

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

Query title	Relationship between Disability and Organised Crime globally
Authors	Anisha Saggu
Date	September 2025
Query	This query will undertake research on the relationship between disability and organised crime overseas, at a global level. The aim is to identify any existing studies or reports on the topic, explore the impact of organised crime on individuals with disabilities, and assess whether there is further work or research required in this space to address the needs of people with disabilities who experience organised crime (e.g., access to justice and protection).
Enquirer	Sarah McAveety, Transnational Serious and Organised Crime Department

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Methodology
3. Evidence on how people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by organised crime.
 - a. Why are people with disabilities targets of organised crime?
 - b. What types of organised crime most commonly affect individuals with disabilities?
 - c. Access to justice
4. What gaps exist in current data or research?
5. Examples of best practice
6. Key recommendations and further work

Introduction

Individuals with disabilities can be targets of criminal actors and face various forms of exploitation, abuse, fraud (including identity fraud) and victimisation. There is a significant gap in comprehensive data and understanding of the specific ways organised crime exploits people with disabilities and the systemic factors that contribute to the vulnerability to abuse. This lack of insight hinders the development of effective policies and interventions to protect them.

This query, submitted by the Transnational Serious and Organised Crime Department, requested the Helpdesk to undertake research on the relationship between disability and organised crime overseas, at a global level. The aim is to identify any existing studies or reports on the topic, explore the impact of organised crime on individuals with disabilities, and assess whether there is further work or research required in this space to address the needs of people with disabilities who experience organised crime (e.g., access to justice and protection).

This research will be of interest internally to FCDO colleagues, as well as Home Office colleagues. This information will be used by the FCDO's Transnational Serious and Organised Crime Department to inform future policy, programming, and advocacy efforts. It

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

may also be shared with implementing partners and international stakeholders to strengthen inclusive approaches to SOC interventions.

This query answers the following four research questions:

- How are people with disabilities disproportionately affected by organised crime globally and what evidence exists to exemplify this?
 - What types of organised crime most commonly affect individuals with disabilities?
 - How do intersecting identities (e.g. gender, age, SOGIESC, displacement, poverty) compound the risks faced by people with disabilities?
- What gaps exist in current data or research?
- What are the best practices and lessons from different countries in supporting people with disabilities who have experienced organised crime, particularly in ensuring access to justice and long-term protection?
- What are the key recommendations and further work required to ensure disability inclusion in SOC responses or programmes?

Defining Organised Crime

There are varying views on the specific definition of organised crime, however, it is commonly agreed that organised crime is crime that is planned and coordinated criminal behaviour, conducted by individuals, groups, or networks that work on a continuing basis (ibid; [Department of Justice, n.d.](#)). Organised crime differs from other forms of criminal activity as it is organised and does not include random, unplanned individual criminal acts ([United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.](#)). Organised crime overlaps with other forms of crime, for example White-collar crime, however the distinction is that organised crime occurs as a continuing criminal enterprise that exists to profit primarily from illicit activity, whereas white-collar crime occurs as a deviation from legitimate business activity. Financial gain or profit is often the main motivation and responds to public demand for services. Organised crime can be maintained through corruption, and it may involve violence or the threat of violence.

[The International Criminal Police Organisation](#) (Interpol) (n.d.) have noted that organised criminal networks are a global business and can be involved in different types of criminal activities that span several countries, including trafficking in people, drugs, illicit goods, weapons, armed robbery, counterfeiting, money laundering, cyber-crime, fuel laundering, waste crime, tobacco and alcohol smuggling, fraud, sexual exploitation and abuse, and acquisitive crime (ibid; [Organised Crime Task Force, 2023](#)). These organised criminal activities are never static in the context of constant social, political and technological change globally, which creates new and different opportunities for organised criminals. The revenue from organised crime is estimated to be in the billions, and some organised crime groups (OCGs) have robust operating models, long-term strategies, hierarchies and strategic alliances to generate the maximum profit (closely resembling the operation of legitimate businesses in this respect). Organised crime is never victimless, and it affects individuals, communities, and businesses.

It is important to note that throughout this research there was a wide variety of resources that focused on Disability Hate Crime (DHC). Hate crimes disproportionately affect a victim or community as they are targeted because of a personal characteristic they have. DHC is therefore crime against people with disabilities (either at an individual or community level)

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

and can reinforce prejudice and discrimination. The UK [Crown Prosecution Service \(2022\)](#) defines DHC as *"Any incident / crime which is perceived by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice based on a person's disability or perceived disability"*. There is a distinction between DHC and crime committed against a person with disabilities, as the latter occurs because the offender may perceive a person with disabilities as vulnerable and not because the offender dislikes or hates people with disabilities. [The Crown Prosecution Service \(2022\)](#) has defined crime against a person with disabilities as *"Any crime in which disability is a factor, including the impact on the victim and where the perpetrator's perception that the victim was disabled was a determining factor in his or her decision to offend against the specific victim."* Examples can be 'mate crime' or 'befriending crime,' whereby the victim is groomed or befriended and subjected to financial or sexual exploitation or made to commit criminal offences. This topic will be explored more throughout this report. This distinction has been highlighted given the recurrence of literature focusing on DHC rather than Organised Crime against people with disabilities.

Methodology

This research took place between August to October 2025. The research team included one lead researcher based in the UK and one senior technical expert who provided oversight throughout the process. The research involved the following pieces of qualitative research:

- > **Primary research:** This included key informant interviews with two experts who support victim services. These participants were based in Europe. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and lasted around 1 hour each.
- > **Secondary research:** This included an in-depth literature review on disability and organised crime globally. The research team identified published and unpublished resources on the topic, evidence reviews, policy documents and other analyses, and used a mixture of grey and academic literature. Following standard Helpdesk practice, the secondary data had to fulfil the following criteria to be included:
 - **Focus:** Global level data and evidence, including country case studies, on disability and organised crime, in line with the research questions. Key word searches included the abovementioned forms of organised crime, such as trafficking, drugs, cyber-crime, sexual exploitation.
 - **Time period:** 2015 – present
 - **Language:** English
 - **Publication Status:** Publicly available and unpublished material shared with the research team by the Transnational Serious and Organised Crime Department and KII participants.
 - **Geographical focus:** Global

A human rights-based and social model of disability approach has been taken for this research. UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognise that 'disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society, on an equal basis with others' (CRPD Preamble (e)). Moving away from the medical and charity approach towards disability, a human rights-based approach recognises that impairments are a natural form of human diversity, and that people living with a wide range of

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

impairments can be found in all contexts globally. Impairments can be physical, mental, intellectual and sensory. The approach understands that barriers in society are disabling and focuses on removing the barriers to promote opportunities for participation. A rights-based approach emphasises that all people have a right to access to safety and basic services, such as health, sanitation, clean water, shelter and education on an equal basis ([United Nations SDG, 2024](#)).

