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Desk & field research

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A framework to develop the power of place and the potential of the project **We Are Streetwise** in:

Marseille





Antwerpen

Utrecht



Table of Contents

1. Introduction

2. Summary

3. Methodology

4. Findings

5. The story of the 3 cities

6. Needs analysis
 6.1 Needs analysis youth aged 15-24
 6.2Needs analysis youth aged 24-30

7. 5 step model
 7.1 Step 1: Goingout and being there
 7.2 Step 2: Mapping talents & dreams
 7.3 Step 3: Personalized approach
 7.4 Step 4: Personal development plan
 7.5 Step 5: Evaluation

8. Principles, objectives and the roles of trainers

9. Gaps and Opportunities

10. Recommendations

11. For Youth Work Organizations

12. For Stakeholders and Policymakers

13. Conclusion

14. References

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies highlight two key trends in youth criminality: an increasing number of young offenders and a rise in the severity of crimes (De Jong, 2022; Weijers et al., 2021). While overall recorded youth crime is declining, a growing criminogenic culture among specific youth groups normalizes fast money schemes, drug trade, extortion, and even violent crimes (Van der Laan et al., 2021; Weerman et al., 2022).

This culture particularly attracts youth from disadvantaged urban areas, where financial struggles, lack of educational opportunities, and the need for status and belonging make crime an appealing alternative (Ferwerda et al., 2021; Sieckelinck & Kaulingfreks, 2022). Experts emphasize that harsher punishments alone do not counteract this problem. Instead, young people need access to meaningful opportunities, strong social networks, and positive role models (Bruinsma & Tops, 2022).

"If young people don't see future prospects, it becomes much harder for them to stay motivated and make positive changes."
- Arno, Chapp De Mic

"Our goal is to help them discover their own voice, boost their self-confidence, and give them tools they can use to shape their own future".
- Arno, Chapp De Mic

National and local policies increasingly acknowledge this approach. But there is still a lot of work to do. With knowing this knowledge and taking the future of the youngsters at heart. We started this project where we focus on vulnerable youth. We realize that on hand everyone has a dream and the ability to realize it. On the other hand, everyone has talent and the capacity to develop it.

And thus conducted desk and field research within the framework of the "We Are Streetwise" project, an Erasmus+ KA220-YOU initiative that aims to empower youth at risk of criminal involvement in Utrecht, Antwerp, and Marseille. The desk research is the result of the collaboration of the following youth organizations Blenders, Roots Vlaanderen, Marseille solution and Stichting M&K.

"[...] Young people are the future. Showing them they have options and possibilities helps inspire hope and motivates them to make positive choices".
- J.W. de Koning, Wijkagent

The project focuses on enhancing self-esteem, resilience, social skills, and employability among vulnerable and marginalized young people through an innovative 5-step model utilizing anthropological strategies, mentorship, and peer engagement.

"Youth work is about empowering young people to find their own voice. We don't have all the answers, but we can guide them to discover their own potential".
- Arno, Chapp De Mic

The project focuses on enhancing self-esteem, resilience, social skills, and employability among vulnerable and marginalized young people through an innovative 5-step model utilizing anthropological strategies, mentorship, and peer engagement. Desk research plays a critical role in shaping the project's interventions by providing a comprehensive understanding of the target group's needs, identifying best practices, and supporting policy recommendations that contribute to long-term impact in youth empowerment and crime prevention.

The primary objectives of this desk research are:

- To analyze existing academic literature and policy frameworks on youth reintegration, social inclusion, and crime prevention.
- To identify gaps in current support systems for at-risk youth, particularly in legal and bureaucratic challenges.
- To compare different approaches across Europe and extract key insights that inform the project's methodologies and interventions.
- To support evidence-based policymaking, ensuring that "We Are Streetwise" is aligned with EU priorities on inclusion, diversity, and youth employability.

Geographical Focus

This research focuses on three key cities: **Utrecht** (Netherlands), **Antwerp** (Belgium), and **Marseille** (France). These locations have been chosen due to their high concentration of at-risk youth, the presence of youth crime prevention initiatives, and the socio-economic challenges that shape the experiences of young people in vulnerable positions. By examining these cities, the research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the structural and systemic factors influencing youth crime prevention and reintegration efforts.

"We work with youth, many of whom carry trauma, frustration, or disconnection. Sometimes all it takes is a space where they can tell their story without judgment."
- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM

SUMMARY

The youth work approach presented in this desk research integrates a comprehensive and structured five-step program specifically designed to effectively support young vulnerable individuals, recognizing the diverse needs, experiences, and aspirations prevalent among them. This approach, grounded firmly in four guiding principles —cultural match, equality, safe and brave spaces, and tailored support—sets the foundation for meaningful engagement. Each principle acknowledges the distinct personal and cultural backgrounds of youth, ensuring interventions are inclusive, respectful, and responsive to individual life contexts.

The framework targets five primary objectives central to fostering holistic well-being among vulnerable youth: health, connection, control, purpose, and empowerment. By prioritizing these objectives, youth workers create conditions where young individuals not only cope with immediate challenges but also thrive, gaining essential tools for sustained personal growth and social participation.

Central to this methodology is the belief that every young person has a dream and the inherent ability to realize it, as well as the talent and capacity to develop their unique strengths. The three core aspects underpinning the interventions — Nature, Movement, and Future Exploration— further emphasize dynamic and engaging approaches that encourage young people to explore their environments, physical capacities, and future possibilities, thus strengthening their intrinsic motivation and resilience.

