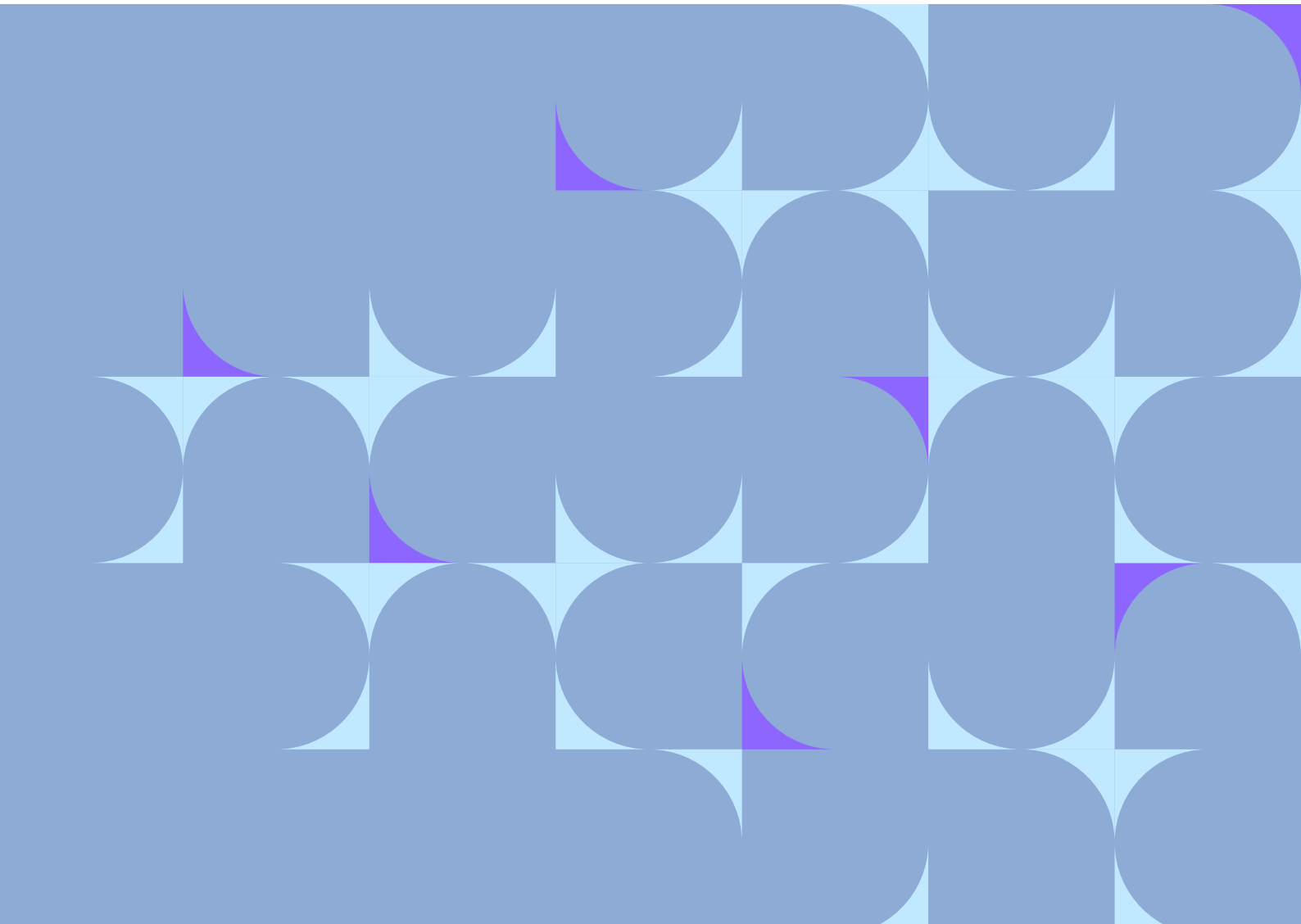
EUDA
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Protecting young people from recruitment into criminal drug networks

