushes marginalised groups to the fringes of society, thereby increasing their general vulnerability, health-related risks, and likelihood of engaging in criminal activity.

The strict criminalization of drug offences also indirectly benefits organized criminal groups. Drug misuse and substance abuse in general directly influence organized crime, as the illicit drug trade will continue as long as the demand exists.²⁸ However, beyond drug use providing the impetus for criminal groups involved in the illicit drug trade to expand and continue their operations, drug addiction and drug-related violence have clear links to human trafficking. Often representing the most vulnerable members of society, persons with a history of substance abuse are more susceptible to manipulation and subsequent exploitation for a range of purposes, including human trafficking for forced criminality.²⁹ As will be discussed in Sections 2 and 4, regarding the vulnerabilities associated with drugs and the non-punishment principle, these widely-accepted risk factors for potential trafficking and a consequent fear of harsh treatment by law enforcement or potential imprisonment often prevent trafficking victims from seeking support and

assistance from state authorities, or from providing information on any illegal activities they have carried out and the criminal networks by which they have been trafficked. This treasure-chest of evidence on the modus operandi, business model, and figures involved in trafficking groups is further out of reach in national contexts that strictly criminalise all drug offences, regardless of how minor, and fail to identify when the offence is committed under force or coercion.

Public health approach to drug crimes

A shared awareness of the need to adopt comprehensive and balanced national drug policies and programmes to address the risk factors affecting individuals and specific communities as a means of tackling the related causes and consequences of illicit cultivation, manufacture, production, and trafficking in drugs has led the UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on the world drug problem to adopt an Outcome Document in 2016 recommending development-oriented, integrated approaches to drug crimes,³⁰ as opposed to stricter criminalisation. The Outcome Document recognised the need to:

Intensify efforts in the context of long-term and sustainable development programmes to address the most pressing drug-related socio-economic factors, including unemployment and social marginalization, conducive to their subsequent exploitation by criminal organizations involved in drug-related crime.³¹

Furthermore, it offered support for decriminalisation and the application of the non-punishment principle in its encouragement of the voluntary participation of individuals with drug use disorders in treatment programmes, with informed consent, where consistent with national legislation,³² as well as the “development, adoption and implementation, with due regard for national, constitutional, legal and administrative systems, of alternative or additional measures with regard to conviction or punishment.”³³

Since 2016, it appears little has changed. There are record numbers of drug-related deaths and people with drug use disorders.³⁴ Describing the global response to drug trafficking as at “an important juncture,” the then Executive Director of the UNODC, Ms Ghada Waly, rightly noted that the international drug control conventions have “a timeless goal at their heart: the health and well-being of humankind.”³⁵ This echoes the sentiments of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who stated in his message to the opening of the 67th session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs:

We must always strive to put people first by ending stigma and discrimination and strengthening prevention; stressing rehabilitation; upholding the human rights of people who use drugs; and expanding prevention and treatment programmes and health services.³⁶

Thus, it is clear that both collective and individual action by States, including OSCE participating States, is required to ensure that the object and purpose of the international drug control conventions are upheld. Only a multi-faceted, interdisciplinary, and balanced response to drug trafficking is capable of ensuring a human-centred approach that promotes public health and safeguards communities. It considers the vulnerabilities of the offender and their risk of being trafficked. With this approach, the number of potential trafficking victims is lowered as risk factors, such as drug addiction and criminal histories, are addressed in a holistic manner that upholds the dignity and human rights of the individual and moves away from blanket criminalisation. If an individual with a drug use disorder has been trafficked for the forced commission of drug offences, State authorities may offer support and protection to these victims, which includes identifying them as victims and giving them access to an array of support and protection measures, including protection from criminal liability and punishment. This will also encourage their co-operation in proceedings against the actual perpetrators of national and transnational crimes. The impact and insights gained from such proceedings will surely assist law enforcement in dismantling organized criminal networks and ensuring their means and methods of operating continue to be disrupted.³⁷

In this regard, several governments in the OSCE are shifting away from solely punitive measures toward a broader public health approach, as is the Scottish Government. Scotland’s “The Rights, Respect and Recovery”³⁸ strategy adopts a public health approach that frames alcohol and drug use primarily as a health and social issue rather than a criminal one. It sets out a shift away from mostly punitive responses to drug and alcohol use toward a health-led, preventative justice model. It recognises that many individuals in the justice system experience substance use problems alongside trauma, poverty, and mental health issues, and therefore require treatment, care, and support rather than punishment. The approach aims to address underlying causes of offending, reduce stigma, and ultimately lower both substance-related harm and crime, aligning justice responses with broader public health goals.

Drug trafficking routes affecting the OSCE region

The illicit drug trade into the OSCE region is facilitated by a complex web of routes and methods, each tailored to the specific characteristics of the drug being smuggled. The range of drugs available to consumers has expanded, making patterns of use increasingly complex and polydrug use a common feature in most drug markets.³⁹ Traffickers constantly adapt to changing market conditions, growing demand, and law enforcement tactics. As criminal networks grow more sophisticated, OSCE participating States must continuously update their strategies to combat drug trafficking and its associated challenges.

In a questionnaire circulated amongst OSCE participating States, over half of the respondents indicated that their country is affected by the production, transportation, consumption, and/or selling of drugs.⁴⁰ Moreover, 46 percent of respondents were affected by Class A, Class B, and synthetic drugs.⁴¹ These figures showcase the extent of the drug trafficking problem in the OSCE region and its status as a major hub for the transit, sale, and consumption of drugs. As regards drug production and cultivation, of the nine respondents who listed the drugs that originate in their country, all nine mentioned cannabis. Just three of the nine States, North Macedonia, Poland, and the United States, indicated the production of synthetics, Class A, and other Class B drugs. Portugal also noted the discovery of a cocaine processing laboratory in the north of the country. Still, state authorities are not aware of any other facilities and did not imply that this discovery is indicative of a growing trend. Therefore, it is clear that the majority of Europe's drug supply comes from outside the region. This is consistent with the latest data and trends in global drug flows and their impact on the OSCE region.

Cocaine

In 2022, global cocaine supply reached a record high with more than 2,700 tons of cocaine produced that year, 20 percent more than in the year prior.⁴² Seizures have generally tripled over the last 10 years, and cultivation has increased massively during the same period, as satellite imagery of southern Colombia shows.⁴³ An estimated 355,000 hectares are now being used for coca bush cultivation.⁴⁴ The main cocaine trafficking flows continue to run from the Andean region to other countries in the Americas and to Western and Central Europe, the second largest cocaine market after North America.⁴⁵ Consumption indicators show cocaine consumption in Europe has gone up by 50 percent in the last 6 years. Europe is an attractive market for drug traffickers, offering space for growth and strong incentives: large profits from charging higher prices for their product than in other parts of the world, and comparably lower risks and penalties.⁴⁶ The developments in actors, routes, and modalities allowed supply to readjust to demand in the region, with a notable turning point around 2015, following declines between 2006 and 2014.⁴⁷

Regarding the routes themselves, the UNODC's 'Global report on cocaine 2023' shows Colombia still dominates trafficking routes from South America, particularly to North America, where most cocaine is Colombian. However, trafficking routes to Europe have evolved, and the dominant role of Colombia's ports as a point of departure appears to be declining, with traffickers increasingly transiting their product through Central America and other countries in South America. Cocaine from landlocked Bolivia (Plurinational State of) and Peru is increasingly transported via the so-called Southern Cone route through Paraguay and the Paraná-Paraguay waterway. Criminal groups, often from Brazil, use planes to cross the border and then use boats along the river to the Atlantic to be transported by sea.⁴⁸ According to the European Commission's (2025) Communication regarding the EU Drugs Strategy 2026-30, flows of cocaine to European ports, either directly from Latin America or via West Africa, have increased dramatically in recent years.⁴⁹

Seizure data suggest that the role of Africa, especially West and Central Africa, as a transit zone for cocaine on its way to markets in Europe has picked up substantially since 2019. Both the total quantity seized in Africa and the number of large seizures appear to have reached record levels during 2021.⁵⁰ Maritime nations in West Africa account for much of the volume of cocaine seized, which is unsurprising as 90 percent of cocaine seizures outside South America are linked to maritime trafficking.⁵¹ Still, other indicators suggest a widening issue on the continent. Cocaine is now also trafficked along routes traditionally used for other drugs,

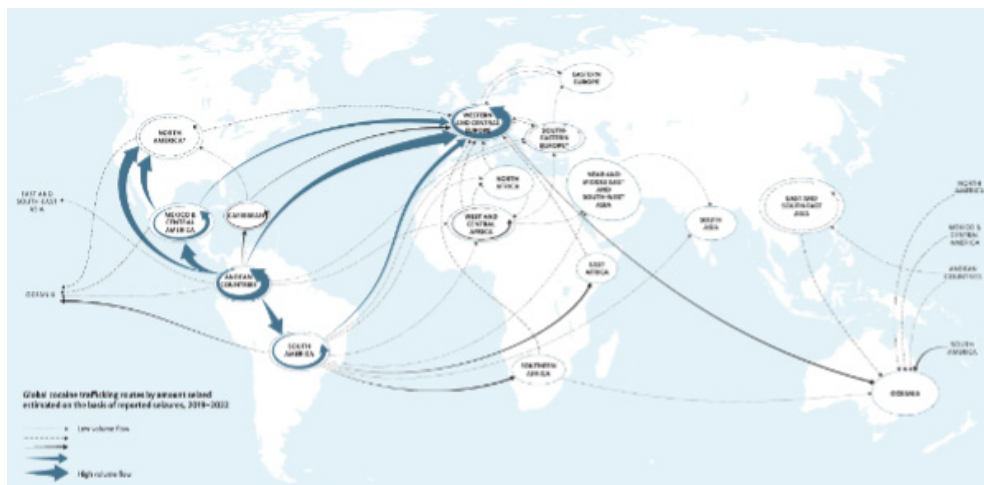
such as cannabis via North Africa and heroin through East Africa.⁵² South Africa has reported a record amount of cocaine seized, suggesting a large increase in flows into the country and raising the prospect of a rebound in the domestic market.⁵³ At the same time, Brazilian crime groups seem to be increasingly targeting Portuguese-speaking countries like Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau and Cabo Verde. Airports in Kenya and Ethiopia are also believed to have been targeted as “stopovers” en route from Brazil to Europe.⁵⁴

In the OSCE, Türkiye’s role as a transit country for cocaine has also been growing in recent years. Since 2014, the amount of cocaine seized in the country has increased sevenfold to a record 2.8 tons in 2021. Some of the cocaine reaching Türkiye arrives after transiting through Western Africa, with other shipments coming directly from Latin America.⁵⁵ From Türkiye, the outbound cocaine flows westwards through the Black Sea and the Balkans, a route historically associated with the trafficking of opiates and heroin, and the smuggling of cigarettes, also traditionally used for migrant smuggling.⁵⁶ Neighbouring Greece has also been receiving rising quantities of cocaine in recent years, much of it destined for the same Balkan route and the markets of Western Europe. Seizure data showed Greece intercepting almost 2 tons in 2020, before falling slightly in 2022, with the majority traced to the countries of departure, Brazil and Ecuador.⁵⁷

Despite a decline in seizures in 2022, the role of Eastern and Southeastern Europe as a transit area for cocaine to Western European markets has increased over the years, and the subregion has been increasingly affected by the use of the drug, as evinced in the answers of Southeastern European countries to the questionnaire. That being said, North Sea ports in Western and Central Europe are consolidating their position as the main entry point to the large cocaine market in the subregion. In response to a questionnaire issued for this report, the NGO HopeNow, based in Denmark, report-

ed large amounts of cocaine being transported in container ships and by individual persons who smuggle the drug in suitcases and other baggage when travelling by bus or car. At the same time, they strap it to their bodies when travelling by plane. HopeNow noted that hashish is trafficked using the same methods, with children being used as drug mules in Italy and Spain. Uteseksjonen, a Norwegian organisation, reported the same drugs and trafficking methods. The Swiss organisation ASTRÉE - Association de soutien aux victimes de la traite et d’exploitation (Association for the support of victims of trafficking and exploitation) reported similar methods of trafficking for cocaine, cannabis, and amphetamines, explaining that women from Nigeria that they have worked with have been forced to transport these drugs on their bodies, in bags or wigs, and by ingestion between several European countries and Switzerland under the orders of their traffickers. This has been accompanied by higher levels of crime, including corruption, intimidation, and violence, particularly in countries with large ports where competition within the cocaine market may have become an important driver of violence between criminal groups.⁵⁸ Belgium and the Netherlands are now eclipsing the Iberian Peninsula as the main hub. The growing prominence of Netherlands-linked routes over the past decade, and the more recent rise to prominence of the Southern Cone route – which refers to cocaine being transported through Bolivia and Paraguay before reaching the Atlantic – may have been instrumental in increasing the availability of cocaine in Europe.⁵⁹ Overall, the quantities of cocaine consumed continued to increase in 2023 in cities in Western, Central, and Southeastern Europe, marking an 80 percent increase since 2011. Cocaine treatment demand has also shown a clear upward trend, rising by almost 60 percent from 2011 to 2022 in these subregions.⁶⁰ Cocaine trafficking has also expanded eastwards during the past decade. Some countries in Asia have reported very large instances of seizures of the drug in recent years, with the demand for the drug increasing in some emerging markets in the region. In Oceania, based on seizures, it appears that cocaine trafficking continued to expand in 2022.⁶¹

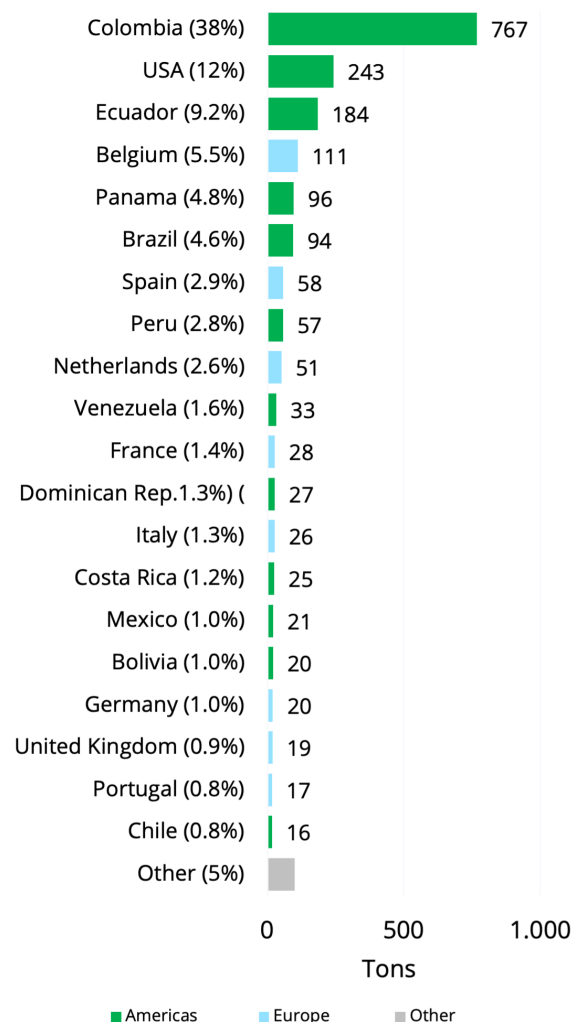
Figure 4
Main cocaine trafficking flows, as described by reported seizures, 2019-2022 (UNODC, WDR)



Cocaine is smuggled into Europe in many ways. Traffickers utilize a wide range of smuggling methods, including air couriers, express packages, private yachts, and even chemical extraction techniques to avoid detection.⁶² The use of maritime containers has become particularly concerning, as traffickers employ increasingly sophisticated concealment methods. The criminal actors involved have diversified in line with the dynamics of competition, specialisation, and collaboration, ultimately leading to more efficient supply chains, in particular to Western and Central Europe.⁶³

It is not yet clear how the economic fallout from the current war in Ukraine and sanctions might disrupt consumption habits in the region. However, the cocaine market in Ukraine is likely to have been drastically disrupted as a result of fewer opportunities for use and it being increasingly difficult to access, as supply lines are likely to be affected.⁶⁴ Still, there is evidence that foreign criminal groups have used Ukraine’s ports as a way of avoiding law enforcement controls in Western Europe. Those groups will probably shift such activities to other Black Sea ports in Romania or Bulgaria.⁶⁵

Figure 5
Cocaine seizures, 2022 (UNODC WDR)



Opiates

The Balkan route, running from Afghanistan through the Islamic Republic of Iran and Türkiye via Southeastern Europe and on to Western and Central Europe, remains the main trafficking route for opiates, with individual drug seizures rebounding in 2021 after being affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.⁶⁶ Still, fluctuations in relation to the size and flow of individual opium seizures were observed in countries neighbouring Afghanistan between 2020 and 2023. Following a drastic decrease in opium production in Afghanistan in 2023 (by 95 percent from 2022) and an increase in Myanmar (by 36 percent), global opium production in general fell by 74 percent in 2023.⁶⁷ The dramatic decrease in Afghanistan was apparently the result of a drug ban announced by the Taliban in April 2022, which the UNODC explains “was too late to affect the 2022 harvest, but had a major impact on the decisions of farmers in the autumn of 2022 when winter crops were sowed in advance of the 2023 harvest and many farmers decided to replace opium with cereals.” This indicates a lower rate of opium trafficking, especially in 2023, which in turn suggests a reduction in opium supply after the drug ban in Afghanistan.⁶⁹ As less opium has been trafficked after the Taliban takeover, opium seizures have concentrated more towards the West.⁷⁰

Iraq is also at risk of becoming a major transit corridor for opiates since the Balkan route affects the region and has been the main conduit of Afghan opiates to Europe since the 1970s. Opiates tend to be trafficked from Afghanistan and Pakistan through the Islamic Republic of Iran, and in some cases through Iraq, continuing onward to Türkiye and into the West Balkans before being transported to markets in Western Europe. The Southern route, on the other hand, allows opiates to be smuggled from Afghanistan southwards through Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, onto the Arabian Peninsula, across the Indian Ocean and towards East Africa.⁷² Saudi Arabia is just one of the destinations of these routes. In sum:

The eastern and southern borders of Iraq are at the crossroads of the opiate trafficked from Afghanistan through the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Arab Peninsula. Opiates transit the Iraqi provinces of Missan and Al Basrah to reach local markets. They are also shipped to the Arabian Peninsula through third countries, ostensibly as a “diversionary tactic” to reduce the risk of detection.⁷³

Heroin and Amphetamines

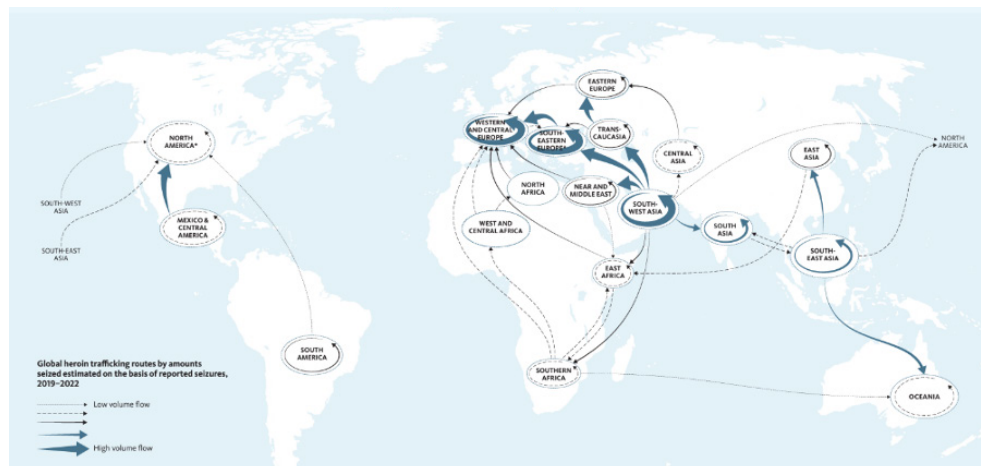
Of particular concern for governments and societies across the Near and Middle East is the rising production, trafficking, and consumption of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), in particular, tablets containing amphetamine sold under the name “captagon,” and methamphetamine.⁷⁴ “Captagon” trafficking has increased dramatically in the Near and Middle East countries, particularly over the past five years. Over the last decade, the largest quantities of “captagon” seized were reported by Saudi Arabia, followed by countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.⁷⁵ Trafficked from countries such as Syria and Lebanon, “captagon” seizures in Iraq increased by almost 3,380 percent from 2019 to 2023 as it is distributed within the country and on to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia on established routes.⁷⁶ Iraq reported the seizure of over 4.1 tons of “captagon” tablets between January and December 2023 alone. However, following the change of regime in the Syrian Arab Republic in December 2024, large-scale illicit manufacturing of the drug has been disrupted.⁷⁷ As the UNODC’s latest analysis shows, while Gulf countries continue to be the primary market for “captagon,” traffickers continue to explore new routes and are now also using a set of diversion and repackaging points, including through Western and Central Europe and North Africa.⁷⁸ Iraq is at risk of becoming an increasingly important node in the drug trafficking ecosystem of the region due to its strategic location near the intersection of a complex global drug trafficking ecosystem spanning Southwest Asia, Africa, and Europe, notably the Balkan and Southern routes associated with opiate smuggling from Afghanistan to Europe, through Southeastern Europe, and towards the Indian Ocean and Eastern Africa, including through the Arabian Peninsula.⁷⁹

