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These information bulletins aim to shed light on specific situations and issues affecting vulnerable youth.

The Institut universitaire Jeunes en difficulté brings together researchers and practitioners who contribute to the development of knowledge and practices related to vulnerable youth in Quebec. Its work focuses on issues such as maltreatment, behavioural problems, delinquency and social integration as well as on the professional practices of those working with at-risk youth and families.

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## The criminal exploitation of minors

**The criminal exploitation of minors is an emerging and still under-documented issue. This document aims to shed light on the dynamics observed, the risk factors and their implications.**

There is no doubt that sexual exploitation ranks among the foremost social concerns when discussing minors—particularly girls—who may be exploited by criminal groups. However, this focus often overshadows another largely overlooked reality: the exploitation of minors, primarily boys, for criminal purposes by the various criminal networks competing for resources within illicit markets.

In international law, the concept of criminal exploitation refers to the coercive use of another person for financial gain. It is generally examined through the lens of human trafficking, which encompasses a broad range of situations (e.g., forced labour, forced begging, sexual exploitation), including coercion to commit criminal offences. This form of exploitation can manifest itself in multiple ways depending on social contexts and the individuals involved (Ninnin, 2025).

In Quebec, the use of minors by criminal groups to commit crimes is attracting increasing attention. Although this practice may, at first glance, appear consensual, it raises important questions. What if exploitation lies behind this apparent complicity?

For now, knowledge about criminal exploitation in general, and coercion to commit crimes in particular, remains limited. Nonetheless, it is worth reflecting on the issue, if only to better understand a situation that is increasingly being observed by those working with minors who are drawn to criminal groups and the opportunities they appear to offer.



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## Coercing others to commit crimes

Interest in coercion to commit offences as a form of criminal exploitation emerged in the United Kingdom alongside the rise of County Lines drug trafficking networks and the growing debate surrounding a justice approach that views minors who commit crimes as potential victims of coercion who require protection, rather than as offenders who should simply be punished (Barlow et al., 2022; Marshall, 2024).

Criminal exploitation, understood here as inducement to commit an offence, is based on the premise that criminal groups take advantage of minors' vulnerabilities and the differential treatment they receive within the justice system in order to persuade them to engage in criminal activity (Mastropolo, 2014).

While many minors voluntarily participate in the activities of criminal groups for their own purposes, it is also possible that some are manipulated or coerced into doing so. Moreover, these two scenarios are certainly not mutually exclusive. A teenager may initially agree to commit an offence on behalf of another person and later become obliged to continue. Like many social phenomena, the criminal exploitation of minors should not be understood as a static condition, but rather as a dynamic process.



**The County Lines phenomenon refers to the use of minors by criminal groups to transport and sell drugs from one region (e.g., an urban centre) to another (e.g., a rural area) in order to expand their territory of operations.**

## Using minors as a criminal strategy

Social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat), online gaming platforms (e.g., Roblox, Fortnite), and encrypted messaging applications (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram) are among the preferred channels used by criminal groups to recruit minors. Through coded messages, these groups offer "missions," meaning the commission of crimes that are often both serious and high-risk (e.g., vehicle theft, drug trafficking, extortion, arson, home invasions, firearm discharges, armed assaults, homicide), in exchange for money. Although the promise of payment can be highly appealing, these arrangements may also involve deception, blackmail, intimidation and debt bondage if the "mission" fails (Harding, 2020; Stone, 2018).

Minors often make decisions based on emotions. Whether intentionally or not, it is hardly surprising that criminal groups seek to capitalize on their impulsivity in order to recruit them. Initially, coercion or subjugation may not even be necessary. Criminal groups need only glorify a criminal lifestyle associated with pleasure, wealth, recognition, belonging and independence. As a result, an adolescent attracted by such promises may actively seek out and recognize a coded message without fully understanding the implications of the "missions" being offered or the cycle into which they risk being drawn.

The motivations of those requesting these activities are likely to vary according to their personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, life trajectory) and the contexts in which they operate (Barlow et al., 2022). Nevertheless, because profit is the driving force behind criminal organizations and violence is their fuel, the acquisition of additional resources and the control of new territories to expand illicit markets are likely their primary objectives. Achieving these goals, however, entails risks. By using others to carry out criminal activities, they believe they can shield themselves—at least in the short term—from the dangers associated with "doing the job" themselves (e.g., violence, retaliation, arrest, conviction) (Coomber & Moyle, 2018).

**Criminal exploitation can be defined as the act of an individual or group taking advantage of a power imbalance to coerce, control, manipulate, or deceive a person into committing criminal acts in exchange for money, goods, or services.**

## Contributing to criminal group strategies: Recklessness or exploitation?

**In Quebec, there appears to be a growing effort by criminal networks to profit from minors for criminal purposes. This trend is a source of serious concern for law enforcement agencies as well as organizations working with youth and their families.**

It is important to question the motivations of criminal groups that rely on minors to carry out their “missions” and to assess the extent to which they truly benefit from this strategy. The wave of extortion, arson and firearm-related incidents involving young men recruited online is deeply concerning. The manner in which these “missions” appear to be carried out often suggests improvisation, carelessness and unpredictability, creating risks not only for those directly targeted by the crimes but also for the broader public.

Improvisation, carelessness and unpredictability also characterize the individuals carrying out these “missions.” This, too, poses serious risks to their own safety. Consequently, their motivations must also be examined—if not more closely. Are they seeking money? Social media recognition? Thrill-seeking experiences? The underlying dynamics must also be understood. At what point does greed begin to work against them? Answers to such questions will undoubtedly help gain a clearer understanding of the issue in order to prevent it.