Research gaps and priorities for stronger prevention and intervention in the European Union



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Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice

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2026

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Executive summary

Safe futures is an initiative supported by the European Union Drugs Agency to strengthen shared understanding of, and responses to, the recruitment and exploitation of young people into criminal drugs networks across Europe. The initiative responds to growing concern that organised drug crime increasingly relies on young people, often those experiencing the greatest vulnerability, as labour in drug supply activities and associated violence, creating an interlinked security, social and public health challenge requiring coordinated, evidence-informed action.

This report emphasises the research needs and priorities emerging from the first 12 months of the safe futures initiative (March 2025–March 2026). It uses a narrative synthesis approach drawing on (1) key documents collated during year one (including the safe futures rapid evidence review (in print), comparative systematic reviews, policy recommendations and technical reports); and (2) learning generated through four multijurisdictional community of practice events. The analysis focuses on research gaps explicitly stated or strongly implied in these sources, including data and indicator limitations, scarcity of robust evaluations, needs for longitudinal evidence, and implementation barriers and facilitators.

Across the evidence base, youth recruitment into drug markets is shown to be multilevel and dynamic, shaped by adversity and trauma, peer/family and network influences, neighbourhood disadvantage and a rapidly evolving digital environment enabling grooming and tasking. Recruitment occurs through multiple mechanisms (e.g. active recruitment, ‘growing into’ networks, and coercive tactics such as intimidation and debt bondage), and is increasingly mediated through social media and encrypted messaging, blurring lines between friendship, opportunity and exploitation. The report suggests that evidence on ‘what works’ remains fragmented and methodologically limited, especially in European contexts, with few evaluated interventions and thin evidence on effective online counter-recruitment approaches. This makes simple ‘off-the-shelf’ transfer between jurisdictions unreliable.

The central implication is the need for a design-led, implementation-aware research and programme agenda that supports co-design, prototyping, testing and refinement of interventions in real-world settings, while strengthening the learning structures that enable adaptation across diverse contexts. To operationalise this, the report sets out five policy-relevant recommendations: (1) build comparable definitions, core indicators and local monitoring partnerships; (2) coordinate a design-led, co-produced intervention pilot with clear theories of change and learning loops; (3) invest in longitudinal and prospective research to understand recruitment mechanisms, timing and ‘dosage’ of interventions; (4) make implementation tracking a core research target (information sharing, early identification and ‘reachable’ service pathways); and (5) develop a bespoke EU-wide evaluation and shared learning infrastructure.

Introduction

Led by the Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice (REPPP) team at the University of Limerick and supported by the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA), the safe futures initiative brings together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to share learning, explore challenges and identify promising interventions to address the recruitment of young people ([1]) into criminal drugs networks.

The project responds to growing public and policy concern across Europe about organised drug crime increasingly using young people, often those experiencing the greatest vulnerability, as a source of labour for drug supply activities and associated violence. This is framed as a widening security, social and public health concern, requiring coordinated and evidence-informed responses (Europol, 2024).

The overall purpose of safe futures is to:

1. identify and learn from existing models and strategies that seek to address the involvement of young people in drug markets and drug-related crime;
2. support networking and collaboration activities across selected jurisdictions and disciplines to strengthen shared learning and coordinated action;
3. identify facilitators and barriers to the implementation of relevant programmes, including challenges that affect delivery, engagement and sustainability across different local contexts;
4. develop a conceptual framework to inform the development and implementation of interventions.