Alongside “captagon,” a methamphetamine market appears to be developing in the region.⁸⁰ Currently, the Near and Middle East, Southwest Asia, and Southeastern Europe represent the two largest emerging markets. According to the

UNODC, “Afghanistan’s drug market is undergoing a major transformation, with opiate production collapsing, affecting drug trafficking patterns in the region and beyond.” At the same time, Iraq appears to be at “the nexus of regional trafficking routes for both methamphetamine and “captagon,” and becoming a critical juncture in the complex trafficking dynamics observed in the Near and Middle East region.”⁸¹ Methamphetamine seizure patterns imply trafficking has intensified, indicating a rapid expansion of the drug’s manufacture, including in Afghanistan.⁸² Methamphetamine trafficking channels from Afghanistan transit through Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, making the bordering Iraqi territories vulnerable to becoming transit points to Europe and southwards towards Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.⁸³ By late 2024, authorities across West and Central Asia reported methamphetamine seizures occurring 50 per cent more often than just three years earlier, with average seizure quantities more than doubling. Law enforcement agencies in Central Asia have also begun detecting and dismantling hundreds of synthetic drug laboratories.⁸⁴

Synthetic drugs have rapidly transformed Central Asia from a traditional transit corridor into a major production and consumption hub, overwhelming law enforcement systems across the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan are dismantling record numbers of clandestine laboratories – some stocked with tons of precursor chemicals – while seizures of synthetic narcotics have surged from just a few dozen kilograms to hundreds within a year. Youth use is rising sharply, with cases involving teenagers as young as 10, and authorities report that traffickers now exploit social media platforms like Telegram to distribute drugs with unprecedented speed and anonymity. As Afghanistan’s opium cultivation declines, precursor chemicals and trafficking routes have shifted into Central Asia, fuelling a domestic market that is expanding faster than governments can regulate or detect.⁸⁵

Figure 6
Main heroin trafficking flows by reported seizures, 2019–2022 (UNODC, WDR)



Cannabis and Hashish

Notwithstanding these notable developments, North America and East and Southeast Asia remain the two largest markets globally, accounting for 78 percent of methamphetamine seizures worldwide.⁸⁶ Large-scale production of methamphetamines, though potentially manufactured in many countries, remains concentrated in a few geographically limited hot spots where the rule of law is weak and/or the corruption is high (mainly in Myanmar and neighbouring countries and in Mexico) and where significant markets are in close proximity. In Europe, preliminary data for 2023 on significant individual methamphetamine seizures indicate a moderate decline, which is supported by wastewater data for the region, which suggest a drop in consumption in 2023, following several years of a steady increase.⁸⁸

Size and flows of individual heroin and methamphetamine seizures suggest that heroin trafficking has continued, although at a lower rate in Afghanistan and neighbouring regions after August 2021, when the Taliban regained power. Since the drug ban was imposed in April 2022, flows of individual heroin seizures have continued to decrease.⁸⁹ With the overall reduction in heroin supply, average shipment sizes have also decreased across several subregions after the ban, with the most notable decrease observed in Southeastern Europe along the Balkan route. In contrast to this trend, shipment sizes have increased marginally in Central Asia, Transcaucasia, and Southwest Asia.⁹⁰ Heroin seizure patterns suggest an intensification of heroin trafficking southward from Afghanistan towards the southern coast of Pakistan and the Western coast of India in the period after August 2021 through 2022.⁹¹ For both drugs, heroin and methamphetamine, maritime trafficking has continued to increase into the end of 2023, including the size of shipments. However, it is not yet clear if this is a direct impact of the Taliban's drug ban or the result of other trafficking dynamics.⁹²

Countries that have traditionally been affected by large transit of heroin, such as Azerbaijan, Armenia, Bulgaria, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Mozambique, Oman, Pakistan, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates have continued to see flows of heroin, although in smaller shipments following the drug ban in Afghanistan. For methamphetamine, on the other hand, the supply in transit seems to present a mixed picture, with increases in the median size of shipments found in selected countries such as, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, and decreases observed in Armenia, Mozambique, Oman, Pakistan, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates.⁹³

In 2022, cannabis remained the most used drug worldwide, with an estimated 228 million regular users in the past year, followed by opioids, with 60 million, amphetamine-type stimulants, with 30 million, and cocaine and “ecstasy,” with 23 million and 20 million, respectively.⁹⁴ The use of cannabis specifically is on the rise, a key contributing factor being the revival of drug markets following a hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic and the related health measures that restricted people's movements worldwide.⁹⁵ A relatively small number of countries account for a vast proportion of the total amount of cannabis resin seized in Europe. This is presumably due to their “strategic location on major cannabis trafficking routes, their comparatively large consumer markets, or the presence of large-scale domestic cannabis production.”⁹⁶

Hashish, meaning cannabis resin, is primarily produced in Morocco and trafficked to the European region through several well-established routes. In North Africa, hashish is transported overland via trucks across the Merzouga desert before being distributed to countries like Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. For Europe, hashish is often transported via freight trucks from Morocco's ports to southern Spain or France, where it is stored in warehouses before being distributed across the continent.⁹⁷ Sea routes are also commonly used, with traffickers employing high-speed motorboats and fishing vessels to transport hashish across the Strait of Gibraltar to Spain and other European nations.⁹⁸ In some cases, traffickers use air routes, with small planes dropping shipments in isolated areas in hours of darkness, while the use of unmanned vehicles (drones) is on the rise. These planes and drones are increasingly common for transporting the drug to European territories, as they avoid border controls, cameras, and radar surveillance systems.⁹⁹ Smaller quantities are also smuggled into Europe by individuals, often referred to as “mules,” who hide the drug in their luggage or on their bodies. [cf. cocaine]

Spain, the main entry point for cannabis resin produced in Morocco and a large producer of cannabis plants, reported seizing 672.5 tonnes of cannabis resin in 2021.¹⁰⁰ This amounts to over 82 percent of the EU total that year. Non-routine data reported by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) also suggest that Spain remained the country that seized the greatest quantity of hashish in Europe in 2022. After Spain, the largest seizures were reported by France (72.5 tonnes) and Italy (20 tonnes), indicating that these countries remain major entry points – although some of the drugs seized in France and Italy may have transited through Spain first. Türkiye, which seized the third largest amount of hashish in Europe in 2021 (33 tonnes), may now also be a significant entry point for hashish from Morocco.¹⁰¹

Trafficking routes for herbal cannabis within continental Europe are just as diverse. For example, cannabis produced in the Netherlands is thought to be largely destined for the Dutch user market. Yet it is also transported to neighbouring countries such as Belgium, France, Germany, and Italy, as well as to States in Northern Europe.¹⁰² At the same time, alongside Spain and Italy, the Netherlands is also a destination or transit country for cannabis products trafficked from other European countries or from countries outside the region, such as Morocco, Canada or the United States.¹⁰³ According to the EU Drugs Agency (EUDA), Spain reported the largest quantity of herbal cannabis seized in the EU in 2021, confiscating 130 tonnes, or about 51 percent of the EU total, which represents a 117 percent increase compared to 2020.¹⁰⁴ Spain is now regarded as the main exporter of herbal cannabis to the rest of Europe. However, Italy and France (which together seized more than a third of the EU total), as well as Germany and the Netherlands, are also reported as origin or transit countries.¹⁰⁵

The Western Balkan region appears to be growing as a significant source of herbal cannabis trafficked to the European market.¹⁰⁶ Western Balkan criminal groups are growing cannabis both outdoors and indoors in EU Member States, close to destination markets. Given the possibility of high earnings, these criminal networks – whose primary activity is cocaine and heroin trafficking¹⁰⁷ – appear to be expanding their illicit business to cannabis cultivation and trafficking.¹⁰⁸ While Albania first appeared to be dominating in terms of cannabis cultivation, in recent years, the percentage of cannabis originating from the country has been steadily decreasing.¹⁰⁹

The trafficking of herbal cannabis along the Balkan route to Western Europe is primarily transported by land. Significant amounts are smuggled in trucks carrying legal goods, but also, more recently, in private vehicles.¹¹⁰ The central Balkan cannabis route has been exploited in both directions, with cannabis products also being smuggled from Western Europe to the Western Balkans and on to Türkiye, although the quantities are less significant.¹¹¹ There are also concerning indications that cannabis from the European region may sometimes be exchanged in Türkiye for heroin.¹¹²

Cannabis is also transported from the Western Balkans by sea, usually to Italy, Greece, and Türkiye (often with the use of speedboats).¹¹³ Maritime container traffic in Mediterranean ports connected by rail to central and Western Europe is also vulnerable to exploitation by criminal networks. In addition, parcels and letters have recently become an important channel for intra-European cannabis trafficking. Data collected in mail centres in 27 countries, including 18 EU countries, Norway, and Türkiye, indicate that a total of 3.75 tonnes of cannabis products were seized in parcels and letters entering, leaving or transiting Europe in 2021. This represents a 9 percent increase compared to 2020 and a striking 118 percent increase from 2019.¹¹⁴ In the future, it is predicted that air or water drones may emerge as methods for moving cannabis or other types of drugs between the Western Balkan region and the EU. One could even say this has already begun, with the first reported use of an uncrewed semi-submersible vessel intended for transporting drugs, including cannabis resin, to the European coast being registered in 2022.¹¹⁶

As reported above, cannabis or hashish is also often transported by individuals in their personal belongings or on their bodies. Arsis – Initiative for Social Change, an Albanian NGO, indicated that drugs are primarily transported by minors in small, concealable quantities kept by minors. These minors are often “caught in cycles of dysfunction, rebellion, and poor guidance,” which increases their vulnerability to trafficking and engaging in substance use and criminal activity.

Links between Drug Trafficking and Human Trafficking

The evolution of drug markets, legal frameworks, and policy responses across the OSCE region reveals a complex and deeply interconnected landscape in which illicit drug economies, human vulnerability, and transnational organized crime mutually reinforce one another. While international drug control conventions have established a comprehensive legal architecture governing narcotic and psychotropic substances, their implementation at the national level continues to vary significantly among OSCE participating States. This divergence is particularly visible in the growing shift – albeit uneven – towards decriminalisation and public health-oriented approaches to drug use, contrasted with the persistence of punitive frameworks in many jurisdictions.

At the same time, the OSCE region remains a central hub in global drug trafficking flows, both as a destination market and as a transit corridor linking production regions in Latin America, Southwest Asia, and North Africa to lucrative consumer markets in Europe. The increasing sophistication of trafficking routes, whether via major seaports in Western Europe, the Balkan route for opiates, or emerging synthetic drug corridors in Central Asia, demonstrates the highly adaptable nature of criminal networks. These groups not only exploit logistical infrastructure but also systematically target individuals in situations of vulnerability, including those affected by poverty, marginalisation, conflict, and substance dependence.

It is within this nexus that the issue of human trafficking for forced criminality becomes particularly salient. Evidence from across the OSCE region shows that individuals, especially women, children, migrants, and persons with drug use disorders, are coerced or deceived into participating in drug-related offences, including transportation, distribution, and retail-level sales. These individuals are frequently positioned at the lowest and most visible tiers of the drug supply chain, exposing them disproportionately to detection and prosecution while remaining largely disposable to the criminal organisations that exploit them.

Crucially, overly punitive drug policies risk exacerbating these dynamics. Where strict criminalisation prevails, particularly for minor possession or low-level drug offences, victims of trafficking for forced criminality may be misidentified as offenders and subjected to arrest, detention, or imprisonment. This not only constitutes a failure to uphold fundamental human rights but also undermines effective law enforcement by deterring victims from coming forward and depriving authorities of critical intelligence on trafficking networks. In this regard, the principle of non-punishment, as recognised in international anti-trafficking law, is essential to ensuring that victims are not penalised for unlawful acts committed as a direct consequence of being trafficked.

Encouragingly, emerging policy trends within parts of the OSCE region point towards more balanced and human-centred approaches. Decriminalisation models and harm reduction strategies, combined with investments in treatment, social support, and rehabilitation, offer a pathway to address the root causes of both drug dependence and vulnerability to exploitation. When effectively implemented, such approaches can reduce the pool of individuals vulnerable to trafficking, facilitate victim identification, and strengthen co-operation between affected persons and criminal justice authorities. Moreover, integrating public health perspectives into drug policy aligns closely with broader OSCE commitments to human security, dignity, and the protection of fundamental rights.

SECTION 2

VULNERABILITIES

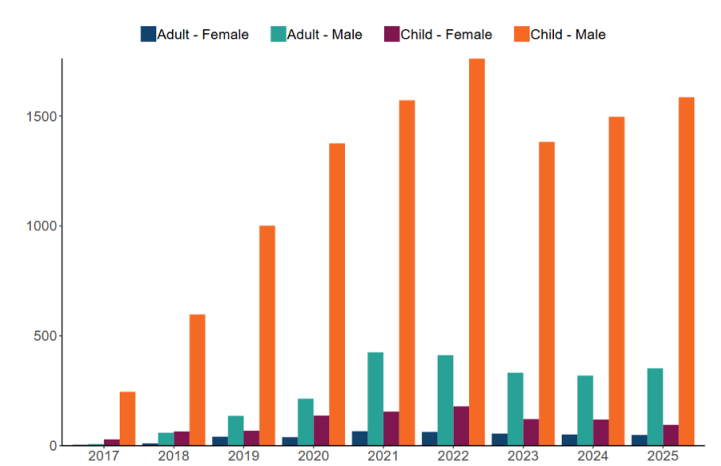
This section describes various vulnerabilities associated with human trafficking for the purpose of criminal exploitation in drug-related crimes, or, in short, drug-related forced criminality. This includes, but is not limited to, the victim being forced to engage in cultivation, manufacture, production, distribution, (cross-border) trafficking, and sale of prohibited substances.¹¹⁷ These vulnerabilities examined by this research range from addiction to other health and social conditions, as well as those specifically related to age, gender, socio-economic conditions, and minorities, including national minorities, as well as criminal arrests and records. The reference to force should therefore not be interpreted as “only” physical coercion, given that other forms of means such as deception or abusing a vulnerable position are included, which of course for minors (under the age of 18 years old) do not have to be proven in court. About these vulnerabilities, much is still unknown because little is understood about this under-reported and under-recognized crime of forced criminality.

→ In general, victims themselves, and their families, communities, the general public, and public authorities may not consider them as victims of this multifaceted crime. At the same time, specialized actors such as law enforcement, judicial or health care officials may assume they are criminals. This is largely due to law enforcement and judicial authorities, as well as public health or care professionals, often receiving inadequate training to allow them to effectively screen for and identify trafficking situations. Additionally, due to complexities of this exploitative form and frequent victim-perpetrator overlap, as well as a lack of victim-informed practices within the criminal justice system or (psychological) health care system, many individuals who were forced to commit drug-related crimes are likely not given due attention as human trafficking survivors. Thus, many individuals who have been exploited in drug-related offences are not identified as human trafficking victims and may experience further victimization and trauma through their interactions with law enforcement or care professionals. Moreover, victims of human trafficking in general may not always describe their experiences in terms of victimization. This is even more true for those involved in drug-related crimes, where they may not recognize that they are being exploited by traffickers, especially when the loss of agency and autonomy occurs gradually and subtly. Consequently, when victims of trafficking do not consider themselves victims, it becomes even more challenging for professionals, such as those in legal or medical fields, to recognize their exploitation as trafficking victims. Furthermore, even in cases where individuals forced into drug-related crimes were formally identified as victims of human trafficking, a prosecution for the drug crimes has still been pursued, amounting to a violation of their human rights by the State (e.g., in *VCL and AN v United Kingdom*, as discussed in the next paragraph).

Among the OSCE participating States identifying and reporting such cases is the United Kingdom, which has been noted for its significant cases, particularly initially involving "county lines" operations where individuals, often minors, are coerced into transporting drugs across regions through "county lines." "County Lines" cases are, according to the National Crime Agency (NCA) of the United Kingdom, where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries (although not exclusively), usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by criminal networks or gangs. The "County Line" is the mobile phone line used to take orders for drugs. Importing areas (areas where the drugs are taken to) are reporting increased levels of violence and weapons-related crimes as a result of this trend.¹¹⁸ They exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money with the use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence), and weapons to ensure compliance. This phenomenon has been encountered not only in the United Kingdom, but also in other European countries and North America.¹¹⁹

There are now several important cases regarding drug-related forced criminality concerning the United Kingdom. In *VCL and AN v the United Kingdom*, on 16 February 2021, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) assessed for the first time the prosecution of trafficking victims of drug-related forced criminality under Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The landmark case concerned two Vietnamese nationals who were charged, convicted, and imprisoned as children for producing cannabis. Their criminalization occurred despite both being conclusively recognized as victims of trafficking (*VCL* before conviction; *AN* after), and despite awareness that cannabis farmers often exploit children. The ECtHR held in this unanimous judgment that the United Kingdom had breached its positive obligation to take operational measures to protect *VCL* and *AN*.

Figure 7
Number of National Referral Mechanism (NRM) referrals flagged as county lines, by age at referral and gender, 2017 to 2025¹²⁰



Sweden, since the late 1990s, also appears to have begun recognizing trafficking for forced criminality, including for specifically drug-related crimes.¹²¹ Following the European Union Directive 2011/36/EU that specified particular forms of exploitation for the purpose of forced criminality (Art. 2.3), such as "pickpocketing, shoplifting, drug trafficking and other similar activities which are subject to penalties and imply financial gain," Denmark was among the first participating States to specifically address (drug-related) forced criminality in its legislation in 2002. At that time, Denmark criminalized trafficking in human beings, including exploitation for criminal activities, through amendments to its Criminal Code. This and other EU countries' legislation abides by international protocols, particularly the Palermo Protocol, which aims to prevent and punish trafficking in persons. Increasingly more OSCE participating States are recognizing and legislating against trafficking for drug-related forced crimes as part of broader anti-human trafficking efforts. This will also assist the process of improved self-identification by victims and identification of victims by law enforcement or health care professionals of this multifaceted offence of drug-related forced criminality.

Hence, only several OSCE participating State collected data on the nature and scope of drug-related forced criminality, associated vulnerabilities and risks, as well as protective factors, or demographic profiles of individuals who experienced such forced criminality. However, existing data does indicate that human trafficking victims are arrested and experience criminalization while in their trafficking situation. Existing laws often also leave a gap in protections for many individuals experiencing drug-related forced criminality, resulting in the arrest and prosecution of many victims. The social stigma and institutional discrimination that come with an arrest or criminal record also leave many individuals further vulnerable to revictimization and trauma.

Against this backdrop, seven core vulnerabilities will now be described in more detail, setting out key aspects that detail factors leading to vulnerability. In addition, there are two general factors that have relevance to many of the vulnerabilities. Firstly, in general, a cyclical relationship between vulnerabilities and this multifaceted offence of drug-related forced criminality is noticeable, also because human traffickers tend to target specific individuals precisely because of their vulnerability.¹²² Their exploitation in turn exacerbates their vulnerability to human trafficking.¹²³ Secondly, persons are especially vulnerable to human trafficking for the purpose of exploitation in drug-related crimes when several vulnerabilities overlap and converge. That is, one vulnerability can also exacerbate other vulnerabilities, causing a negative spiral and increased risk of involvement in drug-related activities. For example, studies explain how irregular migration can affect mental health issues, both of which can make a person more vulnerable to drug use, production or trafficking. As another example, financial difficulties or deprivation have a negative effect on other vulnerabilities that make persons even more vulnerable to exploitation in drug-related crimes and other criminal activities, as will be explained below. Many of these vulnerabilities increase individuals' risks of human trafficking in general, not only for criminal exploitation, and can increase risks of poly-criminality or individuals being exploited for multiple purposes (e.g., both drug-related forced criminality and trafficking for sexual exploitation).

Homelessness, disrupted care, and running away/missing

Young people or vulnerable adults who are homeless or who leave or are missing from care are highly vulnerable to being recruited into criminal activity. Organized criminal networks seek to exploit their needs, such as providing shelter, drugs, or money.¹²⁴ Furthermore, reports highlight the vulnerability of such people to being targeted by organized crime groups for exploitation into crime, which is commonly drug distribution or support (lookout/transportation etc). A situation report published by Europol examining 'Criminal Networks involved in the Trafficking and Exploitation of underage victims in the European Union' reported that "traffickers regularly engage victims' families in the recruitment process or target children hosted in facilities such as orphanages and foster homes."¹²⁵ The exploitation of children and drug trafficking was a theme that ran throughout the report, irrespective of children's origins.