## Individuals exploited for criminal purposes: Delinquent, distressed or both?

The limited research available on criminal exploitation highlights the difficulty of identifying individuals who are victims—or at risk of becoming victims—of this form of exploitation (Marshall, 2024). This challenge is likely attributable to the fact that victims and offenders are normatively viewed as distinct categories. Yet the relationship between criminal involvement and victimization is remarkably strong (Braga, 2022). In many cases, the two realities are inseparable.

Moreover, individuals involved in criminal activity often have an ambiguous relationship with the label of “victim.” As a result, they may struggle to recognize the complexity of their own victimization experiences (Marshall, 2024). Fear of retaliation may further encourage them to deny being exploited (Barlow et al., 2022).

The difficulties associated with identifying potential victims of criminal exploitation complicate efforts to develop a clear profile of those affected. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify factors that may increase vulnerability (see Table 1) (Baidawi et al., 2020; Barlow et al., 2022; Ninnin, 2025; Stone, 2018).

Any analysis of these factors must also take into account the life circumstances often shared by those motivated to exploit others for criminal purposes and those who are exploited. The factors identified above relate to the broader risk of becoming a victim of human trafficking. It is important to remember that human trafficking encompasses a wide range of situations that extend far beyond the use of minors by criminal networks, as currently observed in Quebec. This remains, however, only a hypothesis, since no Quebec or Canadian study has yet examined the issue. The few articles published outside the United Kingdom generally focus on risk factors associated with sexual exploitation or on children’s rights and the legal reforms required to ensure that those rights are respected when minors commit offences.

That said, the analogy with sexual exploitation is not unfounded. Interest in criminal exploitation coincides with changing attitudes toward minors who were once processed by the justice system as “prostitutes” but are now recognized as victims of sexual exploitation. It also reflects concerns within child protection systems about the possibility of overlooking other young people who may similarly be experiencing exploitation (Marshall, 2024).

**Victims of violence are rarely selected at random. This is particularly true within criminal networks, where the individuals who interact with one another are often both those who deceive or assault and those who are deceived or assaulted.**



**Table 1. Personal and social risk factors for becoming a victim of criminal exploitation**

PERSONAL VULNERABILITIES	SOCIAL VULNERABILITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Being a young male</li> <li>✓ Using psychoactive substances</li> <li>✓ Experiencing housing instability</li> <li>✓ Being under guardianship or institutional care</li> <li>✓ Having neurodevelopmental or mental health disorders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Being neglected</li> <li>✓ Experiencing family violence</li> <li>✓ Lacking parental supervision</li> <li>✓ Dropping out of school or being expelled</li> <li>✓ Facing economic and administrative insecurity</li> </ul>

### The thin line between consent and exploitation: Seducing for profit?


Like sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation may not be limited to a single event or a straightforward linear trajectory. It should therefore be examined as a constellation of behaviours emerging from the relational dynamics between those who exploit and those who are exploited (Barlow et al., 2022).

Individuals experiencing criminal exploitation do not initially see themselves as victims. On the one hand, they derive benefits from their activities, at least in the short term. On the other hand, behavioural difficulties or prior involvement with the justice system may lead them to believe that authorities already view them with suspicion. Most are also young men who subscribe to stereotypical notions of masculinity and who, in addition to feeling ashamed of having been “taken advantage of,” do not want to appear weak or cowardly by acknowledging their exploitation. They may also fear retaliation or being labelled as informants if they disclose what is happening (Baidawi et al., 2020; Marshall, 2024).

As with sexual exploitation, it is essential to consider the process through which a minor becomes increasingly vulnerable to coercion into criminal activity. Initially, the young person anticipates benefits from offering criminal services without necessarily understanding the consequences. Later, when the tide turns, they may continue their involvement because they are being forced to do so, because they perceive no alternative, or because the situation continues to provide certain benefits.



Like sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation takes many forms, is characterized by unequal power relationships, and involves individuals who take advantage of the vulnerabilities of others for personal gain.



# Why it matters to assess whether a “mission” involves exploitation

Behind the sensational headlines describing the “missions” carried out by young men recruited online to perform tasks on behalf of criminal groups may lie an even darker reality—one that should not be overlooked.

Victim or offender? Contrary to Shakespeare’s iconic line, that is not the question. Like most social phenomena, criminal exploitation is unlikely to be a binary condition (one is either exploited or not exploited). Rather, it is a multidimensional reality in which individuals may experience exploitation rarely, occasionally or frequently. Furthermore, the tendency to dichotomize victim and offender status creates contradictions within legal frameworks that simultaneously require the protection of minors and the prosecution of those who commit offences. It also generates unnecessary tensions between youth protection systems and criminal justice systems, ultimately undermining support for all individuals experiencing exploitation, regardless of its form (Marshall, 2024).

Nor should the question be framed as protection versus punishment. Both realities must be taken into account, as they do not necessarily conflict with one another. A minor experiencing criminal exploitation may simultaneously be responsible for harms that warrant condemnation and sanctions, while also being the victim of harms that require identification and intervention.

Although still relatively unknown, the concept of criminal exploitation can serve as a valuable framework for assessing the experiences of some minors who commit offences at the behest of criminal groups (Baidawi et al., 2020; Barlow et al., 2022; Marshall, 2024). The possibility that coercion may be part of the equation—alongside the pursuit of money or glory—should be considered when responding to these young people. For some young offenders, criminal recidivism may in fact represent a form of re-victimization.

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