Key areas of activity

Safe futures is organised around interlinked workstreams.

a) Establishing a multidisciplinary community of practice

A central activity of safe futures is the creation of a multidisciplinary, multijurisdictional community of practice (CoP), bringing together policymakers, law enforcement officials, academics and practitioners. The CoP is intended to strengthen shared understanding of the problem, support exchange of practice wisdom and build relationships that enable effective collaboration across systems.

b) Synthesising evidence and developing an intervention framework

([1]) The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as every human being below the age of 18 years, however for the purposes of the safe futures project, young people are defined as those under the age of 24, similar to the UN recording for statistical purposes (see also: https://www.unesco.org/en/youth). This allows for the inclusion of a broader range of interventions to be considered by the project.

A key workstream involves reviewing existing research, mapping current interventions and using this evidence to develop a conceptual framework to guide prevention and intervention responses. This includes the ongoing compilation of academic and grey literature and a structured approach to learning from existing models and strategies.

This synthesis will be complemented, in year two of the project, by interviews with expert stakeholders (including policymakers, academics and practitioners) to further develop and refine the conceptual model and strengthen its practical relevance.

c) Communication and dissemination of findings

The project includes a strong emphasis on communication and dissemination, supported through activities such as stakeholder engagement, newsletters, presentations to EU policy forums and conference participation. Examples of activity noted include stakeholder database development, newsletter release and presentations to relevant European policy and academic audiences.

d) Partnership building

Finally, safe futures prioritises relationship building across partner jurisdictions, including through in-person and online meetings. These activities support cross-national learning and provide the foundations for developing shared approaches to prevention and intervention in this area.

Current report

This report is a ‘snapshot in time’ that focuses on the research needs and priorities identified from activities undertaken in the first 12 months of the project. The findings are presented using a narrative synthesis approach and draw from:

1. key documents collated since the start of the project in March 2025, and

2. CoP events, held over the first year of operation.

Methodology

The objective of this report is to identify and synthesise the research needs and priorities concerning young people's involvement in drug markets across purposely sampled documents. The primary question: 'What research needs and priorities are explicitly or implicitly identified across these documents regarding young people involved in drug markets?'

A narrative synthesis approach was used drawing on (1) key documents collated from the start of the project in March 2025 and (2) CoP events held throughout the first year of the project.

The following documents were used to inform this report.

- **Core safe futures documents**
    - Safe futures rapid evidence review: an initial objective of the project and desk review of literature on promising approaches to address the recruitment and participation of young people in criminal drugs networks in Europe (in print).
    - Safe futures CoP key event report): a report on the learning from several CoP events related to the safe futures project over the first six months of operation (available on request).
- **Supporting and comparative evidence**
    - Adamse et al. (2024), systematic review on organised crime entry mechanisms and risks/protective factors.
    - Boertien et al. (2024), systematic review on interventions for youth organised crime involvement (highlighting very limited evaluated interventions).
    - Clemmow et al. (2025), systems of support review (highlighting access/engagement/navigation barriers).
    - CoP combined notes from four safe futures events – Leiden, Lisbon, Athens and The Hague from March 2025–March 2026 (available on request).
    - EMCDDA et al. (2021), report on drug supply, associated violence and exploitation of vulnerable groups in Denmark.
    - European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN) recommendation paper (2024), using Ekblom's 5Is framework (2011).
    - Groshkova et al. (2026), journal article on drug market violence and strategic priorities.

- The Health Research Board (HRB) (2017), drug-related intimidation evidence review.
- Mellgren et al. (2024), systematic review of psychosocial interventions and effects (including focused deterrence).
- Naughton et al. (2023), journal article on intervention design for those recruited to localised criminal networks in Ireland.
- Søgaard et al. (2026), journal article on criminal exploitation and vulnerability in drug markets: a six-nation comparison of its recognition in international policy discourses and criminal justice systems.
- Walsh et al. (2023), public health youth violence prevention rapid review (focus on implementation/'five Ps').

The documents were searched for:

- evidence gaps explicitly stated (e.g. 'lack of robust data', 'few rigorous evaluations', 'need for longitudinal research');
- research priorities recommended (e.g. data systems, monitoring, evaluation, good practice);
- implementation considerations (barriers/facilitators such as engagement, retention, data sharing, capacity, cultural transferability);
- design and evaluation recommendations (theory of change, adaptive models, hybrid designs, action research, co-production).