A report by UNICEF (France)¹²⁶ exposes many of the problems faced by authorities when confronted with the criminal exploitation of minors in France. The report concluded that many children (both French citizens and foreign nationals) exploited for criminal purposes remain invisible to authorities. The report proposes that such exploitation goes unrecognised or is frequently misrecognised, especially when minors are used for criminal or delinquent offences.

Australian research reported that approximately 44,900 minors were living in and out of "home care," defined as the system of care provided to children and young people by the state and non-government agencies. This cohort accounts for less than 1 per cent of all young people in Australia. However, analysis identified that this group accounted for 53 per cent of all young people reported missing and was responsible for 77 per cent of missing episodes during the timeframe of this study.¹²⁷ This research cited work by Shalev-Greene, which reported that in around 40 per cent of cases, young people's criminal careers began when they were reported missing.¹²⁸

The UK's County Lines programme's strategic threat assessment covering the period April 2024 to April 2025 cited "missing" as a specific vulnerability highlighted as a key indicator leading to exploitation, particularly child criminal exploitation.¹²⁹ To provide some scale and context to the identification of the vulnerability, the report published the following data:

- 6764 children flagged as at risk of County Lines went missing at least once during 2024-25
- 26300+ missing episodes were reported by these children alone in 2024-25
- 2000+ children went missing multiple times, each time being exposed to risk
- Analysis identified that the children most at risk were 15 years old and predominantly male.

Studies have shown that an estimated 4.2 million youth, ages 13-25, experience homelessness annually in the U.S. and are vulnerable to forced or coerced drug selling.¹³⁰ According to the U.S.-based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, one in five homeless youth is a victim of human trafficking.¹³¹ This vulnerability is particularly heightened among LGBTQ homeless youth in the U.S., and a 2009 study revealed that "LGBTQ youth [in the U.S.] who are homeless often commit 'survival crimes,' such as theft, prostitution, and drug sales, to obtain life necessities like adequate housing and food."¹³²

According to a study conducted from 2014-2016, which interviewed 641 homeless youth in select cities in the U.S. and Canada, 81 per cent of labour trafficking cases among all youth interviewed involved forced drug dealing. "Forced drug dealing occurred through familial and cultural coercion as well as through the violence of suppliers and gangs."¹³³ Of the 81 per cent, interviewees reported that, "they were psychologically coerced into selling drugs or physically forced to remain within the trade after they expressed that they no longer wanted to be involved."¹³⁴ In all cases, respondents reported psychological coercion to continue performing labour in the drug trade. For some respondents, parents or family members employed youth in their own drug trading operations at a very young age. Some youth reported that suppliers targeted them to sell drugs by taking advantage of existing experimentation with drugs, poverty, need for support, violence, threats, and fear. Half of the respondents involved in forced drug dealing reported they felt compelled to do so because of their involvement in a gang; violence was a source of force and coercion to compel youth to re-

main in the gang. Youth in the illegal drug trade described their experiences as having distinct characteristics indicative of forced criminality: work against their will or through manipulation; inability to leave; and violence used to maintain power over them.¹³⁵

A similar pattern has also been reported from Canada, according to research in Thunder Bay published in 2025, out-of-town drug traffickers prey on marginalized or low-income residents in housing units, forcefully taking over their residences and converting them into trap houses – an establishment or property used for the sale, distribution, or production of illegal drugs.¹³⁶ Trap houses shield drug traf-

fickers from law enforcement authorities by reducing their need to sell drugs in public places. Drug traffickers use violent, coercive, and manipulative tactics to gain access to residences, including providing free drugs, forcing drug repayments, extortion, and threats of retaliation.¹³⁷

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that homelessness, disrupted care, and running away are significant risk factors in exposing children and young people and vulnerable adults to risks of criminal exploitation. The current understanding of the problem's scale is limited, as reported numbers are likely only a proportion of the true scale.

Illustrative case 1

Male victim born in 2005 in Poland, brought to the UK when he was seven or eight. He had a poor relationship with his parents, and his father was quite absent due to work, while his mother provided most of the care. Started smoking marijuana around the age of 10 and misbehaving in school around 12. His father frequently shouted at him, and both parents subjected him to physical violence. He struggled with English and to fit in, having no friends. His parents often would not let him leave the house, resulting in a feeling of isolation and running away from home, with a total of 88 Missing Episodes. He also lived in a range of different care placements and towns.

When he is 13 years old, he and his friends encounter a man that they have not seen before smoking marijuana. This man lets them smoke some of his joint, then proceeds to sell them marijuana and introduces them to other dealers that the victim starts buying cannabis from and that introduce him into “street life.” The dealers then start asking him to deal for them, and in return they take care of him by buying him food, branded clothing that he wanted, and free cannabis. He sees the older boys having a lot of money, and is told that he can have

the same if he carries on. He is asked by an older boy around the age of 18 to begin dealing crack cocaine and heroin. The older boy always has two or three other older boys with him that they give the victim the products and tell him where to go via text and phone calls. He starts making a profit of minimum £1000 a day and giving it to the gang, while he only receives £120 a day, having been told he would earn much more.

The gang has knives, and he hears them talking about purchasing and owning guns. Two weeks into dealing for the gang at age 13, he is arrested after being caught with 38 wraps of both crack cocaine and heroin valued in the region of £400. After his arrest, the older boys are angry with him for the loss of the seized drugs and subject him to a debt. Sometime later, the victim has drugs stolen from him, adding another £1000 debt to the drug dealers. In the incident ultimately resulting in his arrest, the victim is made to go along with another man stealing a bike as a way to pay off his debt. The man that initially approached him receives calls from local users and then calls either her or the man she is with, with her handing the man the required amount of drugs and him making the deal.

Prior abuse, family breakdown, and weak protective networks

Across multiple countries, research has consistently concluded that previous events of child maltreatment are an important and recurring risk factor that increases vulnerability to criminal exploitation.¹³⁸ Maltreatment can include physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, family instability or weak family support, and weak protective networks, such as school disengagement and social isolation.

These risk factors are observed to be reinforced with:

- other socio-economic factors such as poverty, neighbourhood disadvantage, and gang or organized criminal network presence; and
- individual factors such as substance use or prior criminal justice contact/record.

Further risk factors have been reported, including instability in the home situation. Children growing up in a single-parent family or in families affected by addiction or domestic violence are at a higher risk. Relative deprivation and limited access to the labour market are also major risk factors, as is a familial relationship to crime.¹³⁹

Human traffickers seeking to exploit young people and vulnerable adults will target appropriate locations, such as care homes for young people facing challenging family circumstances or asylum seekers, with staff unable to detect or prevent recruitment and exploitation¹⁴⁰. For example, a case from Italy suggests that an adult recruited undocumented minors within a reception centre for minors, inducing them to transport and give away drugs as part of their work at a car wash. In addition, a criminal prosecution in France¹⁴¹ provides an example where recruitment was conducted targeting newly arrived (unaccompanied) migrants, without a supportive network, living in youth hostels or on the streets. Men of a similar background to the minors recruited them by presenting themselves as benevolent figures, offering pills to make the minors "feel better," and exploiting them to commit theft on their behalf.

Vulnerability also arises from certain family circumstances, such as "domestic violence, parental drug dependency, abuse, neglect, and familial involvement in criminality," as criminality is also sometimes normalized within a family.¹⁴² Additionally, children of divorce can be especially vulnerable to human trafficking, including for exploitation in drug-related crimes.¹⁴³

Illustrative case 2

Male victim born in Nigeria in 1998 to a mother who died when he was little and a largely absent father. Brought up firstly by maternal grandparents then by paternal grandparents, before he is brought to the UK aged eight by his stepmother.

The victim's stepmother subjects him to physical assault and emotional abuse throughout his childhood, which leads to the boy being placed in foster care aged 8/9. He struggles with insecurity, anxiety, low self-esteem, and bullying and isolation in school due to a poor command of English. He is often absent from school and home, and starts getting acquainted on a basketball court with older boys affiliated with criminal gangs in London at age 12. He starts getting attention, food, and weed, offered a better life, and for the first time feels he is treated as an equal. He is given a gang or street name as an overt sign of acceptance in the gang culture.

The victim is made aware of other young gang members getting beaten if they mess up. He is instructed

to sell drugs for the gang and is given tracksuits, trainers, and some money to live on as payment – things he longed for as a child. He is directed by older gang members to sell heroin and crack cocaine. After some time, another gang robs him of proceeds from drugs sales, threatening him with guns and knives. He is left with the drugs but is consequently told he owes his gang more than £2000. The other gang ends up offering him to join them.

He is made to sell drugs on behalf of the gang for free to pay off the alleged debts and is threatened that something will happen to his foster parents if he does not comply. At this point, he is still only 13 years old.

He ends up joining the other gang because he can earn more money there, and he is taught by older members – who seem to really like him – how to shoot guns, asked to carry knives, conduct kidnappings, robberies, and drug operations. He witnesses stabbings, is surrounded by weapons, and experiences the gang "coming at him" with guns.

Mental health problems, substance dependence, and neurodevelopmental vulnerabilities

Young people and adults who have mental-health problems, substance dependence (SUD), or neurodevelopmental vulnerabilities, such as ADHD, learning disabilities, or other neurodevelopmental differences, are over-represented among those criminally exploited for drug distribution and related offences. A study focused upon neuro-disability among children at the centre of the child welfare and youth justice systems found that those children make up a vulnerable and over-represented subgroup of children who cross between child welfare and youth justice systems¹⁴⁴.

SUD, or heavy substance use, is both a pathway into exploitation and a mechanism of control. Several reports and case series (including government reviews) document youth being given drugs to create dependence and then coerced to commit criminal offences – a pattern seen in multiple jurisdictions. As reported above, within the “Trocaadero case” in France, young unaccompanied migrants were provided with controlled substances and then required to commit theft crimes on behalf of the criminal group.¹⁴⁵

Research in the USA specifically examining substance misuse and human trafficking for sexual exploitation¹⁴⁶ reinforced the methods described within the cases above in France and Italy. Conclusions of the research included:

- “A notable factor connecting substance use and trafficking may be a trafficker leveraging victims’ vulnerability and desperation for income regardless of the purpose of exploitation.”
- Finding that “substances have been used as a recruitment method and to control victims, particularly for individuals with pre-existing SUD as a vulnerability;” and
- Finally, “traffickers have used drugs to keep youth compliant to their demands.”

According to British NGO Unseen¹⁴⁷, criminal exploitation that involves drug-related crimes is frequently linked to substance addiction or misuse. Among the individuals the organization has supported who misuse substances, many have reported that they do so to “block out” their traumatic memories, because an exploiter used them to maintain control over them, or that exploiters manipulated long-standing substance issues to maintain influence over them.

Additionally, persons with SUD have also been found vulnerable to so-called “cuckooing,” which serves as a base for storage, dealing or as a safe house out of police view (e.g., in the United Kingdom and Denmark).¹⁴⁸ In some cases, cuckooing happens because of outstanding drug debts.¹⁴⁹ Reduced capacity because of drug use can also make a person vulnerable to cuckooing.¹⁵⁰ Vulnerabilities arising from addiction can, moreover, be “cyclical.”

Cuckooing has been seen to have triggered a relapse in a recovering drug addict.¹⁵¹ Though not an OSCE participating State, a study focused on women directly involved in drug production and trafficking in and from Afghanistan before the Taliban’s ban established that women, who are globally less often found to have been involved in drug trafficking than men, were found to have accessed drug trafficking to support their drug addiction.¹⁵² Some drug users are, moreover, known to have been coerced into drug production or trafficking because of their fear of withdrawal, in particular when it concerns highly addictive drugs such as heroin.¹⁵³ Additionally, it was found that marginalized drug users are vulnerable to being used in a strategy in which drug sellers only possess a small amount of drugs. At the same time, the trafficking victims hide large amounts of drugs nearby.¹⁵⁴ When caught, this shields the actual drug trafficker from being found out, while the trafficking victim does face the consequences of this criminal law response. The “cyclical” nature and mutually reinforcing aspects of vulnerabilities about drug use and addiction require special recognition. Addiction itself is a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors. Vulnerability to addiction can be exacerbated by socio-economic and environmental stressors, creating a cycle of substance use and socio-economic decline, as explained at the end of this section.¹⁵⁵

As evident in the illustrative case 4 from Norway,¹⁵⁶ traffickers have been found to coerce persons with mental health issues, learning disabilities, and neurodivergence who were first subjected to grooming and eventually exploited in drug-related offences. Human traffickers often target individuals who have already experienced trauma, including those with histories of domestic abuse or violence.¹⁵⁸

Illustrative case 3

Male victim born in the UK in 2003 to a Zimbabwean mother and a Malawian father, and later with a younger brother and sister. He grew up in a poor area. He struggled with mental health issues and self-harming from a young age. Both his parents were nurses, and they split up when he was seven due to his father being unfaithful and abusive towards his mother, leading him to spend time in shelters for abuse victims on multiple occasions. His father also beat him frequently and had a drinking problem. He was disruptive in school, made to change schools often, and went missing from home frequently. He started smoking cigarettes and cannabis at age 11, and when he was 14 the family moved to South Africa for two years in an attempt to get away from his issues. He disliked his time there and the family moved countless times while in South Africa.

When he is 13, he is approached by some older boys who tell him to go with them and offered him some cannabis and money and to buy him clothes. The older boys tell him that if he works for them, he will “get girls and money,” and they pick him up in big cars after school to go shopping for him. This is in stark contrast to his experience at home, where his father would only buy clothes for his siblings, but not for him, and after some time of associating with them the gang feels like family to him. Around this time, his mother is in between jobs and often had to choose whether to buy food or clothes, and he is not in contact with his father. He opens up to the older boys, telling them about his struggles at home. He also develops a cannabis habit, and for some time the older boys are giving it to him free of charge.

For his first “job,” the older members of the gang show him how to wrap and sell drugs and instruct him to carry a knife for protection against other drug dealers, users, and rival gangs. He is required to take drugs to a location and they let him keep £20, an amount that excites him. After a few months, they tell him to rob phones, bikes, and mopeds for them, which he accepts because they promise him good money for it.

He goes missing from home more and more, but no substantive action is taken.

Because of his smoking and drinking habit, he often loses or misplaces drugs, leading him to have debts to the gang, which he has to work off without getting paid. He is aware they know where he lives and goes to school, and he is afraid of what they might do to him, as they openly talk about weapons in their possession. The gang members regularly beat him, at first to “toughen him up” and later as a form of punishment. He is frequently arrested and serves time in prison.

At one point, he is arrested, and police seized drugs, which puts him into a debt with the gang for about £1,000. He is found by the gang and they threaten to hurt or kill him, a threat he believes to be credible, so he works without pay for approximately one month. After another arrest, another debt of £1,500 is placed on him, but is soon increased to £4,000 because the gang is “charging interest.” He is subjected to “banking” cannabis at 13 years old and several times since; and he is also used as a money mule for fraud, which leads to his bank account being frozen and the bank calling the police. He is placed in a trap house with two female addicts and is told by the gang to give them a certain amount of drugs every day to be able to stay in the house.

Illustrative case 4

The case concerns a man convicted by the Oslo District Court of serious human trafficking, extortion, and drug-related offenses committed between 2018 and 2020 in Norway. The defendant exploited a vulnerable victim by subjecting him to sustained threats, coercion, and control over a period of about one and a half years. The victim was forced to carry out various activities for the defendant, including storing and distributing significant quantities of hash and anabolic steroids, driving illegal taxi services, and handing over all money he earned. The coercion began after the defendant claimed the victim owed money to third parties due to an intimate photo; this was used as leverage to demand payment. Under pressure, the victim took out loans, borrowed money from family, and ultimately paid at least 500,000 NOK. The defendant also exercised extensive control over the victim's life, including monitoring his movements and, at times, forcing him to live in a car.

The court found that the defendant used serious threats to maintain control, including threats of violence, threats to distribute the intimate image, and threats directed at the victim's young son. It concluded that the victim's vulnerable condition was knowingly exploited and that the situation amounted to

aggravated human trafficking, alongside gross extortion and drug offenses involving large quantities of narcotics. The court rejected the defendant's version of events and relied on the victim's detailed and corroborated testimony, supported by technical and financial evidence. The court gave significant weight to the victim's mental condition, finding that he had a reduced level of functioning and a particular vulnerability (supported by an expert assessment and witness testimony from family and others). This vulnerability helped explain why he complied with the defendant's demands, including taking the blame in earlier police questioning and remaining in the exploitative situation over a long period. The court concluded that the defendant knowingly exploited this mental weakness through threats, pressure, and control, which was a key factor in classifying the conduct as aggravated human trafficking and in assessing the victim's actions as coerced rather than voluntary. As a result, the defendant was found guilty beyond reasonable doubt and sentenced to five years' imprisonment. He was also ordered to pay 100,000 NOK in compensation for non-economic harm and 480,000 NOK for financial losses suffered by the victim.

Migration, insecure immigration status, and language barriers

International reports consistently show that migrants with insecure immigration status and those with limited local language ability are disproportionately vulnerable to forms of criminal exploitation, including recruitment into drug distribution and other illegal markets. As discussed during the joint OSCE/Council of Europe (COE) meeting of the National Anti-Trafficking Co-ordinators and Rapporteurs, North African minors who entered Europe primarily via Spain, minors from Sub Saharan Africa who travelled through the Central Mediterranean route, and Afghan and Middle Eastern minors who arrived via Türkiye before continuing their journey along the Balkan route are the targets of criminal networks for exploitation in drug and violent crimes in Europe.¹⁵⁹ In Vesterbro, Copenhagen, a significant proportion of street level drug sellers are non EU citizens. Similar patterns were identified by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), which reported in 2021 that many of these individuals are exploited and coerced into drug selling by domestic criminal gangs. These groups prey on their poverty, social marginalisation, and precarious living conditions – and, in the case of rejected asylum seekers, on their irregular migration status.¹⁶⁰ In Denmark, rejected asylum seekers eager to stay in the country are sometimes forced to sell drugs due to threats that they will be reported to authorities if they do not comply, which would usually result in their deportation.¹⁶¹ These patterns show that the phenomenon is driven by legal, social, and economic vulnerabilities that traffickers and criminal groups exploit.¹⁶²

The vulnerability of migrants – children, young persons, and adults – is further compounded by:

1. Fear of authorities and/or limited access to official local services often leads irregular migrants to avoid police, health, or social services for fear of visibility, leading to their detention and deportation. As a result, exploitation remains hidden, and victims are unlikely to seek help.¹⁶³
2. Sitting outside of official authorities and their services leads to a dependence on exploiters for support to obtain documents, housing, work, and transport. This logically leads to traffickers' control of travel papers, accommodation, or wages, creating coercive dependency that can be leveraged to force drug-distribution tasks.¹⁶⁴
3. Language barriers lead to isolation and an inability to negotiate. Limited language ability isolates people socially and economically, makes them dependent on intermediaries (who can be exploiters), and prevents understanding of legal rights or safety information.¹⁶⁵
4. Economic pressure and restricted legal work rights push migrants into informal or illegal economies where criminal groups recruit and exploit them for distribution and transport roles. Evidence suggests that nearly \$2 trillion of illegally trafficked goods (drugs) move across international borders each year. Related research proposes that irregular immigration status correlates with increased involvement in illicit drug supply routes.¹⁶⁶
5. Whilst debt bondage will be discussed later as a broader topic, it is undoubtedly relevant to migrants who may have paid human smugglers for passage and access to a country, leaving the migrant forced to “pay off” debts by moving drugs or facilitating trafficking.¹⁶⁷

Displacement is among the vulnerabilities often targeted by criminal networks. Displaced populations are reportedly more vulnerable to drug use:

Compared to the general population, displaced populations experience an elevated level of vulnerability to substance use and substance use disorders. This may result from greater exposure to the risk factors for substance use and substance use disorders, such as family disruption and elevated levels of stress, and the absence of protective factors, such as monitoring by caregivers or a safe neighborhood. Moreover, given that a sizeable proportion of displaced people are children, the adverse experiences they suffer and the trauma of displacement can also make them vulnerable to substance use and mental health disorders.¹⁶⁸

Additionally, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) East report indicates that large scale displacement, conflict driven migration, and unstable socio economic conditions, such as the war against Ukraine, have created environments that criminal networks can exploit, making borders more porous and increasing opportunities for trafficking groups to move drugs, recruit couriers, and establish new routes for refugees.¹⁶⁹

Poverty, social exclusion, and lack of legitimate opportunities

Poverty, social exclusion, and limited exposure to legitimate opportunities are repeatedly identified as root causes and key drivers of vulnerability to criminal exploitation for drug trafficking. Using data from a large study of children in Scotland, Administrative Data Research Scotland¹⁷⁰ found that those who offended by age 12 were most likely to have experienced persistent child poverty. Additionally, they were also more likely to have experienced neighbourhood deprivation, low parental monitoring, living with a single parent, and adverse childhood experiences. Poverty, social exclusion, and lack of legitimate opportunities affect both vulnerable adults and young people and children by:

- creating financial need that makes illicit income attractive;
- eroding social supports and protective institutions; and
- increasing exposure to recruiters and coercive networks.