Limitations

- > Due to the nature of this research, it was challenging to find experts on the topic, and there was limited willingness to participate in the research, so it was difficult to arrange more than two key informant interviews. As a result, the researchers had to rely mainly on evidence and findings from the literature review as well as the limited interviews conducted.
- > There are major gaps in the literature on how people with disabilities are affected by organised crime, particularly in relation to specific types of disabilities, different types of crime, quantitative data and statistics. Additionally, it was highlighted in the literature and KII that there is very little knowledge about how organised crime affects people with disabilities, especially psychosocial disabilities. Most evidence identified through search engines was related to UK statistics and crimes, including disability hate crimes. Thus, careful attention was paid to ensure that other country and regional examples were included in the search terms.
- > With exception of human trafficking and sexual exploitation, the literature was largely silent on issues of gender, social inclusion and intersectionality.

Evidence on how people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by organised crime

This research has shown that limited data, evidence and research is currently available on the intersection between disability and organised crime globally. However, that does not mean that organised crime against people with disabilities does not exist. In the UK, a Crime survey for England and Wales found that 1 in 4 adults with disabilities aged 16 and over experienced crime (including fraud and computer misuse), compared with one in five adults without a disability. One in seven adults with disabilities experienced domestic abuse compared to one in twenty adults without a disability in 2019, with women with disabilities (17.3%, 5.7% respectively) being twice as likely to have experienced domestic abuse and sexual violence than women without a disability (7%, 3% respectively) ([Office for National Statistics, 2019](#)). The [European Council \(2025\)](#) have also noted that one in five people with disabilities (17%) are victims of violence across the European Union (EU), with women, elderly and children at greater risk of suffering from violence and abuse within the home or care institutions. While these statistics are not specifically linked to organised crime, they start to paint a picture of how people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by crime and violence, whether organised or not.

Why are people with disabilities targets of organised crime?

It is important to understand why people with disabilities are disproportionately targeted and affected by organised criminals, compared to people without disabilities. **Attitudes towards people with disabilities are a major contributing factor, as people often perceive people with disabilities as vulnerable, in need of protection, or as 'easy targets' to exploit** ([Macdonald et al., 2021](#)). Research from the University of Nottingham found that

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

people with cognitive impairments, such intellectual disabilities, dementia, brain injuries, and autism spectrum disorders, had increased vulnerability and risk of being exploited, particularly sexually, financially and criminally. The research also found complex and developmental trauma in earlier life was frequently evident among victims of exploitation with disabilities. The research showed that in the UK-based Safeguarding Adult Reviews (SARs), which included exploitation concerns between 2017 and 2022, approximately 96% of the adults involved had some form of cognitive impairment. Financial exploitation and 'mate crime' were the most common forms of exploitation, with 28% of practitioners responding that they witness exploitation at least once a week ([Gardner et al., 2024](#)). Mate crime is defined as a situation in which a person or group of people befriend a person with disabilities with the sole purpose of exploiting, humiliating or taking control of their assets. Such crimes exploit the experiences of loneliness and isolation often felt by people with disabilities. For example, [Macdonald et al. \(2021\)](#) explored how people with disabilities are at more risk of their homes being occupied (i.e., 'cuckooed') by local perpetrators and/or county lines organised criminal groups due to social isolation, loneliness and lack of community services – all of which create a space where the exploitation of people with disabilities can flourish.

Social drivers of exclusion increase the vulnerability to, and risk of, exploitation for people with cognitive impairments, including limited or absent family support, harmful social networks, trauma and isolation, alongside history of previous abuse or bullying. People with cognitive impairments are often exploited in many ways, hence multiple forms of exploitation and abuse often co-exist and overlap ([Gardner et al., 2024](#)). While the most common forms of exploitation are financial or 'mate crime' as mentioned above, other forms can co-occur, including sexual, labour or criminal exploitation. People with cognitive impairments are also at higher risk of everyday exploitation, such as being targeted for phone or online scams (ibid). A study in Japan found that 83.7% victims in cases of scams and fraud were elderly or older adults. The study found cognitive decline has been identified as a risk factor for vulnerability to scams and fraud, with gender also playing a role, with vulnerable men underreporting actual cases. Additionally, older Japanese women, often housewives managing household finances and available at home during the day, are more exposed to phone and door-to-door scams ([Ueno et al., 2021](#)).

A key informant noted that people with psychosocial disabilities who have been institutionalised, and who are now being deinstitutionalised by policy frameworks, are at higher risk of being affected by organised crime. Across the European Union, hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities, mental health conditions, older people or abandoned or vulnerable children have been institutionalised, meaning they live in large segregated residential institutions. These institutions were originally created to provide care, food and shelter, but evidence has shown that they cannot ensure person-centred services or appropriate support, and that physical separation from society, communities and families severely limits the capacity and preparedness of formerly institutionalised people to fully participate in wider societal life. Additionally, due to documented human rights violations and poor treatment within the institutions, the UNCRPD has recognised the rights of people with disabilities and has outlined in Article 19 that independent living and community inclusion of people with disabilities is essential for their wellbeing, which was ratified by the EU in 2011 ([IPOL, 2024](#)). Thus, the EU has pushed for deinstitutionalisation through relevant policy frameworks, such as the EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030 (which aims to provide community-based services, housing and assistive technologies) and the European

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

Parliament resolutions in 2022, urging members to develop deinstitutionalisation strategies and use EU funds for community-based alternatives ([European Parliament, 2024](#)). Similarly, Member States of the World Health Organisation South East Asia Region in 2022 adopted the Paro Declaration which commits members to achieve universal access to people-centred mental health care and services and plan for deinstitutionalisation through strengthening capacity of primary care services and community mental health networks ([World Health Organisation, 2024](#)).