The narrative synthesis process (how findings were developed) included:

- within-document coding: summarised each document while looking for 'research needs/priorities' etc., developed initial codes (e.g. 'recruitment drivers', 'intervention');
- cross-document pattern building: grouped codes using a 'look-alike/feel-alike' clustering approach to identify recurring patterns across sources.

The following limitations are noted.

- **Not a full systematic review.** The approach was a targeted, narrative synthesis of an existing rapid review and other complementary documents as deemed suitable by the researcher from practice knowledge over one year.
- **Various evidence types.** Evidence included policy papers, rapid reviews, systematic reviews, technical reports and CoP notes with findings synthesised qualitatively rather than meta-analytically.
- **Dependence on available text.** 'Research needs' were extracted from what documents explicitly stated or strongly implied; gaps may remain where topics are under-documented.
- **Microsoft CoPilot.** Microsoft CoPilot, the University of Limerick approved AI assistant, aided in summarising some sources and helped draw limited insights from the data as part of the research process. This has the risk of AI hallucinations or

elements in the data being over-exaggerated by AI. To mitigate this, the technology was applied with human oversight and was reviewed and checked by the researcher.

Findings: current research, gaps, needs and priorities

Young people are now implicated in over 70 % of criminal networks, including those involved in cybercrime, fraud, drug trafficking, migrant smuggling and property crime (Europol, 2024). Understanding the issue of young people's involvement in criminal and drugs networks, and how to respond, relies on complex, multilevel and cross-jurisdictional evidence in relation to:

1. the causes and drivers of youth recruitment and involvement;
2. effective interventions;
3. priorities and needs.

Recruitment drivers

Across European jurisdictions, the drivers of youth involvement in illegal drug markets are multilevel and dynamic. These include individual adversity and trauma; peer/family and local network influences; neighbourhood disadvantage and an evolving digital landscape that enables grooming, tasking and coordination of young people in drug related crime and violence (Adamse et al., 2024; EUDA et al., 2026).

Existing evidence shows multiple entry mechanisms for young people into organised crime and drugs markets. Active recruitment, soliciting membership, growing into and self-setup, intersect with a combination of individual, social and structural risk factors (Adamse et al., 2024). Research on Danish drug markets documents debt-bondage, intimidation and coercion as recruitment and retention tactics, sometimes aggravated by repressive enforcement that pushes risk down the hierarchy (EMCDDA et al., 2021). The HRB in Ireland similarly foregrounds drug-related intimidation as a community-level phenomenon with major consequences for individuals, families and services (HRB, 2017).

The 'greentown' project in Ireland (Naughton et al., 2023) identifies two main recruitment pathways through which young people become embedded in local criminal networks. First, some young people are recruited through succession within high-status crime families, where they may be relatively sheltered from adversity and 'nurtured' for continuity and future leadership within tightly bound kinship structures. Second, many other 'associate' members enter through a vulnerability-driven pathway shaped by cumulative adversity and structural disadvantage. Children and adolescents from low-status or crime-prone families often experiencing poor guardianship, multigenerational criminal exposure, trauma and bereavement, school exclusion and limited involvement in prosocial activities, become vulnerable to entry and retention within geographically bounded networks (O'Meara Daly et al., 2020).

Recruitment is described as localised, with networks typically composed of individuals living in close proximity; the research also highlights the role of young people who have

progressed through networks and gain status, becoming responsible for targeting, recruiting and grooming vulnerable younger children. Across cases, the ‘greentown’ research emphasises that recruitment is reinforced through relational processes, for example, mentoring into crime by fathers, older brothers and uncles and through drug-market dynamics that intensify dependence and exposure.