Organized criminal networks exploit debt, substance dependence, migration status, use threats, or promises of status and pay. International reports and regional studies document this pattern across Latin America, West Africa, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.¹⁷¹

A high-profile case in Indonesia (2010) resulted in the conviction of a drug-trafficking courier. The woman convicted consistently asserted she was recruited and exploited by traffickers because of her poverty and lack of legal work options as a domestic worker. Her case became a major legal campaign. The Indonesian execution was stayed (2015) to allow investigation of the alleged recruiters; the Philippines' authorities later pursued trafficking prosecutions of the recruiters, and the Philippines Supreme Court recognised her status as a trafficking victim in related domestic proceedings. The case is a useful example where poverty/social vulnerability was central to the trafficking claim behind a drug-smuggling prosecution.¹⁷²

Socio-economic vulnerability, coupled with other factors, was found to have affected the participation of women in drug production and the drug trade.¹⁷³ More generally, statistically people in a lower socioeconomic group who use drugs are more likely to develop an SUD than people from higher socioeconomic groups. According to the World Drug Report,

“Population groups that face socioeconomic disadvantages such as poverty, conflict and a lack of opportunities for education and employment are particularly vulnerable to men-

tal health problems and drug use disorders. Socioeconomic disadvantages can also limit the access of disadvantaged or marginalized population groups to health, health promotion, prevention and drug treatment services.”¹⁷⁴

More specifically, a participant in a study in the United States shared that both the drug trafficker and their victim “may have vulnerabilities for substances or addiction and trafficking, noting that they often come from similar marginalized socio-economic backgrounds, ‘a broken home, a broken society’, that leads to the development of survival skills to figure out how the trafficker will get his next meal or support his own drug use.” Drug runners in Denmark are also usually recruited among people from lower socioeconomic groups.¹⁷⁵

Financial difficulties can make people more vulnerable to criminal exploitation, including exploitation for drug-related crimes. Furthermore, financial difficulties can exacerbate other vulnerabilities and further increase the risk of criminal exploitation.¹⁷⁶ Individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds often also face increased risks for drug use disorders. The UNODC reported that, “While more people use drugs in developed countries than in developing countries, and wealthier segments of society have a higher prevalence of drug use, people who are socially and economically disadvantaged are more likely to develop drug use disorders.”¹⁷⁸ Factors such as low educational attainment, unemployment, and living in unsafe neighborhood contribute to greater vulnerability. Children from disadvantaged families may experience stressors that hinder their development and increase the likelihood of substance use later in life.¹⁷⁹

The OSCE's 2024 report examining the role of financial literacy in youth crime prevention, shows that nearly half of juvenile delinquency cases involved families with low financial literacy facing severe financial hardship, relying on social assistance and close to insolvency in Hagen, Germany, as revealed by the youth crime prevention initiative Kurve Kriegen.¹⁸⁰ Criminal networks often target social exclusion for exploitation for various purposes, including for drug-related offences. Research conducted among focus youth groups in Ireland further found that the single most agreed upon vulnerability to violence and criminal activity was to be “hanging around” or “larking” in public places, particularly alone.¹⁸¹ Older adults are known to have been preyed on to be victimized through cuckooing, which also links to the following factor of age more generally.¹⁸²

Criminal justice contact and social marginalisation

A growing body of international evidence describes exploitation as occurring along a continuum, whereby early experiences of marginalisation, such as poverty, homelessness, abuse, and unstable migration status, lead to increased contact with welfare and criminal justice systems, thereby heightening exposure to exploitation. Analysis of 1,264 trafficking survivors found links between childhood abuse, mental health issues, and later exploitation, alongside outcomes such as multiple arrests and cycling in and out of exploitation.¹⁸³ According to Polaris, 90 percent of trafficking survivors with a criminal record report that the crimes were related to their trafficking experience.¹⁸⁴

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime highlights that victims of trafficking are frequently criminalised for offences they were coerced into committing, including drug-related and acquisitive crimes, meaning many first come to the attention of authorities as offenders rather than victims.¹⁸⁵ Globally, more than 125,000 trafficking victims were detected in 2026¹⁸⁶ a figure that remains low relative to estimated prevalence, while thousands more individuals are arrested and processed through criminal justice systems each year.

This disparity suggests that victims are often encountered but not identified within these systems. Furthermore, the persistence of low conviction rates in some jurisdictions reinforces the challenge of distinguishing between criminals and victims. Taken together, this evidence supports the notion of a cyclical pathway in which marginalisation leads to system contact, increasing visibility to exploitative networks while simultaneously reducing the likelihood of recognition and protection, thereby perpetuating vulnerability to further exploitation.¹⁸⁷

Many researchers emphasize a continuum from initial marginalisation, which can lead to contact with child-welfare or adult social services and criminal justice systems. This sequence may lead to heightened exposure to recruiters and traffickers. Studies show that prior child-protection involvement, school exclusion, or substance dependency are common pathways into criminal exploitation.

Criminal justice contact, which may involve law enforcement arrests, court involvement, juvenile detention or probation, has been shown to frequently occur with social marginalisation, e.g. poverty, unstable housing, school exclusion, child-welfare involvement, and substance use. Together, these create vulnerabilities that organized drug networks can exploit by means of offering money, shelter, or coercion or using pre-existing justice contacts as leverage.¹⁸⁸

School absence is both a cause and an effect of human trafficking for exploitation in drug-related crimes. As an added vulnerability, where statistically the rates of exclusion are higher on average for children with special educational needs and for those on free school meals, these children are made even more vulnerable and targets of criminal networks.¹⁸⁹ There are indications that drug dealers outsource drug delivery to school dropouts as runners, who are in part recruited particularly for this vulnerability.¹⁹⁰

With this in mind, organized criminal groups adapt recruitment strategies to exploit these vulnerabilities across jurisdictions, with trafficking networks identifying socially marginalised youth and adults, and use deception, coercion, debt, and violence to force them into drug distribution roles. European and transnational analyses characterise these strategies as part of a serious organized crime business model. As reported by Europol, some of the most threatening criminal networks recruit from a young stratum of the vulnerable population, even minors, and abuse them to execute tasks in drug trafficking or to exploit them in criminal activities. They often do this as a countermeasure to avoid prosecution and/or identification of core network members or leadership.¹⁹¹

Age and gender

Human traffickers have been found to target the extremes of age: young and old, especially. Young people are known to have been taken advantage of to sell drugs because of their “age, their naivety and their less risk-averse approach.”¹⁹² Researchers¹⁹³ describe child criminal exploitation as a dynamic process that emerges within “possibility spaces” where a perpetrator’s needs intersect with a child’s vulnerabilities and wider environmental factors. Social capital offers a useful lens for examining both the goals of those involved in exploitation and the social structures that influence how these interactions unfold.

In the UK, children accounted for 50 percent of referrals related to criminal exploitation.¹⁹⁴ In 2025, 2,083 county lines referrals were flagged, which accounted for 9 per cent of all referrals received that year with the majority (76 per cent; 1,585) being male children (at the time of referral). In Denmark, there have been concerns about vulnerable young people selling drugs in Copenhagen, arguably due to police crackdowns in Freetown Christiania.¹⁹⁵ Also, young people under the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Denmark are exploited to carrying large amounts of drugs for street sellers.¹⁹⁶ In Albania, children aged 15–17 are commonly used as couriers and local distributors.

In the Netherlands, Helpline statistics from the Centre against Child Trafficking and Human Trafficking (CKM) show that of the 37 boys and men who contacted the help line, 30 were victims of forced criminality, the majority of whom were exploited in drug-related crimes.¹⁹⁷ Expert accounts suggest that criminal gangs groom the young boys, initially by offering them gifts such as new clothes, mobile phones, and a place to stay, after which the boys are caught up in debt bondage. Some criminal gangs give the boys benzodiazepines (e.g. Rivotril) to make them more passive and malleable.¹⁹⁸

Meanwhile, several media reports and research studies also show how girls and young women are increasingly drawn into exploitation in drug-related crimes; however, they remain unidentified as trafficking victims due to their misinterpretation as in consensual relationships or “bad choices” rather than coercion. Many of them experience both criminal and sexual exploitation, with the two reinforcing each other.¹⁹⁹

Whereas statistically the known involvement of men in drug trafficking and even in the nexus with human trafficking is more prevalent globally, studies dedicated specifically to women show evidence of the involvement of women and girls in both crimes. For example, a report on Afghan women’s direct involvement in the opiate production and trade lists several reasons that explain why they became involved in drug production and/or (cross-border) trafficking, ranging from exploitation of femininity and vulnerability to the connection between drug trafficking and trafficking for sexual exploitation and agency and female empowerment.²⁰⁰ Gender-based violence and trauma are significant risk factors for women developing substance use disorders.²⁰¹

In 2024, Action for Children launched the Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children²⁰² in the UK and interviewed 70 organisations or individuals, including young people, parents and mentors with lived experience of exploitation. The review reveals that any child can become a victim of exploitation, however there are several vulnerabilities and characteristics of children that are likely to be targeted for exploitation. These are black and minority ethnic children who are overrepresented in county line statistics; children with irregular immigration status or who do not speak English.

Research and government guidance highlight that sexual violence and exploitation are part of the abuse experienced by some victims of county lines. Law enforcement and social-care reports emphasise that children are often both criminally exploited and sexually exploited.²⁰³ Children are often forced to conceal drugs in their bodies known as “plugging” which amounts to sexual abuse.

In a case reported in the U.S. media “10 busted in sick NYC sex-trafficking of 16-year-old girl: Nightmare of abuse and exploitation.”²⁰⁴ The case highlights several vulnerabilities and challenges posed by such cases. The case involved a 16-year-old victim who was beaten, raped, drugged, exploited in sex trafficking, and forced to sell drugs for her abusers. The victim was initially lured through an online dating app involving a 49-year-old suspect. It is then reported that within weeks, she was also forced to sell crack to men who paid to molest her. The suspect and associates allegedly tracked the girl’s movements and used physical force to maintain her compliance. Injuries inflicted included a fractured jaw.

The U.S. investigation highlights the complex levels of abuse and exploitation, including forced drug distribution tied to the trafficking cycle, that victims are likely to suffer. Issues include:

- Sexual exploitation is used to embed victims in criminal economies. Sexual exploitation, e.g. commercial sexual exploitation, is frequently combined with expectations that victims will also participate in drug-related activities. This might involve carrying, selling, or recruiting drugs. In some crime models, sex and drug markets are run by the same criminal networks.²⁰⁵
- Forced criminality is widely undetected by the criminal justice system. Victims, as described within examples in

this paper, are often pressured into illegal acts. When arrested for drug possession or related offences, their status as trafficking victims is obscured or simply not identified or recognised. Traffickers exploit this scenario by threatening or punishing victims and impeding their access to support services. Legal analyses highlight the need to avoid criminalising victims.²⁰⁶

- Another consistent theme is the vulnerability of young people and migrants. Research describes a disproportionate representation of children and young adults among detected victims, and additionally, migrants and economically marginalised groups are specifically targeted along drug trafficking routes.²⁰⁷

Illustrative case 5

Female victim born in 1978. Her family consisted of her parents, six brothers, and one sister. Around the age of 11, she was raped on two occasions by one of her older brothers. Her father drank and would occasionally become violent towards her mother, but the household had a relatively stable income. She often skipped school and moved out of home at 16 to work in a burger shop. She was raped again at the age of 18. She had three children by a partner who was ten years her senior and began smoking cannabis around the age of 24. On one occasion, her partner put heroin in her joint without her knowledge, and she ended up becoming addicted to heroin and her children taken away from her. She also got addicted to crack cocaine, paying for the drugs by shoplifting. After about ten years of struggling with addiction, she was able to get clean for a period before meeting a new partner who reintroduced her to heroin. Her new partner was physically and verbally abusive of her, and when she subsequently fell pregnant and gave birth whilst in prison, she soon developed depression and relapsed, leaving her sister to raise her child. She later gave birth to another baby that was put up for adoption.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, she stayed at a house with a friend who was also a drug user. Soon, a group of drug dealers began operating from the house, and they provided her friend with drugs in exchange. One of the gang members asked her if he can put money into her bank account. She refused at first, but after he persisted, she agreed and he transferred £2,000 into her bank account. This led her bank, which recently issued her the bank account, to freeze the account.

The man became aggressive because of this and started keeping her inside the house, likely until the money is recovered., including confiscating her bank card. After three days of being held in the apartment, she managed to escape by climbing out of a third-floor window.

A few days after her escape, a member of the gang contacted and threatened her elderly parents, at some point also throwing bricks through their windows.

One day, she was seen walking in the street by one of the gang members. He approached her and demanded she return to the flat to work off her “debt.” She feared for the safety of her parents and her bank account was closed, so she does not feel she has many other options. She subsequently started dealing drugs on behalf of the gang and even used her benefits payments to try to pay off her debt. One of the gang members slept at the property from which she was required to deal drugs. Once, she tried to escape the property again, but one of the gang members dragged her back inside and repeatedly burned her arms with cigarettes. She had witnessed them frequently in possession of “Rambo knives” and often boasting about severe violence. She became suicidal.

At this stage, she was selling approximately £2,000 per day in drugs on behalf of the gang. Upon discovering that she had a driver’s licence, the gang provided her with a vehicle to use in the drug dealing. Her mother prompted her to try to remove herself from the gang, which resulted in her becoming homeless again. A charity helped her for some time, but members of the gang waiting for her in a car soon found and accosted her. They beat her up, took her with them, and made her resume drug dealing and operating the drug line for them, giving all the money to the gang. Additionally, she was required to perform sex acts against her will, usually involving performing oral sex. The gang members laughed at her and demeaned her whilst abusing her, and she believes that on at least one occasion she was filmed while being abused. The gang further severely beat her and repeatedly told her that she has accrued more debt. On various occasions, she was required by the gang to “plug” or “bank” drugs vaginally.

SECTION 3

TRAFFICKING MODUS OPERANDI

section examines modus operandi based on the constitutive elements of the crime of human trafficking, i.e. the acts, means, and various exploitative purposes (meaning both the exploitation and its intent, e.g., through production, transportation, delivery, possession for further distribution, or grooming others to survive). The “act” element of trafficking in persons can be satisfied by a broad range of conduct, which may in itself appear neutral but becomes criminally significant when carried out with the intent to exploit another person.²⁰⁸ A constituent element of “means” refer to the methods used to secure a person’s involvement, including threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or a position of vulnerability, and the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to obtain the consent of someone who has control over another person. In the case of children, it is not necessary to prove any of these means, as minors are considered incapable of consenting to their own exploitation; however, for all other individuals, the presence of at least one of these means must be established. This framework includes both physical and non-physical forms of control, recognizing that trafficking can occur without overt force, particularly through fraud, deception, or exploitation of vulnerability and abuse of position of authority.²⁰⁹

→ Despite the lack of cohesive criminal case data, a dearth of research on the overall topic and a paucity of detailed analysis to inform truly evidence-based focus of the research, there are increasing indications that criminal networks engage in poly-criminality, allowing for the inference of more hidden human trafficking for the commission of forced criminality in drug related crimes among (detected) drug trafficking than currently discovered.

Given the extensive data on county lines issues in the UK, the present research examines the county lines approach to explore the modus operandi of perpetrators. The UK's County Lines programme was the subject of a published review (September 2025), where the issue of ongoing data collection, both in terms of increasing and improving the quality of longer-term collection and greater volume, was one of the significant concluding remarks.²¹⁰ The County Lines approach focuses upon "the most violent model of drug supply and a harmful form of child criminal exploitation, as these gangs are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money, and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence), and weapons."²¹¹

Drug trafficking as a standalone criminal offence, like the supply of any commodity, requires a range of processes and participants (supply chain) to reach the end user (consumer) and achieve a financial return on the process (criminal proceeds).

Within the context of a lack of detailed criminal case data and limited research, the following section seeks to examine the tactics employed by organized criminal networks in trafficking human beings for the purposes of criminal exploitation in forced drug-related activity.

Belgium's 2025 national report describes this form of exploitation as part of a broader pattern where victims are used as expendable actors in street-level drug markets, exposing them to high legal risks while shielding the organizers. Victims may be compelled to transport, store, or sell drugs, often without real autonomy, and may fear retaliation or deportation if they refuse or seek help. This creates a situation where they are treated as offenders by authorities, even though their actions are the result of coercion and exploitation, which complicates identification and protection of victims within the criminal justice system.²¹²

Acts

Recruitment

The actions taken by traffickers to exploit their victims reveal a wide variety of recruitment methods, including through or during the isolation of victims. Targeting vulnerable individuals (see section 2) – both online and offline – traffickers take advantage of their isolation, due to their migration status, social isolation or their social isolation in general.

In December 2021, at the request of the Municipality of Rotterdam, the Centre against Child Trafficking and Human Trafficking published a study into the nature and extent of criminal exploitation in Rotterdam. The study²¹³ showed that the street is the most frequently mentioned location where students are approached or recruited for criminal activity, with lesser extent taking place online or through social media channels.

Traffickers also create a dependency between themselves and the victim through deception, such as the false promise of a job, and grooming, such as befriending the victim,²¹⁴ developing a romantic relationship with them or offering them shelter. In some cases, the creation of an (emotional, financial) dependency is sufficient to enable recruitment for exploitation in drug-related criminality. In other cases, the trafficker uses threats and violence against the victim and/or their loved ones, including physical isolation (for example, by confiscating the victim's phone, preventing them from escaping, or confiscating passports²¹⁵) to ensure that the victim will succumb to exploitation.

The tactics of criminal networks are similar across the OSCE. Research into criminal exploitation of children in Albania evinces same trajectory where criminal groups recruit individuals by promising quick financial gain and improved living conditions, exploiting factors such as social exclusion, poverty, and school dropout, which increase vulnerability. They frequently build false trust by presenting themselves as friends, mentors, or protective figures, using emotional manipulation to create a sense of belonging and dependence. The research shows the use of peer recruitment for drug related offences through friendship networks, giving small favours and integration/creating false community environments.

Also, older people can be approached at the supermarket, with ill-intentioned individuals helping them to do their shopping, only to end up carrying their bags home and starting to store drugs in their home.²¹⁶ Traffickers may also offer gifts to children, so that they hold drugs or weapons to pay them back.²¹⁷

Digitalization of trafficking crimes has also impacted the recruitment modus operandi of criminals. Now, recruitment is increasingly technology-facilitated and transnational. According to Europol, serious and organised crime is increasingly nurtured online. The online domain has become an essential, omnipresent aspect of daily life, and its role in facilitating organised crime will continue to grow.²¹⁸ Similarly, criminals use new technologies to scale up their reach to victims and expand their illicit activities. Minors and youth are increasingly targeted and recruited through social media platforms for drug related and violent offences. According to Unseen 2023 Helpline data, one of the biggest increases was in criminal exploitation online (1,350%), up from only 2 instances the previous year.²¹⁹

Figure 9

The types of locations or sites where criminal exploitation had reportedly taken place (UNSEEN 2023)

Location type	Potential victims	Potential victims %
Privat house	70	36 %
Cannabis farm	64	33 %
Street	61	31 %
Website/internet location	29	15 %
Business	24	12 %
Travellers/caravan site	3	2%
Park/recreational facility	2	1 %
Public transport	2	1 %
Other	15	8 %
Multiple location types	59	
Unknown	132	
Total	461	139 %

Online grooming tactics mirror classic offline methods but are enabled and accelerated online. Traffickers cultivate trust, isolate victims from support, and progressively coerce or deceive them into exploitative activity, e.g. forced drug-related criminality.²²⁰

Traffickers use social media, messaging apps, online job ads, dating apps, and classified/ad sites to identify, groom, and recruit victims. This can involve using fake job offers, romance/friendship, promises of travel or study, or “work from home” scams.²²¹ Hotlines, complaint datasets, and law-enforcement analyses suggest growing numbers of technology-facilitated cases, but measurement is inconsistent across countries and many victims remain hidden.²²² According to a study conducted by Trend Bureau Drenthe & Social Planning Bureau Groningen in the Netherlands, 4 in 10 young people know peers who may commit criminal acts for others. This primarily involves selling or distributing vapes and other drugs. The report further reveals that young people are sometimes contacted online or through social media with offers to carry out so called “chores” in return for money or goods. In many cases, these tasks involve illegal activities that may result in criminal consequences. Most of these messages appear on Snapchat (64%), followed by TikTok (38%), WhatsApp/Signal (24%), and Instagram (18%). Snapchat is especially popular among young people aged 12 to 18 and offers greater anonymity than many other social media platforms.²²³

Young people and socially and economically vulnerable adults are considered to be at higher risk, especially those with economic hardship, migration aspirations, or social isolation. Some studies highlight adolescents’ near-universal internet use as a risk factor when combined with grooming.²²⁴

Traffickers often use technologies to provide victims a sense of belonging, which they use to groom, recruit, and control victims.²²⁵ For example, grooming (especially of young people) is facilitated by the use of technology, e.g., through adverts on social media purporting to be a way of earning money: “Social media feeds are often filled with content that presents a glamorized lifestyle showing the supposed benefits of getting involved in crime and laying the groundwork for someone to be groomed into criminal exploitation.”²²⁶

Australian authorities reported a method of exploiting older adults online. Law-enforcement agencies described a modus operandi whereby criminals first scam or groom older people online, accessing their savings or funds. Having done so, the elderly people are then pressured to carry drugs as

a way of “earning back” their lost money. Arrests at borders and Australian Federal Police warnings documented this new cybercrime trend. An example was reported of two older American citizens who were arrested at the Sydney airport with fifteen kilograms of methamphetamines and 1.5 kilograms of cocaine. It was reported that their travel arrangements had been booked by a Nigerian and British national, and they were trying to recover half a million dollars that they had lost in a scam.²²⁷

A media report on²²⁸ the French city of Marseille highlighted several pressing concerns, noting that many young people are recruited through social media with promises of easy earnings. According to the city’s chief prosecutor, Nicolas Bessone, recruits are lured with offers of 200 euros a day, only to find themselves trapped in situations that often lead to hardship, violence, and in some cases death. Highlighting the use by violent, organized criminals of online tools to aid their recruitment and exploitation of young people, it was further reported that two new developments characterised the organized drug trade: a growing emphasis on online recruitment, sales, and delivery; and a rising number of teenagers coerced into the trade. The authorities report a high volume of TikTok videos, set to music, advertising drugs for sale in Marseille, “from 10:00 to midnight,” each product with its own emoji, for cocaine, hashish, and marijuana. Other adverts seek to recruit new gang members with overt messages like “recruiting a worker,” “€250 for lookouts,” “€500 to carry drugs.” Similar patterns are also present in cases reported by Belgium, where minors use digital platforms such as TikTok, YouTube (Harraga Channel), Telegram, WhatsApp, Messenger, Facebook, and Snapchat to communicate with each other or with those who manage them, to organise their journey from their country of origin, from one city to another or from one European country to another.

