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OFFICIAL HANDBOOK

UNHRC

Youth Rights vs Public Security: Protecting Minors Recruited by Organized Crime

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COMMITEE
overview

The United Nations Human Rights Council is the main body in the UN system responsible for promoting and protecting human rights worldwide. It was established in 2006 by the General Assembly to replace the former Commission on Human Rights. The Council is made up of 47 member states that are elected for three-year terms. It meets several times a year in Geneva, where countries discuss current human rights situations, review reports, and negotiate resolutions.

The Council can appoint Special Rapporteurs and independent experts to investigate specific issues or countries, conduct the Universal Periodic Review of every UN Member State, and request information from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. These tools allow the Council to keep attention on serious problems and encourage governments to improve their practices, even if it cannot force them to act.

In practice, the Council is a political body where different groups of countries often hold very different views. Some states strongly defend national sovereignty and prefer that each country deal with its own internal matters. Other states argue that human rights are universal and that the international community has a responsibility to respond when serious violations occur. These opposing perspectives shape almost every debate and make consensus difficult to reach. Resolutions often require careful negotiation, compromise, and the building of cross-regional support.

HISTORICAL *background*

The idea that children should be treated differently from adults in the justice system is relatively recent. Until the late 19th century, most legal systems prosecuted minors much like adults. This began to change with the creation of the first dedicated juvenile court in Cook County, Illinois, in 1899, and many states soon followed, building systems on the premise that young offenders should be rehabilitated rather than simply punished. The principle was gradually codified at the international level. The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (the Beijing Rules, 1985) and the Riyadh Guidelines (1990) set standards for juvenile justice and delinquency prevention. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) then established that the best interests of the child must guide state action and that detention should be a measure of last resort. Later instruments addressed exploitation directly. The Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (2000) limited the recruitment of minors by armed groups. ILO Convention 182 (1999) classified the use of children in illicit activities, including drug trafficking, as one of the "worst forms of child labour."

During the same period, organized crime in many regions came to rely on minors as a cheap, expendable, and legally lower-risk workforce, since in many jurisdictions young offenders face lighter penalties. The phenomenon has appeared in very different contexts.

HISTORICAL *background*

In the 1980s and 1990s, drug cartels in Colombia employed adolescents as hired assassins, and in Brazil, drug factions used children as lookouts and couriers. Street gangs in Central America grew rapidly in the 1990s amid post-conflict instability. In Europe, Italian mafia groups have recruited minors in economically marginalized neighborhoods, and in the United Kingdom, “county lines” drug networks have used children to transport and sell drugs across regions. Armed groups in parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East have recruited and used children as fighters, porters, informants, and for other roles, often blurring the line between organized crime and armed conflict. Across regions, recruitment is commonly linked to poverty, school dropout, family violence, social exclusion, and lack of opportunity, though coercion, threats against families, and abduction also occur. More recently, social media, messaging apps, and online games have emerged as recruitment channels that cross borders and are difficult for authorities to monitor.

Government responses have tended to swing between two broad approaches. The security-oriented approach emphasizes tougher penalties, lowering the age of criminal responsibility, and intensive policing of areas and groups considered high-risk. Its supporters argue that it deters criminal groups from using minors, protects communities, and holds young offenders accountable. Critics counter that it stigmatizes marginalized youth, overcrowds detention facilities, exposes children to further violence and criminal networks, and can punish victims instead of the adults who exploit them.

CURRENT *situation*

Today, the recruitment of minors by organized crime is a growing problem in many parts of the world. In Haiti, UNICEF reported that child recruitment by armed groups tripled in 2025, and that the UN estimates 30 to 50 per cent of armed group members are children, some as young as 9. A UN report found that most of the 26 gangs in the country recruit children, using them for tasks that range from errands and extortion to violent crimes. The problem is not limited to one region. In Honduras, a children's rights organization warns of forced recruitment of street children, who are used as lookouts or drug couriers. In the United Kingdom, an official report in May 2026 concluded that forced criminality involving children is likely to intensify.



