

National



POLICYBRIEF



PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: PORTUGAL (1 OF 2)

Young people with paths of risk and deviant behaviour

October 2018

INTRODUCTION

PROMISE explored the ways how young people (14 to 29 years-old) with a history of stigmatisation or conflict participate in society. In Portugal, our research focused on young men and women aged 15 to 24 with life paths of risk and deviant behaviour, presenting conflicts with major normative social institutions like the family, the school and/or the law. They were engaged in a state-provided intervention aiming to promote their social reintegration, namely second chance education projects, non-custodial youth justice measures or alternative residential care, which in some cases, overlapped.

This policy brief is concerned with the experiences of conflict and stigma faced by these young people, in particular, the fact that they become an object of judgements and social demands, and are easily labelled as 'problematic', 'deviant' or 'dangerous'. It also relies on the evidence that supportive relationships and participatory institutional settings act as facilitators for their positive social involvement.

The policy recommendations are directed towards national and regional policy makers in youth related fields, public authorities, civil society organizations, families, schools, teachers and other youth related professionals.

The aim of these recommendations is to suggest effective ways to deal with young people's conflicts with social and juridical norms, specifically by preventing the emergence of risk and deviant paths, and its vicious cycle, and also to promote young people's positive social involvement.

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote national and regional public policies that ensure young people's rights and equal opportunities.

According to our findings, the conflicts young people face are closely related to structural contingencies and inequalities, such as socioeconomic, territorial or gender disadvantage, stigmatisation based on behaviour or place of origin, and social and educational marginalisation. These contingencies and inequalities strongly determined their life paths, which became defined – by others and even sometimes by themselves – as non-normative or as conflicting.

Most young people who become the object of State intervention within educational formal measures or youth justice measures come from poor backgrounds, particularly from socially deprived urban neighbourhoods. These youngsters face greater socioeconomic vulnerability and need to be targeted by specific social and educational policies in order to overcome structural inequalities.

- **Positive discrimination policies and additional support for the most vulnerable young people** should be implemented, providing additional **educational** support adjusted to their needs, and facilitating their access to **housing**, to **health services**, and to the **labour market**.

2. Reduce the stereotyping and discrimination that young people face in formal control institutions, and encourage social relationships of tolerance, mutual trust and positive expectations in such contexts.

In our study, many young people felt that they were often treated by others ('society' and its authority figures, like teachers, judges, or the police) on the basis of prejudices related to poverty and/or to social deprived neighbourhoods. Consequently, their relationships with authority figures tended to be built upon mutual distrust, negative expectations, and attributing individual responsibility for failures and mistakes, leading to more conflict and, ultimately, to marginalisation. This exclusion cycle is particularly evident in young people's relations with formal education, as school often turns into a place for individual failure and interpersonal conflict, where they don't feel welcomed and stop expecting positive outcomes, eventually ending up in disengagement from education.

When young people are given the opportunity to participate in a responsible and cooperative way within a frame of trusting relationships with educational agents, they tend to feel welcomed and reengaged in education.

- Young people with risky or deviant paths should be given **the opportunity to express their identities, points of view, experiences, and positive traits** within educational, care and justice institutions. Encouraging **participation**, side-by-side with peers and adults, in **cooperative activities and projects** can be an effective way to overcome stereotypes, promote mutual trust, and foster positive expectations.

3. Value, support and build the capacity of families, educational agents and other professionals, to develop supportive relationships with young people.

Supportive and individualized relationships established with significant adults (relatives, teachers, youth workers, youth justice officers, psychologists, etc.) are understood by youngsters to be major facilitators of personal change, primarily by providing emotional support, and by enhancing their self-esteem, moral and

behavioural adjustment, commitment to school, work and/or family, and the ability to define long-term life goals.

Teachers and social workers can make a great difference in young people's lives. For that to happen, supportive intergenerational relationships must be characterised by openness, respect, listening, appreciation, joy, adaptability, commitment, space to make suggestions and choices and orientation towards the future.

- Families, educational agents and other professionals **should be trained** (theoretically, methodologically and ethically) to gain a **deeper understanding** of the experiences of vulnerable youth, and to become able to **build supportive relationships** with them. The **positive contributions** of families and professionals could be further acknowledged and supported by the State and civil society, and should constitute the foundation of **articulated multiagency reintegration strategies** directed at vulnerable youth. Within the framework of these strategies, the Portuguese State should encourage the social and legal recognition of the role – and professional status – of **youth workers**.

4. Foster young people's agency in all educational, social and justice institutional responses directed to them.

Encouraging the agency and self-determination of young people with risk and deviance paths is a key aspect on their positive social involvement. Young people's opportunity to participate in the decisions about their paths fosters their personal fulfilment and self-esteem. This, in turn, is shown to be particularly relevant to their re-engagement in education, crime desistance, and development of new life goals.

Young people value the opportunity to make choices and act within the projects they are engaged in. Hence, they tend to be more actively engaged in activities and relationships when they feel that this involvement is a result of their free will and of their own commitment to change.

- Young people should be **involved in the discussion, choice and development of activities** in all educational, social and justice contexts, being able to **give their contribution in all stages** of that process.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

This policy brief is based on 26 individual interviews to young people with life paths of risk and deviant behaviour (9 female). Respondents were aged between 15 and 24; 6 of them were under 18 years old. The participants were recruited through a Youth Justice Team and two Second Chance Education projects. Additionally, approximately 40 hours of participant observation, two group discussion sessions and a photo elicitation exercise were conducted with the students of one Second Chance Education project during a 7 months period.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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FURTHER READING	Matos, R., Martins, F., Carneiro, A., Ribeiro, L., Campos, M., & Negrão, M. (2016). <i>National Context Report – Portugal</i> . Porto: CEDH – Research Centre for Human Development, Universidade Católica Portuguesa. Published online http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/PROMISE-National-Context-Report-for-web.pdf Matos, R., Martins, F., Carneiro, A., Campos, L., Ribeiro, L., & Negrão M. (2018). <i>Young people with paths of psychosocial risk and deviant behaviour (case study report)</i> .

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