A Europol assessment concluded that the digital domain is now deeply embedded within all aspects of migrant smuggling and human trafficking. The assessment highlighted the increase in AI-generated advertisements and multilingual recruitment campaigns on social media, expanding communication reach. The increasing sophistication of traffickers is shown through their use of encrypted communication channels and other tools enabling digital surveillance to monitor and control trafficking victims. It was further reported that criminal networks are also increasingly utilising crypto-enabled payment systems, often integrated with hawala or informal banking structures to manage the financial flows.²²⁹

The role of social media platforms is highlighted in several cases examined for the purposes of the research. For example, a case prosecuted in Norway in 2024 showed how a victim was exploited through compulsion through social media network Snapchat and forced to store and sell hashish and steroids. The proceeds were transferred to the victim’s account, then withdrawn and handed over to the suspect. The victim was also delivering drugs to the suspect on a daily basis, forcing him to move closer to his trafficker to reduce his (fuel) expenses. When the suspect was arrested (and released soon after), he asked the victim to bury the drugs stored at his house, which were allegedly destroyed by the rain. The victim had to find various ways to repay his debts (e.g., driving a pirate taxi, borrowing money from his parents), eventually losing his possessions and leading a precarious life.

As seen in several examples, victims often play multiple roles throughout the supply chain. Most commonly, as reported in Norway, minors and adults start selling drugs on a small scale, get into debt, and are then pushed to sell more or perform illegal “favours” to pay off their debt. The survey and other sources also indicate that in one case, adults were also trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and other criminal activities, such as stealing.²³⁰

The use of drugs to recruit victims also occurs in the context of the commission of forced criminality in drug-related offences. This modus operandi has already been observed in other types of crimes, such as the forced commission of robberies²³¹ or human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.²³² Similarly, as described in earlier chapters of the research, drug traffickers also either use an existing drug addiction or push victims to develop one. Indeed, drug use and addiction prevent victims from seeking help and cause them to lose touch with the reality of the crimes they are forced to commit.²³³

Recruitment of victims through fictitious debts is also observed in this exploitative form. This consists of recruiting a vulnerable person to sell drugs and orchestrating their robbery, to make them responsible for repaying the stolen drugs (without ever offering them any payment). In the context of drug users’ recruitment, Denmark reported the increasing use of violence by local criminal groups, who compete with each other to recruit street sellers.²³⁴

Transportation

Transportation is inherent to the nature of drug-related crime, as drug mules and couriers travel with the drugs in one direction, and potentially with the proceeds of crime in the other.

In the case of migrant smuggling leading to the commission of forced drug-related offences, transportation is inherent to the recruitment process (some information can be found on the two applicants' itinerary from Vietnam to the UK in the ECtHR case).²³⁶ However, this process is often not detailed in cases or questionnaires.

Other cases report the recruitment of victims "on site."²³⁷ This is the case for migrants recruited directly in the country of destination, without detailed information about their transportation before recruitment. As reported in a Norwegian case, some victims were transported and/or picked up by individuals speaking their native language on arrival in Norway. This is in line with the tendency of networks in the UK to recruit more and more among local (mostly British) young people rather than "sending them long distances,"²³⁸ or as observed in Mexico, to recruit victims "who are passing (or being smuggled) through their territories, instead of transporting their victims themselves," with the transportation carried out by smugglers, thus different networks.²³⁹

Harbouring

The trafficker providing accommodation and/or using the victim's home is often inextricably linked to exploitation. Victims may be dependent on the accommodation provided by the trafficker and forced to commit drug-related offences to keep it. Traffickers may also use the victims' accommodation, forcing them to commit drug-related offences.

As described in earlier chapters of the research, with homelessness identified as a factor of vulnerability to exploitation, traffickers are well aware of victims' precarious housing situation. In particular, "people who have a history of homelessness themselves will often feel sympathy towards other homeless people and provide them shelter in their home. This can then turn into exploitation [by criminal organizations] and being taken advantage of."²⁴⁰ Similarly, newly arrived migrants may find themselves homeless or residing in squats, facilitating their exploitation by traffickers.²⁴¹

As discussed earlier in the report, the trend of "cuckooing," i.e., leads to victims having to relocate, with significant adverse consequences for their social networks and families.

Cuckooing can start in different ways: traffickers breaking into the victim's home in their absence; using threats or debt leverage; gaining access through deception (pretending to be a friend); or the tenant initially accepting the trafficker's presence and use of their home in return for rent or drugs, then the trafficker refusing to leave and resorting to violence.²⁴³ In the same vein as cuckooing, victims' homes can be used as "trap houses," defined as properties used for the trafficking and consumption of illegal drugs.²⁴⁴ Denmark has identified the tendency of city-based dealers to extend their (cuckooing) activities in provincial areas.²⁴⁵

Traffickers know where to look for vulnerable people. (Care) Homes for young people facing challenging family circumstances or asylum seekers have been targeted by traffickers, with staff unable to detect or prevent recruitment and exploitation.²⁴⁶ For example, a case from Italy suggests that an adult recruited undocumented minors within a reception centre for minors, inducing them to transport and give away drugs as part of their work at the car wash. In addition, the Trocadéro case in France shows that recruitment was mainly carried out by deception, targeting newly arrived (unaccompanied) migrants living in youth hostels or on the streets. Men of a similar ethnicity to the minors, e.g. from Algeria or Morocco, recruited them by presenting themselves as benevolent figures, offering pills to make the minors "feel better," or a place to stay, after an often-traumatic migration through Spain.

Means

Human traffickers and organized criminal networks exploit young people and vulnerable adults as a way to support drug-related criminal activity. Their methods are manipulative, coercive, and abusive, and understanding them is a key step in developing safeguarding and preventative strategies. The following are examples of the more common tactics used by traffickers and exploiters.

Grooming and Manipulation

Criminal groups, both violent gangs and organized criminal networks, are increasingly targeting young people and vulnerable adults because they are deemed expendable, easier to control, and help reduce law enforcement exposure. As evidenced in global UNODC reports and regional reviews,²⁴⁷ peer grooming recruitment via friendships, peers, or people in the same social circle (including online contacts) is a common pathway into drug distribution and related crimes. Grooming can be subtle (favours, gifts, status); however, this can then escalate into coercion, debt, or violence.²⁴⁸ Research shows that young people often enter drug markets because of friendship ties or triggered into promises of easy money. With this in mind, as described on page 48 recruiters exploit existing peer networks.²⁴⁹

Criminal business models are highly responsive and adaptive, with online-related criminality often adopted or developed ahead of law enforcement agencies.²⁵⁰ This results in the use of mobile communications and social media, but also might involve short-term local subcontracts, transport hubs, and sometimes coerce vulnerable adults to operate drug distribution networks. European policing and other research bodies warn that criminal recruitment and business tactics are rapidly evolving across jurisdictions.²⁵¹ Technology is used to facilitate grooming through encrypted apps, social media, and messaging for recruitment, enabling remote grooming and tasking. International child protection bodies flag this as an increasing risk.

Children and young people are at elevated risk if socially or economically vulnerable. As discussed in detail in Section 2, this includes links with other vulnerabilities previously highlighted, such as care-experienced status, homelessness, school exclusion, substance use, and prior contact with the criminal justice or child protection systems.²⁵³ Vulnerable adults with addictions, mental-health problems, disability, or social isolation may be at heightened risk of being targeted both as “runners” and as locations to exploit.²⁵⁴

Traffickers will often seek to build trust with victims on a progressive path towards exploiting them. The objective is to make the victim feel emotionally obliged, dependent, or too afraid to refuse requests or demands made of them. Research suggests traffickers use an incremental staged process, which can involve a range of differing tactics, such as;

- Befriending or “love-bombing” through rapid emotional attention, flattery, and intimate talk to create attachment and dependency.²⁵⁵ Love bombing is an attempt to influence a person by demonstrations of attention and affection. Psychologists have identified love bombing as a part of a cycle of abuse;²⁵⁶
- Gifts or offers which may involve money, food or simply a sense of belonging;
- Information control by seeking to move the victim away from family and friends, controlling communications and access to services so the trafficker becomes the primary support of the exploited person;²⁵⁷
- Isolating the victim by moving them away from family and friends, and, in a similar method to information control, are then able to control communications and access to services so the trafficker becomes the primary source of support;²⁵⁸
- The use of debt or fraud using false contracts, travel debts, or fabricated fees to make victims feel they “owe” the trafficker and therefore cannot leave;²⁵⁹ and
- Coercion masked as protection whereby the trafficker presents themselves as a protector or agent helping the victim with their problems (legal, housing, drugs), then using that dependency to coerce compliance.²⁶⁰

These methods are consistently reported by a range of international organisations, e.g. UNODC.²⁶¹

Methods of grooming and manipulation continue to evolve. Traffickers increasingly achieve them through online platforms, where they exploit developmental, cognitive, economic, and social vulnerabilities, as described in the previous vulnerability section, to build trust, foster compliance, and subsequently exploit.²⁶² The recently published European Union action plan against drug trafficking emphasises this issue, stating,

“Criminal groups are actively seeking out and attempting to exploit vulnerable minors, often in economically or socially disadvantaged areas, as low-risk, expendable assets. The digital dimension further accelerates this trend, with online platforms and social media being used to groom, manipulate and recruit minors under the guise of quick money or creating a sense of belonging.”²⁶³

Deceit

Deceit can take several forms. As explained above, traffickers may allow free drugs or access to accommodation to victims, until it is billed and becomes a source of debt, forcing victims to commit crimes to obtain drugs, food or protection, or pay off their debt.

In the Trocadéro case, it appears that the promise of a better life in France did not play an important role in the deception of minors. However, the latter were driven to consume drugs to "feel better," to compensate for their lack of direction in life or of a support system, which led them to addiction. Notably, Rivotril (or *mère courage*, "mother courage") was used to push minors to steal, while Lyrica (or *la fusée*, "the rocket") was given by exploiters as a reward after a successful robbery. Moreover, minors felt obliged to be under the "protection of grown ups" in order to survive on the streets. It also appears that humiliation and threats were used to manipulate the minors; it was reported that the minors were "indoctrinated."

As reported by Estonian authorities, deceit is also reinforced by the impossibility of communicating with the leader of a criminal organization, as its members have to take note of his orders indirectly or via a radio station.

As explained above, deceit also involves luring victims with the promise of legitimate work. Victims may also be groomed by "friends" who do them a "favour" and slowly increase their use of control and force. Norwegian authorities have also identified the case of a victim recruited by an acquaintance from the same rural area of Romania to work in a car repair shop in Germany, where he was taken before being forced to modify a vehicle for smuggling and make a drug delivery. The responses to the questionnaire indicate that in cases where perpetrators and victims were not from the same neighborhood, victims were recruited by fake "job scouts" or contacted directly on the streets.

Coercion, Threats, and Intimidation

As part of an incremental process, psychological coercion (threats, intimidation, manipulation) is central. Research has mapped coercive conditions using classic coercion frameworks and found repeated use of threats, surveillance, emotional manipulation, and deprivation. These can be subtle and long-term, especially with young people. In the UK and comparable jurisdictions, criminal exploitation (e.g. county lines) often features targeted grooming of children and vulnerable adults by offering status, money, and friendship and then using threats, debt, and violence to compel criminal activity.²⁶⁶

Tactics used by traffickers can include explicit threats, demonstrating violence, or showing the capacity for violence against the victim or their relatives and are used to prevent reporting. This approach will often be accompanied by threats of deportation, exposure, or criminal prosecution.²⁶⁷ Another tactic reported as being used by exploiters is the use of shame, blame, and reframing, for example, telling victims their situation is normal or their fault, which reduces disclosure and increases internalised coercion.²⁶⁸

Coercion involves threats of violence against adults and minors, physical assault (for example, burning the victims with plastic), sexual violence, and rape (and threats of releasing images of such violence).²⁶⁹ Threats may include death threats.²⁷⁰ In some Danish cities, the recruitment of street sellers has implied increasing violence due to the competition between several groups, such as, threats, violence, occasional torture, and death threats by overdose.²⁷¹ Coercion can also involve confining victims in illegal cannabis farms or other production sites, as noted in cases such as those referenced by the ECtHR and reports from Ireland. Victims are sometimes prevented from leaving these locations unaccompanied, and in some instances, traffickers further tighten their control by forcing victims to use drugs, creating multiple layers of dependency.

A case reported by Norwegian authorities highlights the use of extensive social control on a victim, including regular checks of the victim's phone, sharing their location, bank account balance and e-mail correspondence; cutting contact with family members; changing their legal name; asking money from family; and forcing the use of steroids (i.e., the latter being legal drugs in Norway).

Coercion and threats by relatives also seem to be a trend, particularly in South American countries and in the context of opiate trade in Afghanistan.²⁷²

Physical Abuse and Force

Physical abuse and violence are often the first approach people may think of when considering the tactics used by traffickers and exploiters. Published research and official reports support this view consistently, finding that traffickers and organized criminal networks use physical violence, threats, weapons, and other forms of force and coercion to recruit, control, and compel young people and vulnerable adults into criminal activity, e.g. drug supply, theft, and cannabis cultivation. Studies describe both direct physical assault (beatings and use of weapons) and indirect physical coercion (threats to victims and to their families and forced drug dependency). The harms are widespread and linked to severe physical and mental health outcomes, and to victims being treated as offenders rather than victims.²⁷³

Systematic reviews and clinical studies have reported increased rates of physical violence, injury, and health problems among trafficking survivors. Physical assault is commonly reported alongside sexual violence, mental health disorders (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression), and substance misuse. This is one of the most common findings reported in literature.²⁷⁴

A guidance on child criminal exploitation describes how gangs and traffickers use beatings, intimidation, weapons, threats to family members, and enforced drug dependency to coerce young people or vulnerable adults to sell and transport drugs or commit other crimes. Coercion can be immediate (beatings, threats) or structural (debt, dependency).²⁷⁵ This is underpinned by findings from the UK County Lines Strategic Threat Assessment, which highlight that three out of every four County Lines offenders are linked to violence. This is also associated with the use and presence of weapons within these networks. It was concluded that offending history and weapons recovery in County Lines operations displayed a link between drug supply and violence. During a week's operational intensification, 96 firearms and 466 knives were recovered.²⁷⁶

In the Trocadéro case in France, police surveillance revealed the regular use of violence against the underage victims, even in public, and (physical) coercion before the commission of robberies or other criminal activities. In this context, the poor physical and mental health of these minors has been reported by several associations and social workers. The minors appear to have been housed by the traffickers, perhaps living with them, making the coercion all-controlling.

In a case reported by Estonian authorities, the use of force against an adult victim included intimidation, threats, deprivation of liberty, and physical violence. In several instances, the suspect and other members of the organization physically assaulted the victim when he did not comply with orders.

Financial control, debt bondage and fabricated debts

As described in earlier sections of the research, traffickers commonly use debt bondage and other forms of financial control to exploit young people and vulnerable adults. This typically might involve the traffickers manufacturing or inflating debts, withholding wages, identity or benefit fraud, and controlled access to money, to coerce and control young people and other vulnerable adults into forced labour, sexual exploitation, and criminal activities, e.g. drug distribution, shoplifting, and begging. These tactics create both the appearance of “voluntary” indebtedness to the trafficker and block victim exit routes as a result of issues such as lack of official identification, ongoing debt (real or perceived), and criminal records), thus making victims easier to control and harder to identify or assist.²⁷⁷

The OSCE's National Referral Mechanism practical handbook defines debt bondage as:

“the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of those services are not respectively limited and defined.”²⁷⁸

The objective and resulting impact of exploitative debt bondage create a situation where it is impossible for the person concerned to pay off the actual or believed debts. They will then typically be at the exploitative mercy of the trafficker.

It has been observed in several OSCE participating States that if traffickers provide the victim with drugs, often “free” at first, in a benevolent gesture, they then begin to charge for them, forcing the victim to work for the traffickers to repay their debt.²⁷⁹ A trafficker may wait for the victim to increase their debt over an extended period before asking them to repay it by selling drugs. As a result of “missed deadlines and incurring interest,” some victims will never manage to repay.²⁸⁰ According to the Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care research, this exploitation has a ripple effect, spreading its devastation to families and the country as a whole, as often younger siblings are drawn into exploitation, families are threatened and held responsible for drug debt. Responsibility for debts used by gangs to control victims can be transferred onto parents or girlfriends/boyfriends/partners and wider family. Debt bondage forces the victim into continued criminal behaviour. Practitioners' accounts²⁸¹ show that criminal groups often groom children into exploitation through forms of debt bondage that begin with seemingly small “gifts,” a sandwich, a vape, new trainers, or even just a few pounds for a haircut. For young people experiencing deprivation and drawn to the glamour projected by local dealers or social media, these of-

fers feel enticing and affirming. But once accepted, the gifts quickly become debts that must be repaid through carrying weapons, transporting drugs, or other criminal tasks, with the debt escalating alongside threats, manipulation, and violence. This dynamic is especially powerful for children whose social standing, unmet needs, or desire for belonging make it extremely difficult to refuse or escape the control of the gang.

The above case illustrates how debt and financial coercion are used to force criminal exploitation. Several studies document how traffickers push youth and vulnerable adults into criminal activities; drug distribution (county-lines style), theft, benefit fraud, through the invention or imposition of debts and threats. Manufactured “drug debts” are frequently used to recruit drug users as runners, couriers, or sellers.²⁸²

Additionally, the trend of “fines for acting stupid” has also been observed in Denmark, namely “large fines given to a person as penance for banal ‘stupid’ actions or utterances (dummebøder) or for missed payments on drug debts.”²⁸³

Recruiters may also encourage the victim to earn extra money by running errands and selling drugs to their drug-addicted friends, and gradually increasing the scale of the sale. Violence is then used if the victims want to stop selling.²⁸⁴

Fabricated debt is also widely used for criminal exploitation both as recruitment tactic and as means to control victims. Traffickers invent or massively inflate debts (for example, “you owe £X for drugs/protection/transport”). The victim is then coerced to commit crimes, which might commonly involve drug distribution, transportation, or money collection, to “repay” the debt. In the UK, exploiters may use an entrapment technique, setting up those they are exploiting to be “robbed.” Criminal groups may instruct drug users or others disguised as rival groups to rob them and create a perceived debt.²⁸⁶ Also, criminal networks may deliberately give drug users more drugs than they are trying to buy or are due to be selling. This is used to encourage the drug user to use more drugs than they have paid for to create a debt, providing the exploiter opportunities to force the user into activity to repay this.²⁸⁷

Illustrative case 6

Male victim born in 2003. His father was born in Bangladesh, and his parents separated when he was little, leading to him not knowing much about his father. He grew up with several different stepfathers, one of which was physically abusive towards the family. He had to share a bed with several siblings or sleep on the couch, and there was frequent arguing in the house. He moved towns and schools frequently during his childhood, and social services were involved with the family. He skipped school and did not obtain any qualifications.