CURRENT *situation*

Two challenges stand out. The first is technology: criminal groups increasingly find and contact children through social media, messaging apps, and online games, often across borders. The European Parliament recently warned that digital services are used to identify, target, groom, manipulate, and coerce children. The second is that authorities often fail to recognize these children as victims. The UK report found that systems do not consistently identify or respond appropriately to exploited children, so a child caught committing a crime may actually have been trafficked or forced. In Haiti, the UN has also noted that children linked to gangs are sometimes treated as offenders rather than victims.

Governments and international bodies are responding, but they do not agree on the best approach. Many UN and European institutions now favor protecting children first, through prevention, education, rehabilitation, and punishing the adults who recruit them. The European Parliament, for example, has asked for child recruitment to be treated as an aggravating circumstance in organised crime law, along with prevention programs and early-warning systems involving schools and families. At the same time, many countries facing high violence still prefer tougher security measures, including harsher penalties for young offenders. Delegates should consider how to protect children without ignoring public safety, how to hold adult recruiters and online platforms responsible, and how to fund prevention programs in countries with limited resources.

KEY AREAS *of debate*

- Should children recruited by organized crime be treated mainly as victims of exploitation, or should they still be held criminally responsible for serious offenses? How can states apply the non-punishment principle without ignoring the harm caused to others?

- Should states lower, maintain, or raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility, and what effect would this have on recruitment by criminal groups?

- How can states and the international community punish the adults and networks that recruit children, including those operating across borders?

- . What role should governments and technology platforms play in detecting and preventing the recruitment of children through social media, messaging apps, and online games?

- What programs, such as education, family support, and rehabilitation, are most effective in keeping children out of criminal groups and helping them leave safely, and how should they be funded in countries with limited resources?

DIFFERENT *perspectives*

- High-income countries generally see child recruitment as a form of exploitation, so they argue that children should be protected as victims first. They tend to focus on punishing the adult recruiters and criminal networks rather than the minors themselves, and many want technology companies held responsible for stopping online recruitment through regulation and fines. At the same time, they are concerned about public safety, especially because gangs often use minors precisely because the penalties for them are lighter.
- Low- and middle-income countries often point to poverty, lack of schooling, and weak institutions as the root causes of recruitment. Many say they lack the resources to run rehabilitation programs, safe shelters, or specialized youth courts, so they call for international funding and technical support. Governments facing high levels of violence also feel pressure from their communities to adopt tougher security measures. Some argue that wealthier countries should do more to stop the flow of weapons and the demand for drugs that sustain these groups.
- Countries affected by armed conflict or very weak state control face a different challenge, because armed groups may control whole territories and it is hard to separate organized crime from conflict. They tend to prioritize restoring security first, since prevention and reintegration programs cannot work while violence continues. They usually ask for international peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, and support to demobilize and reintegrate child members safely.

DIFFERENT *perspectives*

- Countries favoring a security-first approach argue that strong penalties, including for minors who commit serious crimes, are necessary to deter criminal groups and protect communities. Some believe lowering the age of criminal responsibility may be justified when minors commit violent offenses. They also stress national sovereignty, arguing that each state should decide how to handle its own juvenile justice system.
- Rights-based approaches, supported by UN bodies, NGOs, and child protection groups, hold that children should never be punished for crimes they were forced or manipulated into committing, a idea known as the non-punishment principle. They argue that detention should be a last resort, since prison often pushes children deeper into criminal networks. They urge states to follow international standards such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to invest in prevention, education, and reintegration.



DELEGATIONS *list*

- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- United Arab Emirates
- State of Qatar
- Republic of Indonesia
- Republic of the Philippines
- Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal
- Mexico
- Republic of Colombia
- Republic of Kenya
- Republic of Lebanon
- Republic of El Salvador
- Republic of South Africa
- Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
- United States of America
- Kingdom of Spain
- United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- Amnesty International
- Human Rights Watch
- International Rescue Commitee (IRC)
- World Vision International

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