Unfortunately, however, there have been many challenges, such as “inadequate funding, outdated infrastructure, continuous national policies of institutionalisation, stigma, misallocation of EU funds and insufficient support for families” – all of which means that people with disabilities will face numerous challenges and barriers during the process of deinstitutionalisation. Additionally, a key informant noted that in Moldova (but not unique to Moldova), people with disabilities who have been deinstitutionalised experience higher risks of trafficking. In particular, in the case of people with disabilities who have been institutionalised their whole lives and have been placed into family foster care, there have been reports that these foster carers use them as slaves, including as sexual slaves or work slaves. This was the case for a woman with disabilities in Moldova who had been deinstitutionalised and subjected by her caregiver to servitude on a private farm, as well as sexual exploitation and abuse, without the Moldovan authorities being aware of this abuse. Once she did escape, she faced with multiple barriers to justice, including disputes with the Moldovan police, prosecutors and judges who insisted noting illegal happened and questioned her credibility, justifying their position using disability and gender stereotypes ([Validity, n.d.](#)). This case was taken to the European Court of Human Rights, which found fault with Moldova’s approach to deinstitutionalisation (where people with disabilities can be placed with families without adequate safeguards and support systems), exposing persons with disabilities to all forms of abuse, trafficking and exploitation ([Validity, n.d.](#); Key Informant).

Poverty plays an important role in explaining why people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by organised crime. The [World Health Organisation \(2023\)](#) estimates that there are 1.3 billion people with disabilities in the world, representing 16% of the world's population. 80% of people with a disability live in a low- and middle-income country (LMIC). It is estimated that 20% of the world’s poorest people have a disability, with evidence showing that disability and poverty are mutually reinforcing ([Fraser and Lee, n.d.](#); [Banks, Kuper and Polack, 2017](#)). People with disabilities living in poverty face additional disadvantages and challenges (compared to people without disabilities), including discrimination, lower education rates, lack of economic opportunities and achievements, and poorer health outcomes. Research and data widely indicate that poverty, deprivation and social exclusion are strongly linked to organised crime, i.e., these key social factors and challenges affecting people with disabilities put them at higher risk of exploitation by criminal networks. This challenging social environment for many people with disabilities increases their burden of risk, including vulnerability to recruitment by criminal groups and risk of exploitation of financial difficulties (such as loans with high interest rates).

Organised crime perpetuates poverty by diverting billions away from the formal economy, deepening the levels of corruption, hindering economic growth, and controlling and coercing communities by exploiting their vulnerabilities ([UN, 2022](#); [Hamilton-Smith, 2018](#); [Council of the EU, 2025](#)). Given that 20% of the world’s poorest people have a disability and 80% live in a LMIC, it is evident that people with disabilities living in poverty are disproportionately at

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

risk of being victims of organised crime. This risk is strongly related to a complex web of intersecting disadvantages that can be exploited by criminal actors, as well as to the vicious cycles of *disability-poverty* and *poverty-organised crime*.

In contrast to the experience of people with disabilities as victims of organised crime, on piece of recent research ([Costa 2023](#)) explored why and how people with disabilities can also be offenders themselves. Costa explored the relationship between education for children with cognitive impairments and risk of incarceration, noting that people with any form of disability are at a higher risk of getting involved with the Criminal Justice System as victims and offenders, compared to people without disabilities. People with cognitive impairments who commit a crime (whether aware or not of its criminal nature) often do so because of first-hand experiences of discrimination and other environmental factors that deepen their vulnerabilities. The study identified key factors that increase an individual's propensity and vulnerability to committing crime or reoffending, including:

- Lack of support networks (including staff within schools and prisons).
- Lack of knowledge in police systems about cognitive impairments and the behaviours they can trigger.
- Lack of sense of belonging.
- Discrimination and gang grooming.

If people with cognitive impairments have inadequate or deficient support systems, they are at higher risk of extreme exposure to gang grooming, alongside higher risks of reoffending due to lack of support (especially life skills training and development) within prisons.

One study explored the concept of 'domestic colonisation' to conceptualise how people with disabilities experience continuous forms of victimisation in the locality of their own homes, through hate crimes, hate relationships, mate crimes and 'cuckooing' ([Macdonald, Clayton and Donovan, 2025](#)). The study indicates that people with disabilities are frequently targeted by neighbours or community members, not only because of their disability, but also because of other intersecting factors such as race, sexuality and socio-economic status ([Donovan, Macdonald and Clayton, 2024](#)). The study introduces a dis/ableist criminology that highlights how structural, cultural, and relational factors enable crime and victimisation against disabled individuals. The article argues that ableist cultures within criminal justice practices portray people with disabilities as inherently vulnerable and less credible, while institutional disablism reinforces their marginalisation. Consequently, inadequate police responses allow offenders to view disabled people's homes as legitimate sites of abuse. The inability to identify these incidents as part of a wider pattern of dis/ableist abuse—rooted in structural and cultural norms—forces people with disabilities to endure ongoing cycles of victimisation, while offenders remain unpunished and undeterred.

What types of organised crime most commonly affect individuals with disabilities?

From the literature and KII, this research found that people with disabilities are most commonly affected by a range of different types of organised crime, including financial exploitation, sexual exploitation, scams and frauds, gang grooming, benefit fraud, human trafficking and forced labour. This section is going to explore each type of crime and why people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by these types of organised crime.

Caregivers can exploit their position and relationship with a person with disabilities

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

and commit organised crime against them. As shown above, people with disabilities can be viewed as ‘easy targets’ because of their care and support needs, and some view their impairments as an inhibiting their ability to protect and defend themselves. Individuals who provide regular care to people with disabilities that are dependent on others for support (for example, with healthcare needs or general day-to-day tasks) may also take advantage their position as a caregiver and exploit people with disabilities in a multitude of ways. The unequal power dynamic between people with disabilities and their caregiver may also be exploited, for example, if someone is being abused or exploited by the caregiver, they may be unwilling to speak out or access justice because of their reliance on the caregiver to meet their needs ([Preventing Exploitation Toolkit, n.d.](#)). The risk of such abuse or exploitation can be exacerbated by the isolation experienced by people with disabilities, presenting fewer opportunities to disclose any harm or exploitation, alongside possible lack of understanding or awareness that they are being exploited. People with communicative impairments may have difficulty in communicating their concerns for fear they will not be believed.