He starts smoking cannabis when he is 13, which is provided to him by a group of older individuals in their early twenties. These individuals give him alcohol, food, and cigarettes as well, and he sees them as friends and brother figures at the time.

One of these individuals asks him to deliver small quantities of cannabis on foot. These “favours” become gradually more frequent, until he is transporting approximately 50 - 60g of cannabis daily, handing the proceeds to the man. He is sometimes paid small amounts of money and other times given food and cannabis. One day, he is left with a bag that supposedly contains a significant quantity of canna-

bis, which he is told to hold for a few minutes. He is then assaulted by a group of youths who steal the bag, during an attack from which he sustains several facial injuries.

Sometime after, he is threatened and cut with a knife by the older individual to give up his address. He is told that he now is under a substantial debt of £10,000 -12,000 and that he is required to work for the older male in order to pay off that debt. He is repeatedly threatened and fears for his own and his family’s safety, as he knows the gang are in possession of knives, including machetes-type blades, and at least one firearm.

He is required to deliver and sell Class A drugs, and he travels by public transport to various locations across England, working for continuous 24-hour periods while also smoking cannabis on an hourly basis. At one point, he is taken hostage by a drug user armed with a knife for several hours and loses a significant amount of money. This is added to his “debt” and he is physically assaulted as punishment. He is frequently required to “bank” the drugs, or conceal them anally, and he struggles with his mental health and sleep issues.

A similar trend observed in Denmark is the rise of robbery scams, known locally as “rulleforretninger.”²⁸⁸ This consists of recruiting a vulnerable person to sell drugs and subsequently orchestrating a robbery targeting the vulnerable person. The purpose is to make the vulnerable person responsible for repaying the debt for the stolen drugs or for being in debt. The exploiter has never lost any drugs or money.

Isolation from family or support

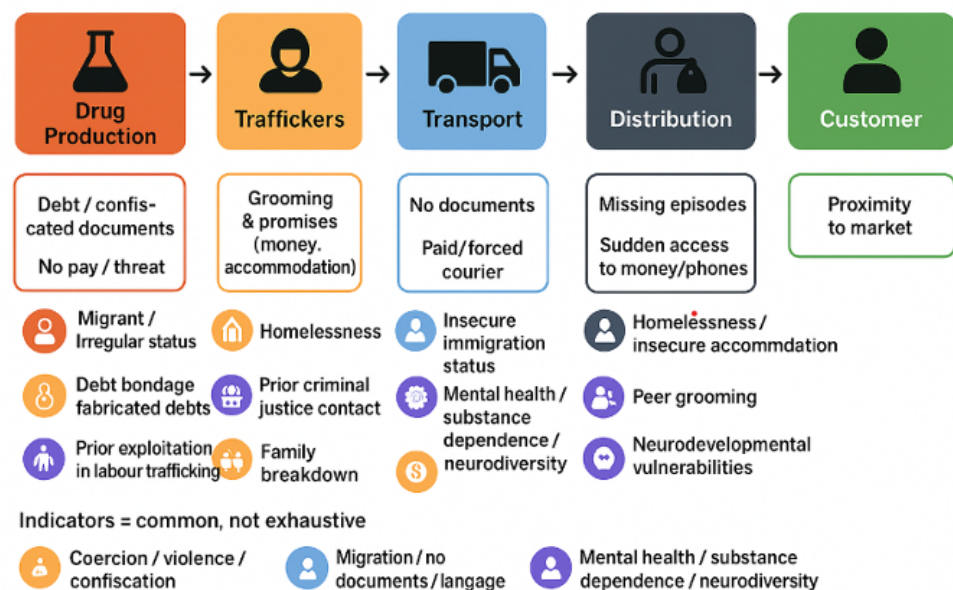
Several studies record how traffickers use physical restriction, relocation, control of documents, elimination/shrinking of safe social space, and surveillance to cut victims off from family and support services. Such tactics assist in preventing victims from seeking help and increase their compliance with criminal tasks, including being forced to transport or sell drugs.²⁸⁹

From the traffickers' perspective, isolating a victim is both a tactic and a goal. By actively removing or weakening a victim's social support from family, community or support services, isolation is likely to increase dependency on the traffickers and at the same time reduce the chance of disclosure or escape.²⁹⁰ Once isolated, victims are more easily coerced into illegal activities (including drug trafficking, transporting, and dealing), as they have fewer safe alternatives and face threats or retaliation if they resist or fail to comply.²⁹¹ Multiple methods have been reported to achieve isolation. This includes physical confinement, relocation, control of identification documents, debt bondage, induced substance dependence, restricted communication, violence, and intimidation.²⁹²

A judicial investigation into “the Nana case,” a deceptive recruitment of vulnerable women from Peru for the trafficking of drugs into Spain highlighted the lengths to which traffickers will go to isolate their victims and use them in the movement of their drugs. Investigative journalism in Spain traced how recruiters in Peru coerced or threatened women to serve as drug mules carrying drugs inside their bodies into Spain. The method included explicit threats against family, resulting in compliance to function as drug mules. Court files document threats to family members and restricted movement that effectively isolated the victims and forced compliance.²⁹³

The following diagram uses the high-level drug trafficking supply chain process introduced earlier in this paper. Additionally, examples of vulnerabilities have been added to the diagram to illustrate how and where traffickers may exploit them within the drug-related crime process. The examples used are not exhaustive but provide some insight into the relevant exploitation within the illicit drug supply chain.

Figure 10
High-level drug trafficking supply chain process



Purpose

A body of evidence from data published by participating States, civil society organizations, and open-source media shows that drug traffickers and criminal networks exploit minors and vulnerable adults because they offer cheap, controllable, and less scrutinised labour that helps traffickers reduce operational risk and maximise profit. Employing this modus operandi also allows criminal networks to mitigate risk, evade detection, and camouflage their leaders.²⁹⁴ This pattern appears across multiple regions, including Continental Europe and Latin America, and is supported by comparative academic work on criminal markets and vulnerability.²⁹⁵ Traffickers use their victims for a variety of exploitative purposes, including production, transportation, delivery, and possession for further distribution of illicit drugs. The process of exploitation often facilitates additional criminal offences, such as grooming others as a means of survival, the possession of firearms, and the perpetration of violent crimes.

Maximising Profit

The global illicit drug market is assessed as generating hundreds of billions of dollars every year in profits for organized crime groups.²⁹⁶ Research has estimated that criminally generated profits laundered by transnational organized crime accounted for approximately 2.7 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009. This amounts to around USD \$1.6 trillion. Of this, the largest proportion is generated by the sale of illicit drugs, contributing 20 per cent of all crime proceeds.²⁹⁷ North America continues to be the world's largest drug market, for example, with a reported 40 per cent of global cocaine users residing in North America.²⁹⁸ Global cocaine profits have been calculated at USD \$84 billion per year and distributed at USD \$35 billion in North America and USD \$26 billion in Western and Central Europe.²⁹⁹ The UN World Drug Report documents the scale of the drug market, which underpins organized crime's ability to exploit vulnerable populations.³⁰⁰ Though exact figures can vary by method and year, UNODC emphasises that drug trafficking remains the single most lucrative activity for organized crime globally. The EU retail drug market is estimated to be worth more than EUR 30 billion annually, making it a major source of income for organized crime.³⁰¹

Furthermore, a study on organized crime in Latin America discusses how drug trafficking is one of the most profitable criminal markets in the region. While this research focuses on macro-levels of organized crime, it helps explain

why criminal groups choose high-profit activities like drug trafficking and, by extension, why exploiting vulnerable individuals becomes embedded in their business models to maintain supply chains and reduce enforcement risk.³⁰²

The convergence of drug trafficking and human trafficking diversifies the illicit activities of organized crime, where trafficking can triple profits with minimal additional effort. The research asserts that this diversification, including the exploitation of vulnerable people, occurs from a profit-maximising focus that sees humans and drugs as interchangeable commodities.³⁰³

Moving from the macro scale of criminal proceeds and law enforcement asset confiscation, it is important to provide some context of the level of illegal profits made by individual organized crime operations involving the exploitation of children, young people, and vulnerable adults. In 2019, the UK's National Crime Agency assessed that the scale of the county lines trade in the country "is greater than crime-fighting chiefs previously thought." The assessment concluded that this criminality was "a £500m industry linked to murder and sexual exploitation."³⁰⁴ The NCA further described phone numbers "linked to about 1,000 branded networks, with a single line capable of making £800,000 profits in a year."

In another investigation in the UK, at a local individual line level, police secured convictions of several individuals for offences including arranging or facilitating the travel of another person with a view to exploitation under the UK's Modern Slavery Act and the trafficking of heroin and crack cocaine. As part of the investigation's assessment of criminal proceeds generated by the organized criminal group, it was reported that they had profited by around £80,000 from the criminal exploitation of teenage boys.³⁰⁵

An investigative report by Reuters details the global infrastructure underlying fentanyl production. The report explored brokers, smuggling of precursor chemicals from China to Mexico, and international distribution. Whilst the report focuses on the supply chain rather than the exploitation of victims, it illustrates the massive scale and profitability of modern drug trafficking networks that also overlap with other forms of exploitation. Mexican authorities have closed around 1,000 bank accounts containing 400 million pesos (\$20 million) and issued 33 arrest warrants as a result of the probe. The sheer scale and integration reinforce why traffickers resort to exploitative tactics, including the use of vulnerable couriers in some regions.³⁰⁶

Having set out the scale of illicit trade and used case studies to describe the size of criminal profits generated, what impact or success has law enforcement made in seizing criminal assets and profits from organized crime groups involved in drug trafficking? According to studies referenced by Europol, only a small proportion of estimated criminal proceeds are ever seized or confiscated. Research indicates that, in the European Union, roughly 2.2% of estimated criminal proceeds are provisionally seized or frozen, and only about 1.1% is ultimately confiscated. This means approximately 98.9 % of estimated criminal profits remain in criminal hands rather than being seized.³⁰⁷

Research of global studies and data highlights consistent and common mechanisms by which traffickers and criminal networks exploit vulnerability to enhance profits:

1. **Low-risk workforce:** Using youths or vulnerable adults reduces legal exposure and lowers labour costs.³⁰⁸
2. **Diversification:** Organized groups combine drug trafficking with other forms of exploitation to maximize revenue streams,³⁰⁹
3. **Exploitation of socioeconomic vulnerability:** Poor economic circumstances are frequently cited as a core reason traffickers recruit and exploit individuals,³¹⁰
4. **Structural incentives for profit maximization:** Organized crime literature consistently finds that traffickers optimize their operations (recruitment, distribution, enforcement avoidance) in ways that increase profitability while lowering operational risk,³¹¹

The estimates described above show the scale and profitability of organized crime drug-trafficking networks, including how they exploit children, young people, and vulnerable adults as part of broader criminal operations. This is not simply an issue for top-level transnational crime but covers the spectrum of such criminality from local neighbourhoods to international drug cartels. All are reported to generate significant profit within the particular context. However, precise profits from exploitation are much harder to measure because these activities are covert and under-reported. What is beyond doubt, however, is the organized criminal networks' objective of maximising profit as a priority.

The case of V.C.L. against the UK and the cases in Ireland, where Chinese and Vietnamese gangs have been found to run highly sophisticated cannabis farms, exploiting their nationals in the process, also showed how victims are exploited for production and cultivation purposes, hence indicating the criminals' purpose to boost production. Such production was sometimes done by victims who were locked inside these illegal cannabis factories. Migrants crossing from Latin America to the United States may also be forced to work on legal and illegal marijuana farms, operated by transnational criminal organizations and Asian criminal organizations with ties to the Chinese Communist Party (also involved in money laundering) to pay off their smuggling debt.³¹³

Risk Reduction

Organized drug trafficking groups seek to reduce risk to themselves, especially from law-enforcement detection, arrest, and prosecution, by exploiting children, young people and vulnerable adults as "front-line" operatives, buffers, or intermediaries. There is a significant body of information and evidence on this topic, particularly in Europe and the UK, and emerging global literature linking these practices to human trafficking and modern slavery frameworks.³¹⁴

Risk reduction strategies employed by organized criminal groups can involve the deliberate recruitment and manipulation of children and adolescents to conduct high-risk activities that would be considered riskier for experienced adult offenders to perform, for example:

- Couriers ("runners") – moving drugs, cash, and weapons across areas, often nationwide or across county lines, while adults stay at a distance.
- Sales and distribution – selling illicit drugs locally or in rural areas.³¹⁵

Such approaches may reduce the likelihood of detection, as younger or vulnerable carriers may attract less suspicion from law enforcement than adult gang members. They provide a disposable workforce that if apprehended, due to their youth, are less likely to face heavy criminal sanctions or are identified as victims rather than offenders in many jurisdictions. Finally, they provide a buffer from the organized crime leadership whereby the network's core members who co-ordinate operations stay remote, insulated and harder to identify.

The exploitation of vulnerable adults provides additional opportunities to reduce risk and may take the form of:

- **Home occupation:** Criminal groups take over the residences of adults with vulnerabilities, e.g. addiction, mental health needs, or financial hardship.³¹⁶
- **Coercion through dependency:** Adults who are dependent on substances or financially unstable may be easier to control and may themselves be threatened or indebted.
- **Layered exploitation:** Vulnerable adults may be used to supervise or recruit others, acting as secondary buffers for organized crime.³¹⁷

The impact of such tactics is aimed at reducing law enforcement attention. For example, a cuckooed location can appear as private property and therefore operate below the radar of local policing. Furthermore, vulnerable adults often lack social and community support, making it harder for exploitation to be identified, reported to authorities, and responded to.

Victims, often unaware of the extent of their involvement, are used to transport drugs within and across borders (and to prisons). For example, women working in brothels, including trafficked women, have been targeted by Albanian criminal networks to act as drug couriers for cocaine from Belgium and the Netherlands to Italy, or from the former Soviet Union states to Eastern Europe. This trend can also be observed in Japan and China as part of the Yakuza and Triads activities.³¹⁸

So-called “drug mules” and couriers, often women and children, represent the “lowest level in the drug supply chain,” as they can be easily replaced. As observed in Latin America and Southern Africa, “female drug ‘mules’ can also act as decoys to detract attention from larger drug smuggling activities carried out by traffickers at international borders.” Although these roles are also occupied by men, women seem to be the ideal victim for the forced commission of drug related crimes, as traffickers have realized that their vulnerability and femininity do not arouse as much suspicion as men’s, particularly in cultures where these criminal activities are perceived as masculine. For example, “a beauty queen and lingerie model, was suspected of using other young, beautiful models to transport cocaine internationally.”³¹⁹ Women also generally accept lower remuneration than men.

Traffickers also use women infected with diseases, including HIV, to transport drugs in West Africa, as the authorities are said to be reluctant to report them for fear of infection, or because they may be seen as a burden on the justice and healthcare systems.³²⁰ Although rarer, women can also play intermediary and leading roles in drug trafficking, sometimes recruiting other female couriers through coercion, intimidation or financial compensation.³²¹

Reports from Norway mention cases where exploitation includes transportation (in specially altered vehicles or taped to the body, or in the persons’ luggage or vehicle, within the country or to nearby countries), storage and sale of drugs (synthetic drugs, class A drugs, class b drugs, and others, for example in one case, 130 000 Rivotril [klonazepam] tablets).

As observed in Denmark, long-distance transportation of drugs is mainly carried out by older vulnerable individuals, as they have access to a car and are perceived as more reliable.³²² Another trend observed in Denmark is the use of drug addicts and marginalized individuals to transport drugs or cash, on their bodies, as passengers. In this way, gang members and dealers can avoid having their cash confiscated, as vulnerable victims claim ownership of the money.

Delivering drugs, perceived as “risky work,” is mainly carried out by runners recruited among the most vulnerable.³²³ Other “low-level” tasks involve “sitters,” who handle customer calls/messages; “lookouts,” who warn sellers of police presence; or “stashers,” who hide drugs in safe locations to avoid police detection.

A study exploring whether the same or something similar occurred in Denmark found that “dealers’ adaptation of more customer-oriented, and more labour-intensive, service approaches has functioned as a catalyst for increased exploitation for vulnerable individuals.” Notably, the country has seen the development of “extra-local delivery” schemes that geographically extend runners’ work. As an alternative to the risky delivery of drugs by postal services, which can be traced back to the sender and recipient, the addresses of vulnerable people appear to be used to minimise the risks for traffickers.³²⁴

To achieve market expansion, organized drug trafficking groups seek to expand markets by several means. This may include:

- moving drugs from saturated urban markets into new geographic areas to maximise profit and reduce competition.³²⁵
- Using networks rather than fixed territories. Research shows that distributed networks, rather than fixed areas, enable groups to operate flexibly. This is especially relevant in rural and low-risk localities.³²⁶
- The use of violence and intimidation. Groups often employ violence to secure territory or defend new markets from rivals, especially when exploiting human couriers or bases.³²⁷

These approaches will be achieved through the targeting of vulnerabilities previously highlighted within this report, such as unstable home environments, mental health challenges, or socio-economic disadvantage. These recruits may be trafficked long distances, held in unfamiliar accommodations, threatened with violence, or psychologically manipulated. The children, young people, and vulnerable adults are exploited to transport, store, and sell drugs on behalf of the group.

SECTION 4

THE

NON-PUNISHMENT

PRINCIPLE

Victims of human trafficking are routinely penalised for unlawful acts they were compelled to commit as part of their exploitation. As described in this report, these acts may include immigration violations, document fraud, drug-related offences, or activities linked to sexual exploitation. Criminalising such individuals contradicts international human rights obligations, undermines effective anti-trafficking strategies and criminal justice for the serious criminals compelling victims to commit criminal acts, and thus it thwarts prevention of both human trafficking and other crimes and results in secondary victimisation.

What are the rationales for the principle?

→ One of the major principles guiding anti-trafficking work is the principle of non-punishment (NPP) of victims of trafficking. This maintains that victims of trafficking should not be re-victimized by being detained, charged or prosecuted for activities committed while being trafficked or are a direct consequence of their situation as trafficked persons.³²⁸ The principle does not confer blanket immunity and only applies where the trafficking situation causes the victim to act without real autonomy. Where the trafficked person has had no choice but to commit an unlawful act because of the trafficking situation, the non-punishment principle protects trafficked persons from prosecution, conviction, or other forms of punishment, based on the premise that their responsibility for unlawful acts is to be understood in the context of coercion or other forms of control.³²⁹ In this sense, and because of the inherently exploitative nature of human trafficking, which subjects victims to a multitude of abuses, including fraud, violent force, and death threats, the principle draws from the long-standing criminal defences of duress and necessity.³³⁰

Now enshrined in multiple international and regional instruments, in domestic legislation, and in case law of national and regional courts, the non-punishment principle has been explicitly recognised as a general principle of international law.³³¹ In the context of trafficking victims' rights, the non-punishment principle has been referred to as "the beating heart" of victims' human rights protection at the international, regional, and domestic level, which must be given high-level prominence as it relates to the inviolable legal right of the victim to be protected by law. As propounded by the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, the principle is "critical to the recognition of trafficking in persons as a serious human rights violation."³³³ It applies to all criminal offences committed by trafficking victims, "regardless of the gravity or seriousness of the offence committed."³³⁴ The Council of Europe Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking (GRE-TA) has also advocated for the non-punishment principle to be applied to all offences that victims of trafficking were compelled to commit and has recommended the removal of exceptions.³³⁵ In a similar vein, the OSCE Recommendations provide that "the duty of non-punishment applies to any offence so long as the necessary link with trafficking is established."³³⁶

This section outlines the rationale for the principle, identifies persistent implementation gaps, and provides concrete policy recommendations to support effective, rights-based implementation.

