# Teenagers exploited by organised gangs fuel surge in Scottish retail crime



Teenagers in Scotland are increasingly being exploited by organised criminal gangs, leading to a wave of robberies across the country. Current investigations reveal that these gangs have orchestrated over 1,500 thefts within the last year, primarily targeting supermarkets and convenience stores to steal alcohol for resale on the black market. While this phenomenon raises alarm bells regarding youth exploitation, it also underscores the broader issues of retail crime that have surged dramatically in recent years.

The police operation, dubbed Operation Dynos, has been launched by Police Scotland to combat the rampant criminal behaviour linked to these gangs. Detective Superintendent Neil McDonald, who leads the force's efforts on acquisitive crime, highlighted that young people are cynically recruited due to their perceived leniency in the justice system. He reported that the activities of these gangs have resulted in 1,533 recorded crimes, correlating to a financial loss of approximately £166,560—just a fraction of the £20,000 average annual loss reported by shopkeepers due to theft and vandalism.

In striking parallel to this, Scottish crime statistics from earlier this year noted a startling 18 per cent rise in shoplifting incidents, which has intensified the plight of retailers across Scotland. David Lonsdale, director of the Scottish Retail Consortium, described the spiralling theft rates as a scourge that not only impacts store owners but also exacerbates the risks faced by retail staff, who frequently report increasing instances of violence against them. Amid these concerns, the Scottish Grocers’ Federation conducted a survey revealing that a staggering 83.5 per cent of shopkeepers have experienced more violence directed at their employees.

The exploitation of vulnerable youth is not an isolated incident, as a broader investigation by the BBC has uncovered an alarming trend of women and children being trafficked from Eastern Europe to engage in shoplifting operations, particularly by organised crime groups. One such group operating from Glasgow boasts 154 members who steal high-value items intended for resale across borders. The Retailers Against Crime initiative has identified 56 similar groups that not only facilitate retail theft but are also tied to more serious crimes including drug trafficking and firearms offences.

As criminal exploitation becomes a pressing concern, advocacy groups are voicing their alarm. Experts from organisations like Barnardo’s Scotland have pointed out that children coerced into criminal activities often feel they have no escape, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The charity’s director, Martin Crewe, stressed the importance of parental vigilance in observing changes in behaviour and signs of potential exploitation.

The Scottish Government is responding to this crisis with new initiatives aimed at safeguarding at-risk children from organised crime. Among them is the Practitioners Guidance on Criminal Exploitation, which aims to equip frontline workers with the knowledge to identify signs of vulnerable individuals being drawn into criminal activities. This reflects an acknowledgment that proactive measures are necessary to combat a worrying trend that goes beyond mere retail theft and touches on significant issues of child protection and social welfare.

Given these intertwined issues of youth exploitation and retail crime, it is clear that a collaborative approach involving law enforcement, community support, and family engagement will be essential in addressing the root causes of these problems. As efforts to curb the impact of such criminal organisations continue, it remains imperative for communities to unite in safeguarding the wellbeing of their youngest members while also restoring the safety and integrity of local businesses.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14745905/Vulnerable-youngsters-steal-booze-black-market-police-probe-gang-forced-Scots-teens-carry-1-500-shop-raids.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-67687565)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14745905/Vulnerable-youngsters-steal-booze-black-market-police-probe-gang-forced-Scots-teens-carry-1-500-shop-raids.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.gov.scot/news/tackling-criminal-exploitation/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/12/12/criminal-gangs-trafficking-women-children-shoplifters-uk/), [[4]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-67687565)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://cpdonline.co.uk/knowledge-base/safeguarding/unravelling-dark-world-child-criminal-exploitation/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[7]](https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/new-scottish-scheme-aims-to-protect-children-from-serious-organised-crime-groups-4051616)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14745905/Vulnerable-youngsters-steal-booze-black-market-police-probe-gang-forced-Scots-teens-carry-1-500-shop-raids.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-67687565> - A BBC investigation reveals that hundreds of vulnerable women and children are trafficked to the UK to shoplift for Eastern European crime groups. One gang, based in Glasgow, has 154 members stealing high-value items to sell or ship abroad. The Retailers Against Crime (RAC) is tracking 56 such groups funding organised crime linked to drugs, firearms, and human trafficking. Arrests have been made in cities including London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Darlington.
3. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/12/12/criminal-gangs-trafficking-women-children-shoplifters-uk/> - Criminal gangs are trafficking women and children from Eastern Europe to shoplift in the UK. The Retailers Against Crime (RAC) is monitoring 56 shoplifting groups funding serious organised crime, including drugs and firearms. One gang, based in Glasgow, has 154 members stealing high-value items to sell or ship abroad. Many members have been arrested and jailed for shoplifting, but upon release, they continue to offend.
4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-67687565> - A BBC investigation reveals that hundreds of vulnerable women and children are trafficked to the UK to shoplift for Eastern European crime groups. One gang, based in Glasgow, has 154 members stealing high-value items to sell or ship abroad. The Retailers Against Crime (RAC) is tracking 56 such groups funding organised crime linked to drugs, firearms, and human trafficking. Arrests have been made in cities including London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Darlington.
5. <https://www.gov.scot/news/tackling-criminal-exploitation/> - The Scottish Government has introduced 'Practitioner Guidance on Criminal Exploitation' to help frontline workers identify and prevent children and vulnerable adults from being drawn into organised crime. The guidance, developed by the Serious Organised Crime Taskforce, aims to support a shared understanding of criminal exploitation and assist professionals in recognising signs such as individuals travelling to unfamiliar areas or exhibiting changes in behaviour.
6. <https://cpdonline.co.uk/knowledge-base/safeguarding/unravelling-dark-world-child-criminal-exploitation/> - An article discussing the rise of child criminal exploitation in the UK, highlighting that over 2,000 county lines are operating, with young people aged 14-17 being most exploited. It details how children are groomed online to open bank accounts for laundering criminal money and are used in various criminal activities, including shoplifting. The article also provides real-life examples of child exploitation, emphasizing the need for awareness and intervention.
7. <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/new-scottish-scheme-aims-to-protect-children-from-serious-organised-crime-groups-4051616> - The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) in Scotland is developing a new scheme to protect children and young people from exploitation by serious organised crime groups. The initiative aims to raise awareness of criminal exploitation and encourage relevant agencies to share information to intervene early and protect young people from being drawn into criminality. The scheme is being developed in collaboration with law enforcement and third-sector partners, including Action for Children.