Financial fraud is considered as one of the fastest growing types of abuse against people with disabilities who are particularly vulnerable. In most cases, acts of financial exploitation or fraud against people with disabilities are committed by someone known to the victim (aside from scams that are often perpetrated by strangers targeting a wide range of individuals online, by phone or other means). The perpetrators could be a family member, caregiver or another close associate, exploiting the victim’s trust to gain access to their finances. [Special Needs Alliance \(2019\)](#) note that “this can take many forms, from convincing them to extract cash from an ATM, to manipulating the to grant them financial power of attorney, to outright theft of valuables and other assets”, accomplishing this through deception or threat. The Alliance’s article highlights numerous cases of trusted individuals who have exploited the legal and fiduciary responsibilities granted to them, especially when a financial power of attorney is granted to them in situations where an individual cannot handle making economic decisions by themselves. In some cases, people with disabilities have been manipulated into signing a power of attorney without full understanding of what it means. A key informant also discussed the issues with social benefit fraud, where organised criminals can take control of benefit payments on behalf of claimants who cannot manage their cash benefits themselves.

People with physical impairments may be targeted by organised crime groups, who may force them into positions where they beg on streets, because they are perceived as invoking more sympathy among passersby. [Eurojust \(2022\)](#) released information that judicial and law enforcement authorities in Romania, Hungary and Germany had successfully dismantled a criminal network that recruited people with physical and psychosocial impairments, transporting them abroad and forcing them into street begging. The Organised Crime Group (OCG) specialised in trafficking people in Romania and Hungary in 2017, misleading people with disabilities and other vulnerable people with fake job opportunities in other EU countries. The OCG had their ID documents and money removed and were accommodated in empty houses without sanitary facilities or running water. The OCG only supplied these trafficked people with large amounts of alcohol and little food. **Organised criminals can groom or befriend people with disabilities and enticing them to commit minor criminal offences.** This includes crimes such as shoplifting, using or selling the victim’s medication, handling stolen goods, forcing victims to transport drugs nationally or internationally, and taking over their accommodation (‘cuckooing’) to commit further offences such as taking or selling drugs ([Crown Prosecution](#)

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

[Service, 2022](#)).

A key informant noted that organised criminals befriend people with disabilities with disabilities and encourage them to put their trust in them. They can do this using social media or dating apps, presenting their relationship with a person with disabilities initially as romantic, but then subsequently sexually exploiting them.

[Amborski et al. \(2021, p1331\)](#) describe sexual exploitation as including:

- Forced or alcohol/drug-facilitated penetration of a victim (rape),
- Forced or alcohol/drug-facilitated incidents in which the victim is made to penetrate a perpetrator or someone else (ordered rape),
- Non-physically pressured unwanted penetration (i.e., being worn down by someone who repeatedly asked for sex or showed they were unhappy,
- Feeling pressured by being lied to, believing promises that are untrue,
- Having someone threaten to end a relationship or spread rumours,
- Sexual pressure due to someone using their influence or authority),
- Unwanted sexual contact (i.e., having sexual body parts fondled or grabbed and being kissed in a sexual way),
- Noncontact unwanted sexual experience (i.e., someone exposing his or her sexual body parts, flashing, or masturbating in front of the victim,
- Someone making a victim look at or participate in sexual photos or videos or someone harassing the victim in a public place in a way that made the victim feel unsafe.

One of our key informants noted that other forms of sexual exploitation have involved uploading to social media of photos and videos of people with disabilities being forced into sexual activities. They also noted that people with psychosocial impairments are more at risk of this kind of crime, as are women with disabilities and children with disabilities and refugees. A meta-analysis on sexual violence against people with disabilities found that people with disabilities were at significantly higher risk of sexual victimisation than people without disabilities (odds ratio = 2.27), with significantly higher risk levels among adults with disabilities, as compared to minors. Sensory impairments were associated with the highest risk of victimisation, and this risk was found to be significantly higher in African countries compared with all others ([Amborski et al., 2021](#)).

[DeafKidz International \(2021\)](#) has compiled a situational analysis on the sexual exploitation and abuse of deaf and disabled children online. The analysis identified three key factors that contribute to the vulnerability of children with disabilities, including:

- The dependency of these children on carers, which may often involve intimate activities such as toileting and bathing.
- Risk related to institutionalised residential care, subjecting children to rules and regulations that require them to comply with instructions.
- The issue of such children being unable to articulate their needs or fears which is significant issue for deaf children.

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

Poverty, lack of education and awareness, loneliness and isolation (because of disabilities and failure to protect children with disabilities adequately) are all key contributors to the sexual exploitation of children with disabilities. Deaf children or children with communication difficulties may not be equipped with skills, language and vocabulary to self-advocate and self-represent, to say no to unwanted contact, to know what is acceptable and not acceptable, and to know how to report incidents if they occur. Thus, children with disabilities are 1.7 times more likely to be sexually exploited than children without disabilities, and further evidence suggests that 50% of deaf boys and girls are sexually abused before adulthood compared to 25% of hearing females and 10% of hearing males. With lack of child protection systems and services (especially in the Global South), the recording and reporting of sexual exploitation remains very low (ibid).

People with disabilities, including children with disabilities are also subject to sexual technology-facilitated organised crime. A key informant noted how people with disabilities can fall victim to sexual exploitation through distribution of sexual abuse materials being spread online. Perpetrators are harnessing new ways to use technology to harm children, especially children with disabilities, LGBTQI+ children, indigenous children and unaccompanied children ([FCDO, 2024](#)). For example, the use of artificial intelligence has become a new threat to children's safety, with children's faces being used to create AI-generated sexual abuse material. The key informant noted that they found some perpetrators or consumers of sexual abuse materials prefer to exploit children with obvious disabilities. While in some cases of online sexual content creation it may not be actual footage of a child who is being sexually abused, nonetheless organised criminals are still profiting off the exploitation of children by using deep-fake materials and still causing trauma to the child whose face has been used.