Criminal drugs networks now exploit social media, encrypted messaging and mobile ‘drug lines’ for advertising, grooming and rapid tasking for criminal purposes. This has increased labour intensity and recruitment of vulnerable young people as runners, money mules and ‘information mules’ (EMCDDA et al., 2021). Criminal networks use the dark web, encrypted messaging apps and gaming environments to groom young people, using influencer-style language, ‘gamification’ and promises of quick financial gain (Europol, 2024). Research highlights that online recruitment is not incidental but systematic, leveraging algorithms and peer-to-peer dynamics to normalise criminal behaviour (EUDA et al., 2026). These tactics blur the line between friendship and exploitation, making early detection and prevention critical.

Recruitment and intervention

The safe futures rapid evidence review (EUDA et al., 2026) identified eight intervention approaches from the existing literature: (1) mechanism/driver-specific recruitment mapping; (2) digital counter-recruitment; (3) adaptable family-centred supports; (4) rapid engagement/no-wrong-door delivery; (5) place-based collective efficacy; (6) school strategies designed around social centrality; (7) justice-adjacent ‘reachable moments’; and (8) identity-rich economic alternatives.

However, research on which interventions work in which context, and why, is fragmented and methodologically limited (Boertien et al., 2024). Evaluated interventions are often implemented within limited policy contexts or narrow geographical boundaries or are not subject to comprehensive empirical evaluation. This hinders their replicability or scale-out across different jurisdictions. Boertien et al. and their systematic review of interventions found that, among a total of 20 310 potential studies, only two qualitative studies met their inclusion criteria, highlighting the scarcity of empirical evidence on this topic. Research shows that the strongest causal evidence relates to focused deterrence (most effective in moderate certainty reductions in gun violence), while school-based universal programmes show smaller, lower certainty effects with many other approaches lacking rigorous testing in Europe (Mellgren et al., 2024).

Evidence on effective online recruitment interventions is thin. Existing studies call for privacy preserving analytics, online platform partnerships and protocols that link online outreach to offline wraparound support and education in schools for example (EMCDDA et al., 2021; EUDA et al., 2026). However, this new and evolving area of recruitment means that evidence-based interventions are scarce with limited evidence pointing to the effective development of detection and response protocols within online platforms (EUCPN, 2024).

Research suggests that effective responses must begin with addressing recruitment through network disruption and the creation of safe ‘exit environments’. This is because the network

itself can exert an independent criminogenic influence beyond individual risks, or a ‘network effect’ consistent with social facilitation processes. The intervention design must be bespoke and grounded in an accurate understanding of each network’s structure and resilience (e.g. family-based versus peer-based versus drug-focused configurations), cautioning that a case-by-case diagnostic approach may be necessary even if it conflicts with standard ‘scaling up’ assumptions in evidence-based programming (Naughton et al., 2023).

Research priorities and needs

At the European level, recent work on drug market violence and youth recruitment highlights issues of data scarcity, definitional variability, lack of consistent definitions and indicators, and local contextual differences (Groshkova et al., 2026; EUCPN, 2024; Adamse et al., 2024). European contributions on drug-market violence argue for improved data collection and monitoring; local-level information sources and partnerships; evaluation and sharing of good practices; and a regular forum for information exchange (Groshkova et al., 2026). Søgaard et al. (2026) also highlight a core concern that young people involved in serious drug crime are often exploited, yet criminal justice systems frequently treat them as offenders rather than victims. Their recent six-nation comparison suggests that drug-market-related criminal exploitation exists but varies across Europe and individuals are coerced, manipulated, controlled, deceived or entrapped into serious drug production or supply activities (not simple possession), due to power imbalances. They advocate for a combination of public health and harm-reduction responses and better European coordination while respecting national contexts.

Safe futures stresses the importance of collecting data on core outcomes spanning the individual (substance use, mental health), family/school, network exposure and neighbourhood efficacy, with explicit tracking of unintended effects and attribution (EUDA et al., 2026). Longitudinal, prospective studies are required to associate dynamic risks and protections with particular mechanisms and to inform targeting and intervention frequency (Adamse et al., 2024; EUDA et al., 2026).

