

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 147

Query title Relationship between Disability and Organised Crime globally – Short Summary

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The Transnational Serious and Organised Crime Department has requested the Helpdesk to research the global relationship between disability and organised crime, including existing studies and areas needing further work. The findings will inform FCDO and Home Office policy, programming, and advocacy, and may be shared with partners to promote inclusive approaches to serious and organised crime interventions. The research questions are:

1. 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?
2. What gaps exist in current data or research?
3. 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?
4. What are the key recommendations and further work required to ensure disability inclusion in SOC responses or programmes?

Limitations to this research

Because of the niche topic, few experts were available or willing to participate, limiting the research to two key informant interviews and a literature review. Significant gaps exist in understanding how organised crime affects people with disabilities, especially by disability type, crime type, and quantitative data. Limited knowledge was found on impacts to those with psychosocial disabilities, and most available evidence focused on UK data, prompting efforts to include global examples. Except for human trafficking and sexual exploitation, the literature rarely addressed gender, social inclusion, or intersectionality.

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 ([Department of Justice, n.d.](#)). 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](#)).

Why are people with disabilities targets of organised crime?

- > 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 people

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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.

- > 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.
- > 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.
- > A key informant noted that people with psychosocial disabilities who have been institutionalised who are now being deinstitutionalised by policy frameworks are at higher risk of being affected by organised crime. However, there are many challenges related to support for people with disabilities who are being deinstitutionalised, such as lack of funding, outdated infrastructure, stigma; and lack of support for families. Additionally, lack of robust safeguarding and support systems have increased the risks of sexual exploitation, trafficking and servitude, as found in Moldova. ([Validity, n.d.](#)).
- > Poverty plays an important role in explaining why people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by organised crime. 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).
- > A study found that individuals with disabilities, especially those with cognitive impairments, face a higher risk of involvement with the criminal justice system due to discrimination and environmental vulnerabilities. Key contributing factors include weak support networks, limited understanding of cognitive impairments by authorities, lack of belonging, and exposure to discrimination or gang grooming ([Costa 2023](#)).

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

- > From the literature and KILs, 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.
- > Caregivers can exploit their position and relationship with a person with disabilities and commit organised crime against them. 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

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with disabilities, which results in fewer opportunities to disclose any harm or exploitation and contributes to a 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 to be 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 (apart from scams that are often perpetrated by strangers targeting a wide range of individuals online, by phone or other means).
- > 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.
- > 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 them to transport drugs nationally or internationally, and taking over their accommodation ('cuckooing') to commit further offences such as taking or selling drugs ([Crown Prosecution Service, 2022](#)).
- > Organised criminals befriend people with disabilities with disabilities and encourage them to 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. One of our key informants noted that other forms of sexual exploitation have involved the 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.
- > [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 dependence of these children on carers, which may often involve intimate activities such as toileting and bathing; risks related to institutionalised residential care, subjecting children to rules and regulations that require them to comply with instructions; and the issue of such children being unable to articulate their needs or fears which is significant issue for deaf children.
- > People with disabilities, including children with disabilities are also subject to sexual technology-facilitated organised crime.
- > People with disabilities (especially children with disabilities) can also fall victim to sextortion by online 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](#)).
- > 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. 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. 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

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and people living in poverty.

Access to justice

- > People with disabilities are also disproportionately impacted by organised crime because of how they access justice if they are victimised.
- > 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 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; and processes that dismiss and or question the credibility of people with disabilities ([Burch and Stamp, 2025](#)).
- > Victims who have hearing impairments face communication barriers when accessing support and justice.
- > 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 under-reported or unnoticed.
- > 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" ([Rocha, 2025](#)).
- > Most justice systems do not respond adequately to victims with disabilities, and people with disabilities are faced with other barriers. 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.
- > 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.

Examples of Best Practice

- > 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).
- > 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

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to financial exploitation.

- > 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. 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.
- > 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.
- > 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.
- > 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 and abuse.

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.
- > 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.
- > 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.
- > Work closely with OPDs, especially organisations that support victims with disabilities, who focus on a specific impairments and work with different social services.
- > Procedural accommodations should be provided to people with disabilities.
- > Support efforts to build better collaboration between relevant service providers and to ensure people with disabilities are given the right support by the right agencies.
- > Consider conducting accessibility audits of criminal justice systems to map the journey of a person with disabilities at each stage of the process.
- > More advocacy, policy influence, and engage with legal systems are required to ensure there is better accessibility in the justice system.