Viewed as a manifestation of the victim-centred and trauma-informed approach to combating human trafficking,³³⁷ the non-punishment principle aims to safeguard the human rights of victims. This is because human trafficking victims are often held liable for unlawful activities committed by them as a consequence of their trafficking, not only in relation to the specific forms of exploitation they may be subjected to (for example, soliciting prostitution, engaging in illegal work, or drug cultivation) but also for incidental or consequential acts, namely any immigration, administrative or civil offences committed by them, either in the course of being trafficked or as a direct consequence of their trafficking situation.³³⁸ However, as noted by Special Rapporteur Mullally, punishment of a victim "marks a rupture with the commitments made by States to recognize the priority of victims' rights to assistance, protection and effective remedies."³³⁹ This has also been the finding of the European Court of Human Rights, which clarified through its caselaw that human trafficking falls within the scope of the prohibition of slavery and forced labour enshrined in Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR),³⁴⁰ which imposes positive obligations on States Parties. These include the substantive obligation to put in place a legislative and administrative framework to prohibit and punish trafficking and to protect victims;³⁴¹ the substantive obligation to take operational measures to protect victims of trafficking;³⁴² and the procedural obligation to investigate situations of potential trafficking to be able to identify and punish those responsible.³⁴³ The latter two obligations, to take operational measures to protect victims and to investigate situations of potential trafficking only apply where a State knew or ought to have known of circumstances giving rise to a credible suspicion. Still, a failure to apply the non-punishment principle would automatically lead to a violation of Article 4 ECHR either directly – where the State has failed to protect a trafficking victim from prosecution or punishment – or indirectly – where the State fails to identify a trafficking victim and instead punishes them for an offence committed in the context of their trafficking situation.³⁴⁴

A failure to uphold the non-punishment principle not only breaches a State's positive obligations, it inevitably leads to further serious human rights violations, including detention, forced return and refoulement, arbitrary deprivation of citizenship, debt burdens arising from the imposition of fines, family separation, and unfair trial.³⁴⁵ It so follows that initiating criminal proceedings against a trafficking victim also represents a manifest denial of the right of access to justice and inhibits the possibility of recovery for the victim.³⁴⁶ This is particularly important to note, as trafficking victims are subjected to a plethora of highly traumatising events and require extensive psycho-social support and understanding from national law enforcement to prevent further victimisation. This has already been recognised by the ECtHR, which has found that it is axiomatic that prosecution would be injurious to a victim's "physical, psychological and social recovery and could potentially leave them vulnerable to being re-trafficked in future."³⁴⁷

The consequences of punishing trafficking victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of their exploitative situation are far-reaching and profoundly harmful, not only to the victims but to larger anti-trafficking efforts and criminal justice. This is because a fear of punishment can prevent victims from seeking protection and assistance from law enforcement,³⁴⁸ thereby allowing trafficking crimes to go undetected. Ensuring that victims are not prosecuted or punished when they come forward also encourages reporting of crimes and the subsequent sharing of information on the perpetrators and the modus operandi of organized criminal groups.³⁴⁹ When trafficking victims co-operate in the investigation of suspects and act as witnesses in criminal proceedings, rather than being the subject of the trial, state authorities can fight against the impunity often enjoyed by traffickers by ensuring the actual perpetrators are held accountable and criminal networks are disrupted. To do otherwise, would limit both the effectiveness of investigations and the potential for accountability.³⁵⁰ Prosecuting and other punishing trafficking victims for unlawful acts committed directly related to their exploitation also harms effective prevention of trafficking and other crimes involved and wastes limited State resources on punishing victims (generally at low levels of the criminal organizations at best) rather than on securing convictions of higher-level criminals.

The non-punishment principle is considered essential to the object and purpose of the Palermo Protocol,³⁵¹ that being the protection and assistance of victims with full respect for their human rights.³⁵² In 2002, shortly after the enactment of the Palermo Protocol, the Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recognised for the first time that trafficking in persons may be for the purpose of forced criminality, but also that victims might incidentally commit unlawful acts in the context of their status as trafficking victims. Hence, the Recommended Principles and Guidelines firmly advised that such victims be provided with protection, rather than punishment, for any unlawful acts committed by them arising as a direct consequence of their trafficking and shall not be "detained, charged, or prosecuted."³⁵³ Alongside recommending that the non-punishment principle is applied at the earliest stage of investigation, the Recommended Principles and Guidelines advocated for the guarantee that law enforcement actions must never take place at the expense of victims' rights as traffickers must remain the focus of anti-trafficking strategies.³⁵⁴ This awareness is crucial, as when trafficking victims first come to the attention of national law enforcement authorities they risk being viewed as offenders and their victim status going undetected or not being recognised. As a result, unidentified trafficking victims are often wrongly arrested, charged, prosecuted, and convicted for crimes and other unlawful acts committed as a consequence of their trafficking situation, while the true perpetrators escape unpunished and continue their criminal activity with impunity. Just over a decade later, the 2013 OSCE Policy and Legislative Recommendations towards the effective implementation of the non-punishment provision with regard to victims of trafficking signalled the global "increasing prevalence" of human trafficking committed for the purpose of enforced criminality. The OSCE Recommendations highlighted how such a form of trafficking is often based on the "deliberate strategy of the traffickers to expose victims to the risk of criminalization and to manipulate and exploit them for criminal activities." Therefore, the more traffickers can rely on a State's criminal justice system to arrest, charge, prosecute, and convict trafficking victims for their trafficking-related offences, whether criminal, civil or administrative, the easier it is for traffickers to profit and thrive.³⁵⁵

There are now several international anti-trafficking instruments with a binding non-punishment provision applicable to victims trafficked for forced criminality. The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings 2005 was the first binding treaty to include the principle of non-punishment.³⁵⁶ The subsequent EU Trafficking Directive 2011/36/EU also includes an express binding provision on non-punishment of victims “compelled to commit” criminal activities in Article 8 (without any stated limit on the severity of the crime), and specifically recognises the increasing phenomenon whereby traffickers subject victims to enforced criminality and includes reference to this as one of the forms of exploitation included in the definition of trafficking in human beings.³⁵⁷ Similarly, though with less authoritative wording, Article 14(7) of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Convention against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (“ASEAN Convention”) of 2015 requires States Parties to “consider not holding victims of trafficking criminally or administratively liable.”³⁵⁸

Although none of these provisions call for an absolute prohibition on the punishment of victims of human trafficking, each reflects the core objective of ensuring victims are not prosecuted or punished for unlawful acts they have committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Based on this underlying legal framework, one can identify three core elements that determine the applicability of the non-punishment principle: that the person is a victim of human trafficking; the trafficking victim committed an unlawful act; and the unlawful act is linked to the victim’s subjection to trafficking, meaning there is a causation link (the offence is “a direct consequence” of “directly related” to their subjection) or a duress defence (the victim was “compelled” to commit the offence due to their situation).³⁶⁰ As pointed out by former UN Special Rapporteur, Ms. Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, the ASEAN Convention and the OHCHR Recommended Principles and Guidelines employ a direct causation link between the victim’s involvement in unlawful activities and his or her subjection to trafficking in persons while the CoE Convention and EU Directive include a duress element in their non-punishment provisions, which require States not to punish victims of trafficking “to the extent that they have been compelled to commit the offence as a direct consequence.”³⁶¹

In contrast, the UN system views the obligation to implement the non-punishment principle as stemming from the principle of due diligence that requires States to “protect trafficking victims from being held liable for any unlawful act committed as a consequence of their subjection to their trafficker or traffickers’ dominant influence.” Due diligence in the exercise of prosecutorial discretion, in particular, is essential as trafficked persons who are at greatest risk of punishment are also those at heightened risk of trafficking and re-trafficking. This makes “early identification and prompt assessment by trained and qualified individuals essential to ensuring the effective implementation of States’ obligations of non-punishment.”³⁶³

Various UN bodies have now advocated for application of the non-punishment principle. The Security Council has repeatedly called upon States not to penalize or stigmatize victims of trafficking for their involvement in any unlawful activities.³⁶⁴ In 2011, the General Assembly affirmed the non-punishment principle and urged Member States to refrain from penalizing victims who had been trafficked for having entered the country illegally or for having been involved in unlawful activities that they had been forced or compelled to carry out.³⁶⁵ In its general recommendation No. 38 (2020) on trafficking in women and girls in the context of international migration, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) reiterated the importance of the non-punishment principle and the obligation of States to ensure its application to all victims without exception.³⁶⁶ In addition, the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime reiterated the non-punishment principle and the importance of access to remedies if victims are punished or prosecuted its resolution 10/3.³⁶⁷

Challenges to Implementation

The aforementioned binding instruments and resolutions oblige States to provide for the possibility of not prosecuting and/or imposing penalties on a victim-defendant when the non-punishment principle applies. To abide by these binding provisions, States must give real and practical effect to their wording and take the necessary steps to ensure the application of the non-punishment principle in the appropriate cases. However, global harmonisation in the adoption and application of the principle is hindered by several factors. Some of these are considered intrinsic in the international anti-trafficking structure as there remains significant variations in the formulation of non-punishment between international and regional instruments, as well as in national legislation.³⁶⁸ The International Bar Association (IBA) has found that these differences not only concern the nature of the principle, meaning whether states are recommended or mandated to adopt it in their domestic legal framework, but also its meaning and scope.³⁶⁹ In recent years, there has been a convergence in soft law instruments towards a common understanding of non-punishment, yet critical differences still emerge both regionally and domestically.³⁷⁰

Effective implementation of the non-punishment principle is frequently challenged by the failure to identify trafficking victims. Naturally, the effectiveness of the non-punishment principle hinges upon accurate identification of conduct which amounts to trafficking.³⁷¹ The onus of identification of trafficking victims generally falls on the State, again stemming from the principle of due diligence and the positive obligations imposed by international human rights conventions.³⁷² However, as observed by former Special Rapporteur, Ms. Joy Ngozi Ezeilo, the issue of identification “raises a number of complex pragmatic questions, in particular concerning how, where, and by whom identification should be performed.”³⁷³ As the IBA explains, this responsibility is often vested in a range of actors across the justice and social support systems.³⁷⁴ Like definitions of the non-punishment principle, there is no uniformity globally with regard to identification processes, which remain informal in several countries. This makes ensuring transparency, coherence, and co-ordination critical in this context.³⁷⁵ In States where a formal process does not exist and the responsibility lies on judicial and law enforcement systems, officials must be trained in proper identification processes and when to apply the non-punishment principle. If and when there is a formal identification process, identification must be carried out in

a manner that supports the trafficking victim throughout legal proceedings. In practice, this means identification processes and outcomes should be qualitatively sound and all available information considered in the course of criminal proceedings, bearing in mind that different standards of proof may be required, and new information may emerge between the identification decision and the criminal proceedings.³⁷⁶

An awareness of how the trafficking situation relates to the commission of unlawful activities by victims (meaning the causation link or element of duress) is integral, but States adopt varying perspectives that can create confusion. As explained above, there are stark differences in countries’ approaches to the nexus between the offence and victim’s exploitation. “Compulsion” and “direct consequence” appear to be the most common approaches adopted,³⁷⁷ but there is a lack of consistency and harmonisation. The same applies to interpretations of the meaning of “compulsion” and “direct consequence” domestically.³⁷⁸ As highlighted by the OSCE in 2013, determining whether an unlawful act is compelled is a complex, fact-specific inquiry that includes examining the absence of “the possibility to act with free will; not only under the threat of physical violence or emotional abuse, but also in the devastatingly prevalent scenarios wherein traffickers exploit victims by abuse of a position of vulnerability.”³⁷⁹ This core element of human trafficking is reflected in Article 3(b) of the Palermo Protocol, which provides that the consent of a victim is irrelevant for the existence of the crime of trafficking in persons, where any of the means listed in the definition of trafficking are established – while in the case of trafficked children, the act and purpose of exploitation is sufficient, regardless of the means used. This is repeated in the Explanatory Report to the CoE Convention, which provides: “the requirement that victims have been compelled to be involved in unlawful activities shall be understood as comprising, at a minimum, victims that have been subject to any of the illicit means referred to in [the definition of trafficking] when such involvement results from compulsion.”³⁸⁰

Unfortunately, because trafficking victims often act under the more subtle forms of pressure that would usually not be sufficient to amount to traditional justification clauses such as duress, there is a real risk of law enforcement failing to recognise the compulsion that caused them to commit an offence. This is because the coercion they are placed under may be indirect or psychological. Hence, applying the non-punishment principle whenever any of the means in the trafficking definition are present and adopting a broad, inclusive understanding of causation and duress in suspected trafficking cases is key to overcoming these challenges involved in interpretation and ensuring victims are protected from further punishment and serious human rights violations.³⁸¹

Just as there is a risk of States adopting a limited view of duress that fails to consider the more nuanced forms of coercion or compulsion experienced by trafficking victims, there is also a danger of undue weight being given to inconsistencies or contradictions in a victim's testimony. This was indirectly acknowledged in the OSCE Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings, which encouraged investigators and prosecutors to conduct criminal process "without relying solely and exclusively on witness testimony" and to explore "alternative investigative strategies to preclude the need for victims to be required to testify in court."³⁸² A clear example of a State failing to uphold this recommendation is the case *S.M. v. Croatia*, in which the Municipal Criminal Court in Croatia found the victim's testimony to be incoherent, in places illogical and contrary to other evidence.³⁸³ Consequently, the Municipal Court determined that the victim had given sexual services voluntarily due to the insufficient evidence to the contrary. Relying on Article 4 of the ECHR, concerning the prohibition of slavery and forced labour, the victim appealed the decision on the basis of alleged shortcomings in the investigative process which did not follow correct lines of enquiry and failed to call several witnesses to testify. In its final judgment, the Grand Chamber of the ECtHR highlighted the authorities' failure to follow obvious lines of inquiry and overreliance on the victim's testimony without taking into account the possible impact of psychological trauma.³⁸⁴ This finding was reaffirmed by Judge Turkovic in her Concurring Opinion, which explained how the Court's decision clarified that flaws in the protection and treatment of victims and their testimonies, and in particular the disregard for their

possible psychological trauma and overreliance on the victim's testimony, are elements to be taken into consideration in reviewing the State's procedural obligations in criminal proceedings.³⁸⁵ It is also worthy of note that in the course of the ECtHR proceedings, GRETA highlighted the significant disparity between the number of identified trafficking victims, on the one hand, and the number of prosecutions and convictions, on the other hand. There are many reasons for this, but the overreliance on victims' statements, issues related to the credibility of witnesses who might change their statements over time, or difficulties in relation to the sufficiency of evidence were viewed as particularly prominent.³⁸⁶

Finally, beyond the challenges of identifying trafficking victims and applying the non-punishment principle in appropriate cases, there remain practical barriers that prevent trafficked persons from availing of the non-punishment principle or equivalent defences. The lack of trained legal representatives has emerged as a "key barrier" in accessing the protection afforded by the non-punishment principle.³⁸⁷ As mentioned above, enhancing the expertise of all actors involved in legal processes of identification of trafficking situations and of application of the non-punishment principle is integral to its effectiveness. The need for capacity-building is intertwined with the need to improve access to, and the quality of, legal advice for trafficked persons.³⁸⁸ The IBA has found, based on a global survey for which a total of 167 responses from 71 countries were collected, the lack of trained legal representatives – or lack of legal representation all together – negatively affected access to the rights associated with the non-punishment principle.³⁸⁹ Respondents were asked to indicate whether their category (prosecutors, judges or lawyers) had access to any form of training on the non-punishment principle and its application. The vast majority of respondents across the three categories indicated that no training was available to them or that, if it was, it was not compulsory. Only three out of 22 prosecutors, a tenth of the judges, and one out of 19 lawyers stated that they received training and that such training was mandatory. Of particular concern is that over half of the 60 surveyed judges stated that no training whatsoever was available to them and their colleagues.³⁹⁰ Other practical challenges to implementation include linguistic barriers and a lack of referral to national antitrafficking identification mechanisms.³⁹¹

How have States Implemented the Non-Punishment Principle in Practice?

Despite repeated calls for the application of the non-punishment principle, its implementation by States has been limited, with its scope and content contested.³⁹² This is showcased in the responses of OSCE participating States to a questionnaire circulated for the purposes of this report. When asked whether their country's human trafficking or related legislation included the non-punishment principle, eight of the 26 respondents stated that there is no explicit legal provision providing for the non-punishment principle. Instead, it is allegedly covered by other criminal law provisions related to duress. Five of these States are located in Western Europe,³⁹³ with the remaining three in Eastern Europe.³⁹⁴ However, the fact that it may be covered by other criminal law provisions does not mean the non-punishment principle is in fact implemented in practice. France, for example, is one of the five Western European States that stated that the principle is covered by other criminal law provisions. Yet, Hors de la Rue, a French NGO that supports vulnerable foreign children and youths, drew attention to the rare application of the non-punishment principle. They provide several reasons for this: firstly, the slow pace of criminal proceedings – which often features a time lag between proceedings in which young people are targeted as victims and those in which they are targeted as perpetrators. To date, there has been no review of convictions after a young person has been recognised as a victim. Furthermore, young people who have been recognised as victims have already been told that the principle of non-punishment can only be applied to the prevention period, i.e. the period covered by the investigation; secondly, the application of the principle of non-punishment raises questions for legal professionals and educators, who work with these young people on a daily basis, about how to strike the right balance between the dual status of perpetrator and victim. It is for this reason that Hors de la Rue stresses the important role of lawyers, associations, and ad hoc administrations in providing the keys to understanding the “perpetrator/victim prism” and ensuring those involved in the justice system are seen first and foremost as children and victims.

The crucial need for an increased awareness and implementation of the non-punishment principle in France is exemplified by Hors de la Rue in the Trocadero case which has been referenced several times early in the report. This 2021 case involved 17 unaccompanied minors between the ages of 8 and 17, all of whom were Algerian and Moroccan and living in the streets, who were coerced into the commission of crimes such as theft and the sale of drugs. Despite six of the seven men involved (responsible for coercing the minors) being prosecuted for trafficking in human beings, several of the children were also prosecuted. Some were incarcerated for several months, despite the principle of non-punishment, while others remain in detention.

Danish and Norwegian NGOs, HopeNow, and the Salvation Army Prison Ministries, describe a similar situation in their respective countries. HopeNow noted that trafficking victims who may have been involved in forced criminality, namely drug offences, will always be regarded as criminals since the non-punishment principle is almost impossible to apply. The Salvation Army Prison Ministries, on the other hand, stated that Norwegian Immigration Police often choose to deport trafficking victims, including the imposition of a travel ban on entry into the Schengen area, based on violations of immigration law. According to ASTRÉE, Swiss authorities also impose deportation bans in place of the non-punishment principle. In a case concerning trafficked Nigerian women forced to commit drug offences, four out of five victims were prosecuted – two of whom faced deportation penalties, one with a ban on entry into the Schengen area (currently on hold as a solution is being sought for the individual's safety) and one without a ban on entry into the Schengen area. The majority of victims supported by ASTRÉE serve their sentence during the criminal proceedings with sentences ranging from one to three years imprisonment. This is despite trafficking victims cooperating with law enforcement authorities and providing information, or having been found in a situation of exploitation. Interestingly, Switzerland's response to the questionnaire stated that the non-punishment principle is applicable in the context of all criminal offences and no sanctions or prosecution will be applied if the victim was forced to commit the offence. Moreover, Switzerland stated that law enforcement personnel is trained to detect trafficking victims by indicators based on the definition of human trafficking and the provision in the penal code. If a trafficking victim is detected, the non-punishment principle allegedly has priority and all measures to protect and support the victim by a specialised institution will be applied. This response stands in stark contrast with the information provided by ASTRÉE,

which works directly with trafficking victims in Switzerland. Hence, there is clearly a prominent gap between State policy and its implementation in practice that requires urgent attention.

While 15 respondents stated they do include the non-punishment principle as a legal provision in their national laws, it is only applicable to a limited number of crimes or administrative violations. Slovenia and the United States, on the other hand, include the non-punishment principle in their domestic legislation only as a policy provision for prosecutorial discretion.

Notably, over half of respondents that stated that their legislation provides for the non-punishment principle are located in Eastern Europe.

In addition, of the 13 States that indicated their national legislation explicitly enshrines the non-punishment principle, seven were also countries in Eastern Europe.³⁹⁵ NGOs in one of these countries, Albania, highlighted how several factors can influence the criminal justice response to individuals involved in drug crimes. Vatra Psycho-Social Center explained that the circumstances and situation of the accused upon arrest is considered, especially if the accused can demonstrate that they were coerced, manipulated, or in a vulnerable position. The courts may take into account personal circumstances, such as economic hardship or exploitation, and cooperation with law enforcement – including the defendant/victim voluntarily reporting their involvement, seeking help, providing valuable information on drug trafficking networks or related crimes - which may lead to reduced charges or leniency in sentencing. However, this indicates an improper application of the non-punishment principle since victims appear to still be prosecuted. This is confirmed by Albanian NGO ARSIS – Initiative for Social Change, which explained that some trafficking victims it has worked with, who were minors, nonetheless faced charges due to their involvement in criminal activities, primarily theft or drug-related offenses. In such cases, outcomes varied, with some receiving alternative sentences focusing on rehabilitation rather than punishment, while others faced legal consequences but were supported through the process by advocacy groups. This raises concerns as to whether this is indicative of a larger trend in practice. For instance, St. Petka, a Bulgarian organisation, indicated that Bulgarian authorities consider the same factors as Albania, but did not provide further information on how this affects the criminal justice response.

Eastern European States also remain at the forefront of national responses upholding the principle of non-punishment as regards to the discretion provided in applying the relevant provision. For the slight majority of participating States, some 52 percent, the non-punishment principle was discretionary in nature. In contrast, over a third – 38 percent – of States included the principle as a mandatory provision that must be applied in the relevant cases. More than half of these were countries across Eastern Europe, namely Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. In contrast, only three OSCE pS – included the non-punishment principle as a mandatory provision.