People with disabilities (especially children with disabilities) can also fall victim to sextortion by sextortion scammers. People with disabilities are more likely to be manipulated, coerced or pressured into sexting than those without a disability ([National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, 2021](#)). Victims may then be forced into sharing explicit images of themselves. Numerous reports have shown how sextortion scammers blackmail such victims,

Box 1: Case study examples across five European countries

Rocha (2025) provided examples from five countries across Europe on the different types of violence identified, which can be classified as a form of organised crime.

- > Bulgaria: Domestic, physical, psychological, economic, financial, sexual violence all identified, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, segregation and complete isolation, being shackled, neglected and abuse, coercion and exploitation into illegal drugs.
- > Portugal: Financial, psychological, domestic and institutional violence, sexual abuse
- > Slovakia: Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, financial exploitation and coercion, discrimination and stigmatisation
- > Lithuania: Several cases of medical and institutional abuse
- > Hungary: Women and children with disabilities experienced instances of gender-based violence such as sexual abuse, physical and verbal, within institutions and public spaces.

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

demanding that they send money to the scammers to stop them sharing the image online (see [McCubbin, 2024](#)). Unfortunately, this has led to individuals taking their own lives because of the constant state of trauma, stress and anxiety this causes – a growing concern among young people ([Tidy, 2024](#)). Investigative journalists have tracked some sextortion scammers to Nigeria ([BBC, 2025](#)).

People with disabilities can be exploited sexually and financially through human trafficking, which is a form of organised crime, because they are perceived as vulnerable and appealing targets for organised criminals. Trafficking means transporting, recruiting or harbouring people for the purpose of exploitation, and is a process of enslaving people. People with disabilities are more vulnerable to trafficking, often due to inadequate social safety networks. People with disabilities can be trafficked for many different reasons, including forced begging, forced labour and sex work. Studies have found that traffickers exploit specific needs of their victims with disabilities, such as their economic, therapeutic, rehabilitative and social needs ([Peterka-Benton and Bowman, 2025](#)). People with intellectual disabilities are deliberately targeted, with studies finding that girls with disabilities experience higher incidence of commercial sexual exploitation compared to peers in relation to the sex trafficking of minors.

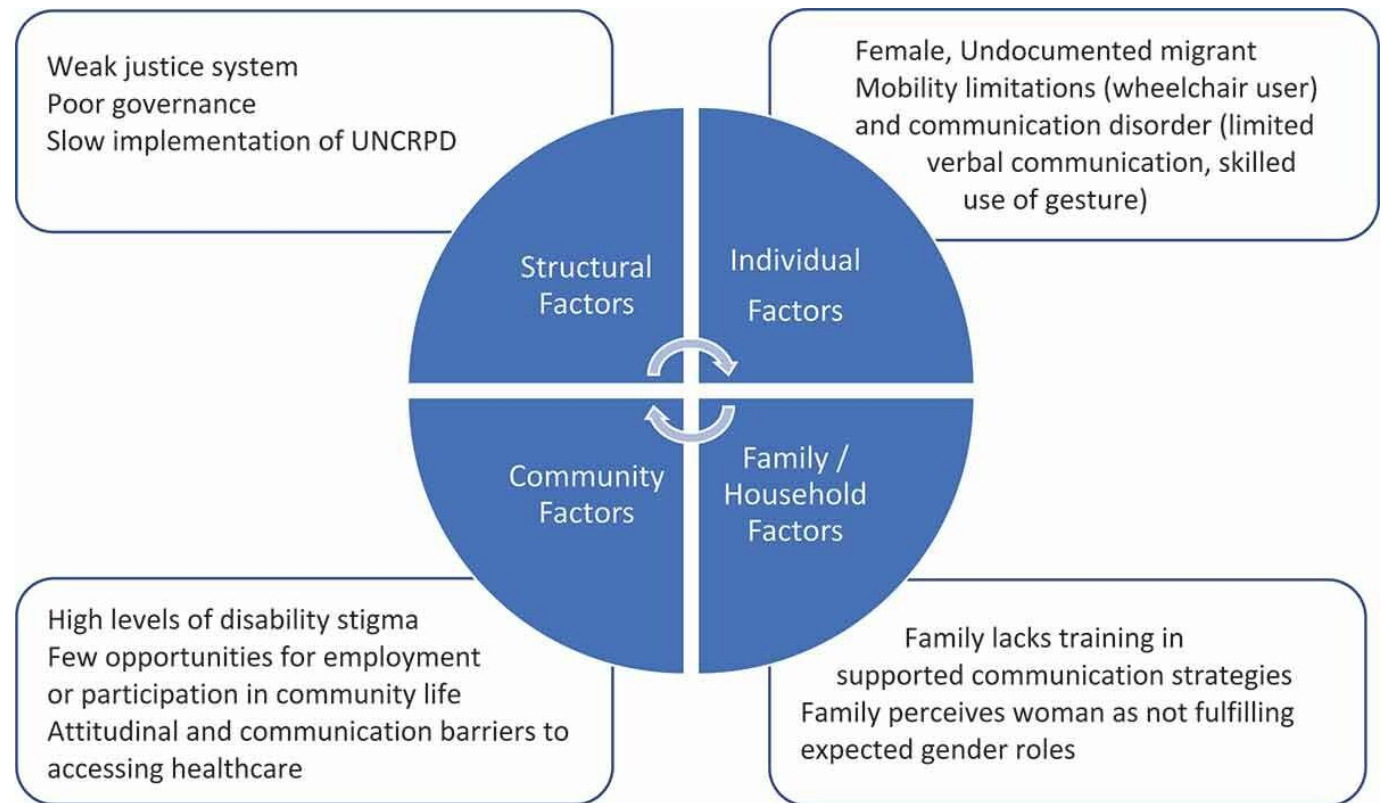
A key informant said that, in their experience, people with disabilities at higher risk of trafficking (and especially of trafficking with forced prostitution) include those from a migrant background, children, women and people living in poverty. ([Mohapatra, 2023](#)). [Child Hope \(n.d.\)](#) have noted how children whose movement or communication is impaired are at higher risk of exploitation (through trafficking and modern-day slavery). [Mohapatra \(2023\)](#) estimated that 2.64 million people with disabilities were living in modern slavery in 2021, of which 1.47 million were in forced labour and 1.17 million in forced marriage, with the highest number of people in forced labour being in Asia and the Pacific regions. It was also estimated that of the 1.47 million in forced labour, 0.93 million are exploited in the private sector, 0.33 million in forced commercial sexual exploitation, and 0.2 million in forced labour imposed by state.