However, differences in local-level policy contexts and jurisdictions means that policymakers cannot rely on linear evidence importation. Without appropriate research and evidence, it is not possible to know if what works in one context will work in another. This therefore calls for a design-led approach to research and programme development whereby context-sensitive responses are developed and evaluated iteratively while building learning structures that focus on implementation development. Any conceptual model designed to address the issue of young people’s recruitment and participation in organised drug crime needs to balance fidelity and adaptation to varying local contexts. The design (or research) task is to pair what is most promising with local adaptation and evaluation contexts, rather than assuming direct transferability of cause and effect (Mellgren et al., 2024; Groshkova et al., 2026).

A design-oriented research lens should also incorporate concrete implementation barriers such as staff shortages or poor information sharing, and implementation facilitators such as early identification, co-location and single points of contact to make services reachable for the highest-risk young people (Clemmow et al., 2025; O’Meara Daly et al., 2025).

The safe futures CoP events (*n* = 4) attended by purposely selected researchers, practitioners and policymakers, highlight the critical importance of aligning programme design, implementation and research. In the first CoP event, the challenge of translating scientific research into operational programmes was raised by the participants who noted that academic research can sometimes be considered too abstract for implementation. It was suggested that multidisciplinary collaboration between researchers, policymakers and practitioners from the outset is needed. This applies to both programme development, implementation and evaluation, and points to a collaborative design-oriented approach.

A design-led approach provides the organising logic to move beyond 'programmes off the shelf' towards co-produced, implementation-aware and data-literate responses capable of evolving across jurisdictions and with diversifying European drug markets. In practice, this means (i) selecting designs that are promising on current evidence, (ii) conducting context-sensitive trials with implementation tracking, (iii) curating local-level data partnerships that feed into national/EU views, and (iv) resourcing comparative scale-ups only when core components and system preconditions are clear (Mellgren et al., 2024; EUDA et al., 2026; Groshkova et al., 2026). Therefore, the research agenda should look at how we co-design, test and refine interventions, and so include research from the outset, and enable programmes to adapt and develop iteratively in response to local and changing contexts. This can still be achieved using core and fundamental intervention elements that are scalable but have inbuilt flexibility to respond to localised problems ([2]).

Recommendations for policymakers

Recommendation 1: Build comparable data, definitions and monitoring

Create an agreed core set of definitions and indicators (with clear age/justice caveats across EU Member States) and support local data partnerships to monitor trends, compare across jurisdictions and evaluate what is working. This could include indicators that capture outcomes across individual well-being (e.g. substance use, mental health), family/school factors, network exposure and neighbourhood efficacy, and can track unintended effects.

Recommendation 2: Coordinate a design-led, co-produced intervention pilot

Move beyond 'off-the-shelf' solutions by resourcing a design-led pilot where advancements in intervention are co-designed then tested, adapted and refined iteratively while implementation is happening. This can prioritise the intervention approaches already identified as promising in the safe futures evidence review (e.g. digital counter-recruitment, family-centred supports, no-wrong-door engagement, place-based collective efficacy, justice-adjacent reachable moments and identity-rich economic alternatives), and be added to the empirical work (in progress) with clear theories of change and flexible 'learning loops' built in.

([2]) See the greentown project for an example of bespoke intervention design with inbuilt flexibility that assesses needs over a number of core areas and reacts accordingly (https://www.ul.ie/research/greentown-reducing-the-influence-of-criminal-networks-over-children-and-families).

Recommendation 3: Invest in longitudinal and prospective research on recruitment mechanisms

Fund longitudinal/prospective studies that can link changing risk and protective factors to specific recruitment mechanisms (including coercion/intimidation and 'growing into' networks), so policymakers can understand what drives recruitment, for whom and when, and therefore how to time interventions and set realistic 'dosage' and follow-up. This is important in the current landscape as current evidence is fragmented and often cannot tell whether findings from one context will hold in another.