Thus, with the highest incidence of non-punishment provisions, both explicit and included in other legislative provisions, Eastern Europe appears to be spearheading State implementation.

Regarding the category of crimes to which the non-punishment principle may apply, the 13 respondents that enshrine the principle in national legislation appear to limit its applicability to minor or medium gravity offences, such as illegal sex work; use of false documents; irregular migration or border offences; theft; donating organs; tissues or cells of human origin; and public begging. However, the principle applies in such cases if it can be shown that the suspect has been a victim of trafficking and was compelled to commit the offences in question. An analysis of the circumstances and all available evidence is carried out to determine whether the victim acted out of extreme necessity or coercion.³⁹⁶ In the United Kingdom, violent offences, sexual offences, terrorism-related offences, and immigration offences are outright excluded. The United Kingdom, along with Kyrgyzstan, also excludes drug offences from the scope of application of the non-punishment principle. While these are the only two respondents who indicated that their country's legislation provides for explicit criminalization of drug offences despite being a trafficking victim, only 15 respondents stated that their country considers an individual's status as a trafficking victim.³⁹⁷ Romania, Moldova, and Greece require the trafficking victim to report their involvement in the commission of drug offences to the competent authority prior to the institution of criminal proceedings, with Greece further requiring their participation in criminal proceedings.³⁹⁸ This is concerning since, as previously highlighted, the fear of harsh treatment by law enforcement or reprisals from the trafficking group deters victims' cooperation with law enforcement and represents a major hurdle that trafficking victims must overcome. For many, the immense trauma they experienced – combined with a lack of awareness of

their rights and potential support available – prevents them from seeking the assistance of state authorities. Other trafficking victims may not even be aware of their status as a victim or have a lack of trust in the fairness or effectiveness of the criminal justice system. In light of this, legal frameworks that hinge the application of the non-punishment principle on the victim first reporting the crime arguably fail to recognise the true purpose of the non-punishment principle. That is, the need to safeguard the rights of trafficking victims and offer protection from unwarranted prosecution arising from illegal conduct committed as a direct consequence of their exploitation.

At this juncture, it is important to recall that both former Special Rapporteur Giammarinaro and current Special Rapporteur Mullaly have already clarified that the non-punishment principle applies to all criminal offences committed by trafficking victims, “regardless of the gravity or seriousness of the offence committed.”³⁹⁹ Rather, the non-punishment principle should be understood as a “compulsory tool,” which is required to be applied by all the domestic authorities, including the police, the judiciary, immigration and border officials, and any other law enforcement agency when a situation triggering the application of non-punishment is first identified.⁴⁰⁰ To do otherwise is to go against applicable international standards that mandate a comprehensive and inclusive application of non-punishment, without discrimination on the basis of the type exploitation or category of offence.⁴⁰¹

One of the noteworthy mechanisms in a broader application of the non-punishment principle is the criminal record relief via vacatur laws as adopted by more than 45 states and a recently enacted federal vacatur law in the United States.⁴⁰² A vacatur is a rule or order that sets aside a judgment or annuls a proceeding and, in contrast to expungement (after which a conviction remains on an individual’s record), erases the conviction entirely. Prior to 2010, vacatur

laws did not exist for victims of human trafficking, making the New York state legislature the first to provide sex trafficking victims with a means to clear prostitution and prostitution-related convictions.⁴⁰³ The law permits judges to vacate convictions provided that the victim can demonstrate that their “participation in the offense was a result of having been a victim of sex trafficking.”⁴⁰⁴ The legislation is narrow in scope since it is pending judicial discretion and in practice, although judges are inclined to vacate prostitution offences, they were not required to vacate other convictions. Because of this, trafficking victims do not fully benefit from criminal record relief as they may remain subject to convictions for crimes related to their human trafficking, such as drug possession.⁴⁰⁵

The states that followed tended to adopt a similar approach to that of the New York legislature. While prima facie providing victims with protection from unwarranted prosecution and conviction, in actuality vacatur laws significantly limit those that can seek relief. As noted, a feature of the New York legislation, that has been reflected in the legislation of other states, is the imposition of a burden of proof on the victim. To benefit from vacatur, trafficking victims must demonstrate that their crimes were committed while they were being trafficked. For example, in Washington state, the victim must prove that the trafficker acted knowingly or in reckless disregard of the fact that force, fraud, coercion was used to compel the victim to engage in a sex act and that the victim’s conviction resulted from this act.⁴⁰⁶ This requires extensive evidence, which can amount to a form of revictimization by the criminal justice system.⁴⁰⁷ Furthermore, proving intent is notoriously difficult, and to shift this burden on the victim is likely to lead to re-traumatization and an inability to apply the vacatur law in practice. Washington’s legislation also disqualifies victims with other pending charges or convictions following the prostitution-related conviction in any Washington court or other state or federal court. This represents a detrimental fault in the legislation since victims tend to be trafficked between states to avoid investigation.⁴⁰⁸

Other states, such as New Hampshire and New Jersey, have taken a broader approach. Many have chosen to keep the language of the legislation quite vague by including prostitution and related offences within the scope of the statute. Pennsylvania even added possession of a controlled substance to the list of offenses that they may vacate – due to a high number of victims with possession convictions.⁴⁰⁹ California supplemented existing legislation providing vacatur with a secondary statute that expanded the scope from prostitution convictions to any nonviolent offences committed at the behest of their captors.⁴¹⁰ States including Montana, North Dakota, Utah, Idaho, and Kentucky have also included nonviolent offences, committed while victimised by human trafficking within the scope of vacatur.⁴¹¹ Nebraska’s 2018 legislation took an expansive approach to the forms of evidence a victim may rely on. In addition to the standard language calling for official records from federal, state, local, or other entities to demonstrate one’s status as a victim, Nebraska’s law also permits the use of affidavits or sworn testimony from advocates, doctors, and other members of the community.⁴¹² Accepting a broad range of documentation gives victims far greater opportunities to prove their victimhood to the court, and consequently their ability to avail of vacatur.

Finally, in addition to allowing victims to petition the court for vacatur of their prostitution charges and convictions, several states allow victims to raise their status as a victim of human trafficking as an affirmative defence.⁴¹³

SECTION 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

A body of evidence analysed in this research highlights a growing trend of criminal exploitation within drug markets, particularly targeting vulnerable adults and children. Individuals experiencing homelessness, addiction, insecure migration status, or socio-economic hardship are frequently coerced into roles such as cultivation, transport, and distribution through tactics including debt bondage, threats, manipulation, and deceptive recruitment.

The purpose of criminal networks is clear: to maximise profit and expand the illicit drug market and reduce risk of detection. The analysis of the world drug data provided by international and regional reports evinces that expanding global drug market deepens exploitation of vulnerable population. As the demand for consumption increases across the OSCE region, it is often supplied through exploitation and violence. To maximise profits, organized drug trafficking groups seek to expand markets and territories by leveraging the vulnerabilities of young people and adults through coercion, social influence, and strategic exploitation. Overall, research suggests that structural factors, including market competition and the availability of vulnerable labour, are key drivers of this form of exploitation, presenting ongoing challenges for identification and response by authorities.

→ Several OSCE participating States are making progress at the national level by collecting data, conducting research, and increasingly bringing the issue of forced criminality into the public debate. Nonetheless, any robust and effective action is significantly hindered by the absence of a clear legal definition in most countries, which leads to widespread under-reporting and misidentification or lack of detection of victims. As a result, individuals coerced into drug-related crimes often do not recognize themselves as victims, instead describing their actions as voluntary, while authorities also fail to identify them as trafficked persons. This problem is compounded by broader misconceptions about “ideal victim” of human trafficking, which is still primarily associated with sexual or traditional labour exploitation, while forced criminality, especially drug-related activities, remain poorly understood and rarely acknowledged. Law enforcement frequently treats individuals involved in drug crimes as offenders rather than potential victims, a dynamic that traffickers exploit to maintain control, knowing that victims are unlikely to be identified or protected. Similarly, families, communities, and the public often lack awareness of this form of exploitation, further limiting recognition and reporting. These gaps obscure the true scale and nature of the problem, despite emerging evidence of increasing cases, particularly involving vulnerable groups coerced into drug production or distribution activities. At the same time, the lack of reliable data and the risk of political misuse of the issue (e.g. amplifying links with migration) complicate efforts to accurately assess victim profiles and vulnerabilities.

The non-punishment principle is increasingly recognised as a core component of a victim-centred approach focussed on the need to protect potential trafficking victims, rather than subjecting them to double punishment. Despite this, its scarce and inconsistent application remains a systemic issue for criminal justice and broader legal systems around the world as most justice systems remain geared towards the prosecution, punishment, and deportation of offenders, often without considering the nexus between the offences committed and the victims’ exploitation.⁴¹⁴ In order to give real effect to international anti-trafficking instruments, as well as the fundamental provisions of international human rights law, States must work towards establishing a system grounded in the paradigm of protection.⁴¹⁵ The parameters of each of the elements of the trafficking definition should be clear and easily understood within domestic systems. It must then be proactively applied by prosecutors, judges, and other key actors in the process.⁴¹⁶ Furthermore, the provision and the protection it offers ought to be highlighted to the public and made accessible, so as to increase the likelihood that potential trafficking victims are aware of its existence. With the knowledge that, as a trafficking victim, they will not be prosecuted for unlawful acts committed as a direct consequence of their being trafficked, their willingness to report the crimes to the relevant authorities will hopefully be enhanced.

These protection measures are to be incorporated at the earliest stage of an investigation. As soon as there is a suspected situa-

tion of human trafficking and the conditions of the non-punishment principle have been met, victims must be diverted from the criminal justice system as offenders and safeguarded from detention, prosecution, and any other potential denial of justice.

Since police are often at the forefront when identifying victims, they play a critical role in this process. However, many lack the required specialized training and expertise in forced criminality but also in human trafficking writ large to be able to identify victims of trafficking accurately and with sensitivity. The same concern applies to investigating and prosecuting authorities, as well as legal practitioners and the judiciary. They must be provided with sufficient training on how to identify and appropriately respond to trafficking situations, as well as on how to adopt a trauma-informed approach when dealing with potential victims.⁴¹⁷ This is integral to providing victims with full and effective protection, as early detection is integral to preventing subsequent revictimization.

A more coherent and co-ordinated response across the OSCE region is required – one that bridges drug policy, anti-trafficking efforts, and social protection systems. This includes strengthening early identification mechanisms for victims of trafficking for forced criminality, enhancing training for law enforcement and judicial actors, and ensuring access to assistance, protection, and remedies for affected individuals.

Ultimately, addressing drug trafficking in the OSCE region cannot be separated from addressing the human realities that underpin it. A paradigm shift is needed: from viewing individuals involved in low-level drug offences solely as perpetrators, to recognising when they may in fact be victims of exploitation. By embedding this understanding into law, policy, and practice, OSCE participating States can more effectively disrupt criminal networks, uphold their international obligations, and move towards a response that is not only more effective, but also more just.

In considering key areas for policy and practice, a broad range of steps related to advancing legal and policy frameworks, reducing vulnerability to exploitation of high-risk populations, making protection schemes fit for purpose, and finally disrupting and dismantling trafficking networks through cross-disciplinary, cross-border collaboration and leveraging partnership with civil society and the private sector.

Based on the analysis outlined in the above sections of this report, the following broad areas of action are recommended for consideration by policymakers and practitioners in the fields combating both human trafficking and illicit drugs with regard to prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership. A separate set of policy measures has also been developed to strengthen the application of the non punishment principle, which is essential for ensuring that all recommended actions proposed in this research can be implemented effectively.

Recommended actions for prevention

- Ensure trafficking for forced criminality is included in anti-trafficking legislation and definitions. This is a distinct form of exploitation and must be addressed as such.
- Ensure the non-punishment principle is explicitly included in relevant legislation.
- Establish co-operation between drug enforcement agencies and National Anti-Trafficking Co-ordinators and Rapporteurs or equivalent mechanisms to collect and analyse data on the links between human trafficking and trafficking of illicit drugs at the national level. Such data should be disaggregated by gender, age, and other vulnerabilities targeted by criminal networks. Within this co-operation develop joint strategies and action plans and/or align existing strategies to ensure common understanding and approach to tackling this phenomenon.
- Develop intelligence-led community early warning networks comprised of NGOs, education facilities, social welfare agencies, child protection agencies, and youth centres that identify signs and patterns of risks among children, vulnerable youth and adults, and communities at high-risks of exploitation in criminal activities.
- Partner with NGOs, experts with lived experience, and faith-based groups to develop targeted mentoring programmes and awareness campaigns, including online, for at-risk groups targeting grooming, deceptive recruitment, debt bondage.
- Integrate trafficking and exploitation awareness into school curricula and public health outreach.
- Include survivors/lived experience experts of forced criminality to inform the development of policies and practical measures
- Raise awareness among vulnerable communities, civil society, and service providers to improve trust and confidence and reporting

Recommended actions for protection

- Establish multidisciplinary joint working groups with the participation of anti-drug and anti-trafficking practitioners to ensure regular co-ordination and co-operation to review/discuss and conduct individual assessments of cases to ensure identification of and adequate assistance to trafficking victims. Such assessments should be made with due regard to protecting the confidentiality and privacy of the individuals involved to avoid stigmatization or re-victimization.
- Use OSCE Model Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)⁴¹⁸ for identification of victims of forced criminality. These procedures should be made available for staff of schools, medical facilities, prisons and juvenile detention facilities, migrant detention, and deportation facilities.
- Ensure National Referral Mechanisms and other relevant policy guidance is inclusive of nuanced elements of forced criminality and agencies responsible for identification and referral are properly trained to recognize suspicions and patterns of forced criminality. Due consideration should be given to their degree of association with organized crime groups, with specific safeguards put in place to prevent their repeated association with that or another group.
- Provide frontline agencies, officials, and service providers with the specific mandate and multiagency guidance and training necessary to properly identify cases of forced criminality. Document the abuses and experiences of trauma suffered by victims, assess their individual needs, and develop potential responses to these needs.
- Develop joint in-depth research on the circumstances of trafficking of vulnerable adults and children for exploitation in drug-related offences with national civil society organizations and survivor-led organizations, or support them to conduct such research.
- Guarantee access to comprehensive services, including legal aid, medical and psychosocial support, including treatment of substance abuse when needed, and shelter, independent of co-operation with criminal justice proceedings.

Recommended actions for criminal justice

- Develop targeted training programmes and guidance for criminal justice practitioners across criminal justice process and the judiciary on nuanced elements of forced criminality, such as psychological coercion, trauma, the issue of consent, abuse of position of vulnerability, and the non-punishment principle. Ensure that these trainings are also conducted jointly with participation of anti-trafficking and drug enforcement police and prosecutors.
- Improve witness protection programs to encourage victim co-operation.
- Develop partnership with financial intelligence units, financial institutions, and technology companies to identify financial links to drug-related forced criminality
- Support joint investigations, mutual legal assistance requests, and extradition agreements.
- Increase funding for international task forces targeting drug trafficking organisations that exploit humans.
- Identify and respond to online platforms used for recruitment and coercion of vulnerable adults and children into forced criminality, including through criminal liability.
- Use data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) to detect recruitment patterns, suspicious financial activity, and online grooming.

Policy Recommendations for Implementation of the Non-Punishment Principle

International standards and research consistently show that the non-punishment principle is most effectively implemented when it is embedded across legal frameworks, institutions, and professional practice. The following recommendations reflect the published work utilised within this paper and consensus across UN bodies, regional organisations, courts, and expert practitioners:

- **Early Identification Mechanisms:** Guided by current international best practice, embed proactive screening tools and victim identification protocols at first contact points with authorities and others who might come in contact with victims (e.g., medical and education professionals, social workers).
- **Legislative Scope:** Explicitly incorporate the non-punishment principle into domestic criminal, civil, and immigration law. Ensure statutory language covers a full range of offences, including criminal, administrative, and immigration violations.
- **Training and Capacity-Building:** Provide regular, mandatory multi-disciplinary training for police, prosecutors, judges, immigration officials, and lawyers as part of a mandated professional development programme focused upon the principle and victim identification.
- **Child-Specific Safeguards:** Craft targeted non-punishment protections for minors, including diversion to child protection services instead of criminal proceedings.
- **Monitoring and Data Collection:** Develop monitoring systems and data collection to track application of the principle and related outcomes.
- **Criminal Record and Financial Relief:** Ensure review and redress mechanisms for wrongful convictions, including by establish procedures to vacate convictions or expunge records for victims who were wrongfully punished and remove administrative fines.

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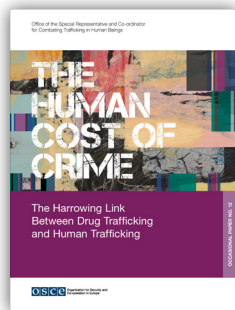
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- 412** P.C. Rodda, H. Smith-Cannoy, 'The Human Rights of Sex Trafficking Survivors: Trends and Challenges in American Vacatur Laws' (2024) *Societies* 14 (29) <https://mdpi-res.com/societies/societies-14-00029/article_deploy/societies-14-00029.pdf?version=1708324978> 7-8
- 413** This includes states such as Arizona, Connecticut, Maryland, Mississippi and South Carolina. See Melissa Owens, 'Human Trafficking Victims' Need for Vacatur: Demolishing Roadblocks to Freedom' (2020) 28(2) American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law 203, 212
- 414** IBA Legal Policy & Research Unit and British Institute of International and Comparative Law, Human trafficking and the rights of trafficked persons: An exploratory analysis on the application of the non-punishment principle (October 2023) <<https://www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-BIICL-Non-punishment-principle-report>> 48
- 415** IBA Legal Policy & Research Unit and British Institute of International and Comparative Law, Human trafficking and the rights of trafficked persons: An exploratory analysis on the application of the non-punishment principle (October 2023) <<https://www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-BIICL-Non-punishment-principle-report>> 48
- 416** IBA Legal Policy & Research Unit and British Institute of International and Comparative Law, Human trafficking and the rights of trafficked persons: An exploratory analysis on the application of the non-punishment principle (October 2023) <<https://www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-BIICL-Non-punishment-principle-report>> 50
- 417** IBA Legal Policy & Research Unit and British Institute of International and Comparative Law, Human trafficking and the rights of trafficked persons: An exploratory analysis on the application of the non-punishment principle (October 2023) <<https://www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-BIICL-Non-punishment-principle-report>> 50
- 418** Survivor and Trauma-Informed Model Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) | Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings

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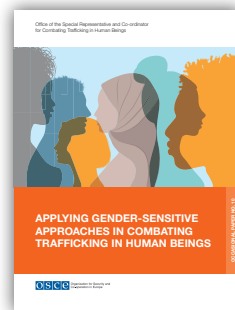
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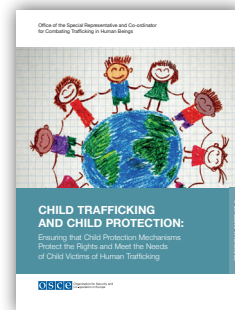
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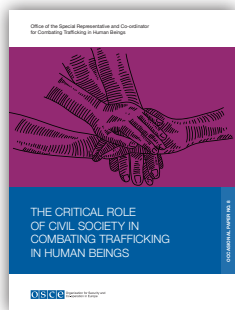
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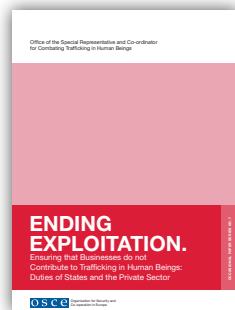
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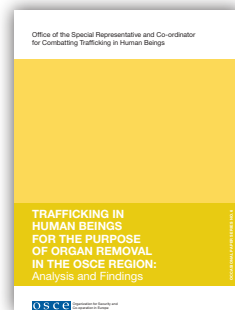
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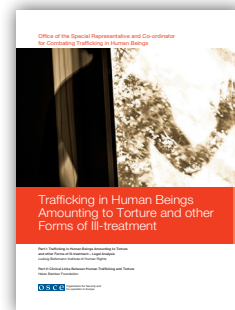
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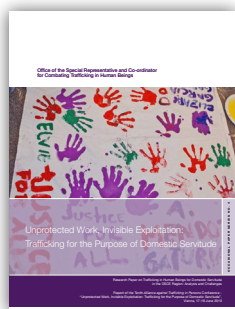
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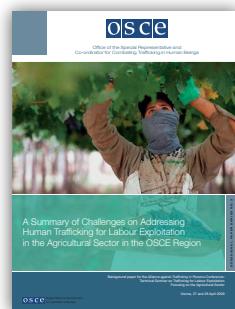
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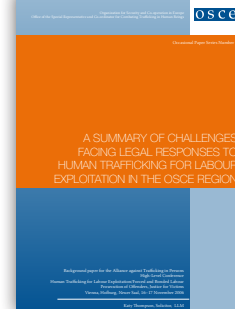
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