[Mohapatra \(2023\)](#) highlighted case studies of the linkage between trafficking, forced labour, forced marriage and disability. One article found that a 24-year-old man was kidnapped by a begging mafia, who then injected his eyes to make him blind, cut off his fingers, and assaulted him to create other visible injuries – all to make him a suitable beggar. The case study also showed how the man and other beggars were only given two chapatis a day to ensure they stayed skinny so as to induce pity among passersby. Another case study by the Ann Craft Trust, which works with people with intellectual disabilities, found there was a serious problem of British Asian people with intellectual disabilities being forced into marriage without giving proper consent, with around 10% of cases involving people with intellectual disabilities being reported to the government's Forced Marriage Unit.

The [International Organisation for Migration \(2019\)](#) have developed a diagram to show the causes for increased trafficking of women with disabilities, stemming from a mixture of family, community, individual and structural factors (see below). The first level of the model looks at basic identity traits like gender, age, and ethnicity, as well as factors related to physical, sexual, or mental health. Disabilities and related challenges also appear at this level. The second level focuses on the household and family, and the third level looks at community factors. These levels show how relationships with family and community members can either protect someone or increase their risk of being exploited. The fourth level deals with larger structural issues (such as the economy, politics, and social

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

norms) that may encourage violence or discrimination against certain groups. All these levels are connected, and together they shape the different risks that can make a person more vulnerable to human trafficking.



Access to justice

As shown above, people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by organised crime because they are at higher risk of various forms of crime, linked to criminals' perceptions of people with disabilities and how the environment allows for people with disabilities to be exploited. **People with disabilities are also disproportionately impacted by organised crime because of how they access justice if they are victimised.** Significant numbers of research studies have found that people with disabilities' access to, satisfaction with, and trust in the justice system is weak. A 2023 Victim Survey in the UK found that nearly 45% of crime victims with disabilities were dissatisfied with the police response to their experiences of crime and were also less likely to report crimes again in the UK ([Burch and Stamp, 2025](#)).

Globally, there are a multitude of barriers to accessing the criminal justice system, but barriers to access are more acute for people with disabilities. The barriers within policing include:

- A significant lack of training and awareness for criminal justice professionals about working effectively with people with disabilities and more responsive handling of their cases.
- Inaccessible communication and information sharing methods.
- Procedural barriers relating to how people with disabilities are expected to engage

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

with the justice processes.

The barriers within the court system include:

- A lack of appropriate adjustments.
- Delays in accessing appropriate support such as intermediaries and translators.
- Processes that dismiss people with disabilities to not be believed (ibid).

Victims who have hearing impairments are also faced with communicative barriers when accessing support and justice. For example, there can be difficulty getting interpreters, and if they are available, the reliability of their interpretation of legal jargon can be problematic ([Bryne et al., 2021](#)). These barriers are compounded by intersecting identities, such as ethnicity and sexual orientation, that bring other constraints and challenges ([Rocha, 2025](#)).

This research has highlighted how women and children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to different forms of gender-based violence through organised crime, especially sexual violence, which will often go underreported or unnoticed. An international synthesis ([Rocha, 2025](#)) on ending violence and ensuring inclusion found that victims with disabilities struggle to identify abuse because of the lack of accessible information. In consequence, they depend on someone else to access information and resources. This report has also noted that often carers can be the perpetrators of organised crime, further limiting access to justice and support. For those who have been able to get access to the justice system, the study found women with disabilities and professionals presented a general distrust in authorities and the justice system because of deeply embedded discrimination, stereotypes, ableism and negative experiences when reporting situations of violence.

People with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities face numerous barriers to accessing the justice system, and evidence suggests that most justice systems are designed from an ‘ableist’ perspective. In most situations, a lack of trauma-informed mental health care and psychological support significantly impacts the level of trauma for victims with disabilities. Other barriers include: “communication difficulties, lack of accessible information on their legal procedures and rights, inadequate training of professionals, legal capacity restrictions, and an absence of procedures to assess and provide procedural accommodations to victims with disabilities” (ibid, p21). Legal definitions and practices often mean people with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities are unable to testify about the violence perpetrated against them (for example, the use of ‘witness capacity’ rules, which refer to a person’s legal ability to give evidence in court and provide intelligible answers). However, some countries have reflected on this, and following a trial in the Canadian Supreme Court, the Canada Evidence Act’s requirements have been revisited to lower the previously ambiguous threshold of cognitive capacities in 2015, to ensure people with intellectual disabilities are able to access justice by being able to act as a witness and testify against their perpetrator ([Beaudry, 2020](#)). However, while this has happened and other countries have also adapted legislation and policies to provide more support to victims with disabilities, the implementation of these is often erratic or weak ([Rocha, 2025](#), Key informant). For victims who are able to access justice (especially in the court setting), most justice systems are not practically set up for people with disabilities, and systems do not provide guidance to victims on how adequately to give evidence (Key informant).

Most justice systems do not respond adequately to victims with disabilities, and people with disabilities are faced with other barriers. For example, [Rocha 2025](#) found

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

slow and inefficient responses by the authorities that minimise the significance of crime against people with disabilities. Many studies have examined how justice system responses varied across types of crime and impairment groups. Neurodivergent victims reporting crimes (including interpersonal violence, assault, property damage or theft) often felt police responded slowly ([Koffer Miller et al., 2022](#)). In fact, [Williams and Jobe \(2025\)](#) found that women with disabilities, in particular neurodivergent women and/or women who have intellectual impairments, are more likely to be perceived as unreliable and a nuisance by police. In addition, the negative perceptions and assumptions about disability throughout the justice system often means that people with disabilities are denied credibility or alternative approaches to the justice system. There is also a lack of cross-collaboration between the relevant agencies or services, often resulting in more red tape and a lack of support for people with disabilities.