Recommendation 4: Make implementation tracking a research target

Treat implementation as central: invest in research and improvement work on practical system conditions that determine whether programmes reach the highest-risk young people, including staffing capacity, information sharing, early identification, co-location and single points of contact. The goal would be to make services genuinely 'reachable' and sustainable, noting that even good programmes fail when delivery systems cannot engage, retain and protect the young people most exposed to recruitment pressures.

Recommendation 5: Build evaluation and shared learning infrastructure to accelerate EU-wide learning

Pair fit-for-purpose evaluation and structured learning so the field can accumulate actionable knowledge across jurisdictions. This means routinely evaluating good practice (including 'null' or mixed results), sharing what is learned through a regular forum for exchange, and only scaling up across contexts when core components and system preconditions are clearly understood, balancing fidelity with necessary local adaptation.

Conclusion

Emerging evidence from the first year of the safe futures project suggests that ongoing research is needed to address the complex problem of young people's recruitment into criminal drugs markets. However, the research should not simply explore a list of potential programmes but take a design-led approach that iteratively frames the problem with those affected, develops prototypes of multicomponent solutions, and continuously tests, learns from and refines interventions based on implementation in real-world settings (Groshkova et al., 2026).

Across Europe, practitioners and researchers report growing concern about the recruitment and exploitation of young people into criminal drug markets, with the dynamics of involvement increasingly shaped by social networks, local opportunity structures and digitally mediated tasks. A recurring message in the work of safe futures is that the current evidence base is fragmented, methodologically uneven and often not adapted to European contexts; as a result, it struggles to keep pace with fast-changing market practices, especially those enabled by social media, encrypted messaging and mobile 'drug lines' (EUDA et al., 2026; O'Meara Daly et al., 2025).

At the same time, European syntheses on drug-market violence and youth recruitment stress the data scarcity, definitional variability and local heterogeneity that frustrate the simple transfer of singular 'off-the-shelf programmes', arguing instead for iterative, design-led responses that learn from (and evaluate) implementation in real time and in real-world settings (Groshkova et al., 2026; EUCPN, 2024).

This is the central implication of the safe futures project and its CoP learning: that comprehensive prevention and intervention must be co-designed, prototyped, evaluated and adapted with attention to systems, networks and local data constraints. A design-led approach does not mean discarding evidence, rather it means that the research agenda must be centred on a cycle of co-designing, testing, evaluating and refining of individual and multiple programme components in different contexts and jurisdictions, recognising that the right fit between an intervention and a specific jurisdiction or context can be decisive for effective outcomes (EUDA et al., 2026; Walsh et al., 2023).

Overall, recommendations for policymakers suggest the following:

1) comparable data and monitoring: agree shared definitions and a core indicator set, and resource local data partnerships so trends, impacts and unintended effects can be tracked consistently across the EU;

2) design-led pilot: fund a co-produced, design-led intervention pilot that is prototyped, tested, adapted and refined in real time, drawing on the most promising approaches identified by safe futures;

3) longitudinal evidence: invest in prospective/longitudinal research to explain recruitment mechanisms and trajectories, what drives recruitment, for whom and when, so interventions can be timed and targeted effectively;

4) implementation tracking: make implementation a core research focus by studying (and fixing) the system conditions that determine reach and sustainability, for example information sharing, early identification and ‘reachable’ service pathways;

5) evaluation and shared learning: build an EU-wide learning infrastructure that routinely evaluates practice (including null results), shares findings and scales up when core components and enabling conditions are clear.

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Recommended citation: European Union Drugs Agency (2026), *Research needs and priorities report,* Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2026
ISBN 978-92-9408-147-6 | doi:10.2810/4508338 | TD-01-26-014-EN-N

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