People with disabilities who have been or are institutionalised are often subjected to various forms of abuse from their caregivers within the institutions. People with disabilities who are institutionalised often face severe barriers to accessing justice, especially when they are abused by their caregivers. Many are deprived of their legal capacity and, therefore, cannot file complaints or access criminal courts on their own behalf. Instead, they are assigned guardians who may have little to no contact with them or may even be complicit in maintaining the abusive conditions, creating a serious conflict of interest. Because these individuals rely entirely on their caregivers or guardians for communication and access to justice mechanisms, their reports of abuse are often silenced, ignored, or dismissed. This results in a vicious cycle in which abuse continues unchecked, and victims remain trapped in institutions where their human rights are systematically violated and where they have no effective legal recourse to seek protection or accountability (Key Informant).

In Nigeria, people with disabilities struggle to access fair treatment in the justice system, which is made worse by poverty, constant discrimination from their communities, weak justice systems and poor government policies. A 2021 study looked at the different forms of discrimination and injustice faced by people with disabilities, from lack of basic services to harmful cultural attitudes, exclusion in religion and education, and the government's failure to act. Using the Therapeutic Day Care Centre (TDCC) as a case study, the researcher interviewed staff and used both new and existing data to understand these challenges. The findings highlight the urgent need to meet the basic rights and needs of people with disabilities, and call on the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) to take stronger action to fix legal shortcomings and improve access to justice for this vulnerable group ([Umegbolu, 2021](#)).

What gaps exist in current data or research?

The literature and KIs highlighted large gaps within the data and research on how people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by organised crime. While there is a decent amount of literature focusing on sexual exploitation, there is limited data and research on other forms of organised crime, including: how intersectionality affects the impacts on people with disabilities; different types of disabilities; and country-specific and global data. Some literature has highlighted evidence gaps on sexual exploitation and abuse of children with disabilities online, meaning it is not currently possible to accurately know the level of incidence and prevalence ([DeafKidz, 2021](#)). There are also gaps in country-specific and

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

global data on how people with disabilities can or cannot access justice – most data and evidence relate to countries such as Sweden, the UK, US, or Iceland, rather than countries in the Global South.

Examples of Best Practice

This section provides examples of best practice by specific countries or organisations that support people with disabilities who have been affected by organised crime. As mentioned above, there are still significant gaps on this topic, with a large part of the evidence and literature focusing on support to victims with disabilities of hate crime. However, some examples include:

- > In terms of collaborating across agencies to improve people with disabilities access and engagement with the criminal justice system, Iceland has Rights Protection Officers (RPOs), who provide essential support for the protection of the rights of D/deaf and disabled people. RPOs can support best communication practices among police officers and people with disabilities to access procedural and reasonable adjustments in court ([Gjecaj et al., 2024](#)). While external support organisations can provide support, they may lack the capacity and resources to deliver support effectively..
- > The [Anna Craft Trust](#) has created a training pack that is accessible to all people, supporting people with intellectual disabilities with their financial management, to reduce their vulnerability to financial exploitation. This resource was developed as part of a project that worked closely with organisations, carers, and service users to gather evidence on the challenges faced by people with intellectual disabilities and their carers. The pack addresses potential risks of personal budgeting and highlights how to look for signs of financial exploitation.
- > The [Crown Prosecution Service](#) has developed a guide to support for people with disabilities and witnesses of crime, providing information about the types of support available, where to access, and how the CPS approach crime and support people with disabilities. This resource is UK-specific.
- > [Validity](#) has a project called Voices for Justice that focuses on creating practical tools for people with disabilities who are victims of crime, helping to ensure that they can participate actively in the criminal justice system. The project aims to:
 - Enhance access for beneficiaries to their rights under the Victims' Rights Directive and related *acquis* through developing an evidence base and set of multi-disciplinary recommendations on access to information and effective communication in criminal justice processes for people with disabilities who are victims of crime.
 - Improve access to supports and accommodations for beneficiaries to communicate effectively and be understood, as well as to provide professionals in the justice system with improved skills and practical tools to communicate effectively with beneficiaries.
 - Promote on-going cross-disciplinary cooperation on information provision and communication by victims of crime with disabilities across criminal justice disciplines.
 - Disseminate the new knowledge and materials to key target audiences in each project jurisdiction and across Europe.
 - Contribute to the on-going consistent and coherent development, review and implementation of the Victims' Rights Directive, the UN CRPD and the European Charter of

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

Fundamental Rights.” (Validity, 2019, n.p.).

The project is working across seven EU countries, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

- > As an organisation, Validity is a creative legal organisation dedicated to advancing the human rights of people with intellectual disabilities and psychosocial disabilities. It does this through focusing on strategic litigation, advocacy, research and capacity-building, and using tailored approaches to address entrenched human rights violations. It works across Central and Eastern Europe and Africa. Examples of other projects include:
 - Enabling Inclusion and Access to Justice for Defendants with Intellectual and Psychosocial Disabilities | Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain (September 2022 – August 2024)
 - Changing the Accessibility of Tools for Victims | Belgium, Croatia, Slovenia, Spain, Romania (July 2022 – June 2024)
 - Child-Friendly Justice: Developing the concept of social court practices | Bulgaria, Romania, Italy (July 2020 – June 2022)
 - The Right to Legal Capacity in Kenya (2015-2016)
 - Mental Health and Human Rights in Uganda (2015-2016)
 - Human Rights and Mental Health in Zambia (2014)
- > [Victim Support Europe](#) works to advance victim support services around the world, to ensure the most marginalised people have access to safe and reliable victim support services. VSE supports organisations across the EU and around the world that work in victim services. While VSE does not offer direct assistance to victims, it operates a referral system to connect victims with national support services. VSE serves as an advocacy organisation, working to influence policy and raise awareness among policymakers and the public about the needs and rights of crime victims. Together with its partners, it has developed a new podcast called [Podcast Litigate – Collaborate, Innovate, Advocate for Disability Rights](#), which explores the legal battles that many people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities face across the EU and how the law can be used as a tool for justice. VSE has also provided a wide range of training on championing inclusion in strategic litigation to advance the rights of people with disabilities.
- > In South Africa, the national Victim Empowerment Programme and related policy frameworks aim to provide trauma-informed services and referrals for victims (including people with disabilities) through coordinated government and civil society networks. The Department of Social Development Victim Empowerment Programme supports service providers in the Western Cape and offers a variety of service to support victims, including emotional and practical support, management of trauma, referring to professional services where necessary, provision of court support services, promoting rights and responsibilities of victims through advocacy and supporting victims to understand their rights ([Western Cape Government, n.d.](#)).
- > In Uganda, there are national anti-trafficking frameworks and action plans that include victim protection measures (trauma-informed care, victim identification and referral). There are also international and local NGOs working in Uganda on trafficking rescue and survivor support include activities targeting vulnerable groups. Children with disabilities are considered throughout a Model National Response for preventing and tackling child sexual exploitation

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

and abuse. Through this initiative, children are provided end-to-end victim support, including planned integrated and multi-stakeholder support; inclusive services that are sensitive to age, gender, sexuality, disability and ethnicity; and psychological support across dedicated law enforcement, frontline workers reviewing images and child protection workforces.

Key recommendations and further work

- > **More data and evidence are required to develop robust and responsive mechanisms that will support people with disabilities who have been impacted by organised crime.** This research has shown that there are still large gaps in the data and evidence, especially concerning the following areas: the ways that people with different types of impairments may be affected; where across the world it is most prevalent; to what extent people with disabilities are being affected and unable to access justice; and other forms of organised crime that impact people with disabilities. It is therefore recommended that more resources be put towards more in-depth research to fill these gaps. This data and evidence should be disaggregated by gender, age, disability type, SOGIESC, and other identity characteristics, in order to provide a full intersectional understanding on the topic.
- > **Provide disability-specific training or allocate funding to train to all professionals who engage with people with disabilities who have been affected by organised crime.** This training should focus on their role and responsibilities for meeting the needs of people with disabilities, as well as how to work with OPDs and provide appropriately focused solutions and support to people with disabilities. Such training would enable them to feel more confident in their abilities to support people with disabilities. Training would also support attitudinal change within the justice system, for example, with police officers who may not handle a case appropriately or safely. This research has shown that people with disabilities often feel dismissed and poorly treated by police officers, due to police perceptions of people with disabilities being 'nuisance callers' or are contacting the police in error ([Inclusion London, 2021](#); [McCulloch et al., 2021](#); [Wilkin, 2024](#)). Provision of disability awareness training (including content on bias and discrimination training, how people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by organised crime, and how professionals should handle cases) would be a significant step forward in the provision of better and more inclusive services to people with disabilities.
- > **Following disability-specific training, justice professionals should be equipped with knowledge on how to detect whether a person may have a disability at the very beginning of any reporting process.** A key informant on this query noted that disabilities are not often detected at the start of the reporting process and the responsible officers lack training or understanding on how to detect a disability and then tailor the responses to this across many justice systems globally. The above-mentioned training should equip all justice professionals to detect disabilities at the start of the process and ensure that any accommodations be made, including hiring disability-specific justice experts, ensuring accessible information is provided, and not dismissing claims based on disability-based stereotypes.
- > **Work closely with OPDs, especially organisations that support victims with disabilities, who focus on a specific impairments and work with different social services.** While OPDs may not be specifically focused on legislative activities, they can offer expertise and

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

guidance on how cases can and should be handled, and they are able to provide voice and advocacy for people with disabilities. OPDs can work with legal professionals to ensure that people with disabilities are receiving the appropriate support throughout any legal process or reporting incidents of organised crime perpetrated against them. OPDs may also work closely with people with disabilities, as well as people in close contact with them, to raise their awareness on signs of exploitation and what to do if they believe that they are victims of organised crime.

- > **Procedural accommodations should be provided to people with disabilities.** This should include people with disabilities being connected with lawyers who have had training on how to work with people with disabilities, as well as other support intermediaries.
- > **Support efforts to build better collaboration between relevant service providers and to ensure that people with disabilities are given the right support by the right agencies.** This research has shown how different agencies may not always collaborate effectively or efficiently with one another, creating red tape and barriers for people with disabilities. By facilitating better collaboration between different criminal justice professionals and social services, people with disabilities can secure better and more timely access to justice, along with the appropriate support at different stages of the justice process.
- > **Consider conducting accessibility audits within criminal justice systems to map the journey of a person with disabilities at each stage of the process.** This would help to identify specific barriers at each stage and provide context-specific recommendations to the relevant agencies on how to address these barriers. This could improve the experience for people with disabilities in the justice system and build trust.
- > **More advocacy, policy influence, and engage with legal systems are required to ensure there is better accessibility within the justice system.** Better accessibility measures can range from improved communicative strategies, resources and information, to more bespoke training on how legal professionals can handle cases of organised crime against people with disabilities (along with bias and discrimination training), assistive technology and support, and specific care and trauma-informed responses for victims (including psychosocial support that is survivor-centred). However, these adjustments should be context-specific and made in response to what data and evidence is showing. This can only be achieved if the previous recommendation on improved data and evidence is pursued.

Acknowledgements

The Disability Inclusion Helpdesk would like to acknowledge and extend our gratitude to [Victim Support Europe](#) and [Validity](#) for generously providing their time, effort and expertise to this research. Their participation has provided valuable contributions that have helped deepen understanding of this research.

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

About Helpdesk reports: The Disability Inclusion Helpdesk is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO), contracted through the Disability Inclusion Team (DIT) under the Disability Inclusive Development Inclusive Futures Programme. Helpdesk reports are based on between 3 and 4.5 days of desk-based research per query and are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues and expert thinking on issues around disability inclusion. Where referring to documented evidence, Helpdesk teams will seek to understand the methodologies used to generate evidence and will summarise this in Helpdesk outputs, noting any concerns with the robustness of the evidence being presented. For some Helpdesk services, in particular the practical know-how queries, the emphasis will be focused far less on academic validity of evidence and more on the validity of first-hand experience among disabled people and practitioners delivering and monitoring programmes on the ground. All sources will be clearly referenced.

Helpdesk services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations and individual experts on disability, including Social Development Direct, Sightsavers, ADD International, Light for the World, Humanity & Inclusion, BRAC, BBC Media Action, Sense and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). Expert advice may be sought from this Group, as well as from the wider academic and practitioner community, and those able to provide input within the short timeframe are acknowledged. Any views or opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, the Disability Inclusion Helpdesk or any of the contributing organisations/experts.

For any further request or enquiry, contact enquiries@disabilityinclusion.org.uk

Suggested citation:

Saggu, A. (2022) *Relationship between Disability and Organised Crime globally*, Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Research Report No. 147. London, UK: Disability Inclusion Helpdesk.