Throughout the five-step program, youth workers undertake multiple roles simultaneously. As connectors, youth workers build deep connections with marginalised youngsters, either through shared backgrounds or by empathically understanding their lived realities without prejudice. Additionally, they serve as story catchers who listen deeply and validate experiences, bridgers who facilitate smooth transitions to specialized services, and professionals who employ evidence-based methods tailored to youths' specific needs.

The first step, "**Going Out & Being There"**," emphasizes proactive outreach, ensuring that youth workers actively engage with young people within their own environments, such as public spaces and community settings in cities like Antwerp, Marseille, and Utrecht. These cities, each with unique socio-cultural contexts, offer youth workers diverse environments in which to establish trust and build meaningful relationships.

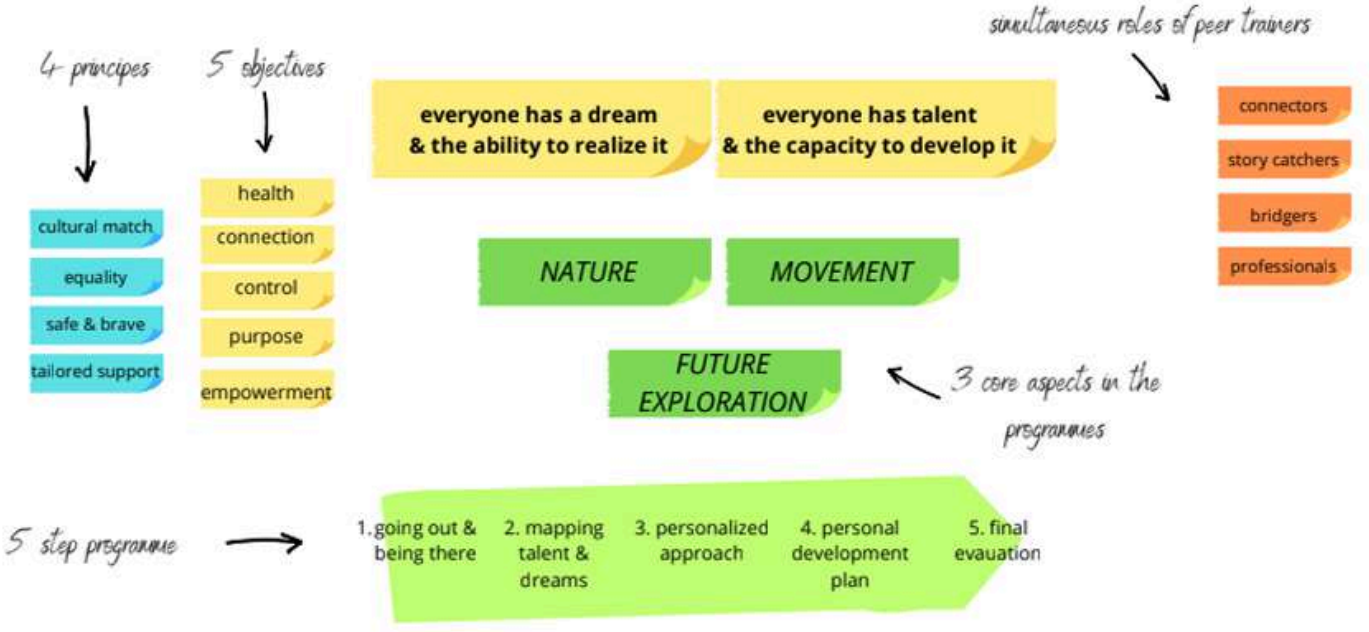
The second step, **"Mapping Talent & Dreams",** involves recognizing and affirming the unique abilities and aspirations of each young individual, thereby laying the groundwork for more targeted interventions

Building upon this foundation, the third step employs a **"Personalized Approach**," wherein interventions are closely tailored to each individual's personal narrative, challenges, and strengths. Extensive research and field experiences across

Antwerp, Marseille, and Utrecht have consistently demonstrated the efficacy of this tailored methodology, highlighting significant improvements in trust, motivation, resilience, and overall engagement among vulnerable youth. The fourth step introduces a carefully structured **"Personal Development Plan"** (PDP), crafted collaboratively between youth workers and young individuals. These PDPs are dynamic, adaptable plans that define clear, achievable short-term objectives and inspiring long-term goals, explicitly tailored around each young person's lived reality. Recent studies, including those by De Jong and De Wit (2023), emphasize that individualized planning significantly enhances youths' sense of ownership, purpose, and resilience, particularly evident through specialized interventions implemented in Antwerp, Marseille, and Utrecht.

Finally, the fifth step, **"Final Evaluation,"** ensures continuous reflection and adjustment of interventions. Youth workers collaboratively evaluate progress and outcomes alongside young people, adapting plans and strategies to respond effectively to evolving needs and aspirations.

This report underscores the necessity of culturally sensitive, adaptive, and responsive youth interventions. By systematically incorporating the essential principles, objectives, and methodologies outlined, youth work in Antwerp, Marseille, and Utrecht demonstrates robust potential for profoundly transforming the trajectories of vulnerable youth, guiding them toward empowered and meaningful futures. We share this illustration that captivates the framework we built!



METHODOLOGY

For this desk and field report of our project we are streetwise, we focused on the following central research question and related sub-questions:

How can we effectively develop and implement a method to prevent vulnerable youngsters to prevent them from joining criminal involvement at the local level in Marseille, Antwerp and Utrecht?

- Which methods, strategies and approaches currently exist, and why are they effective?
- What critical elements or resources are we currently lacking to prevent the criminal involvement of vulnerable youngsters?

To develop a robust, evidence-based support model specifically aligned with our five-step approach—outreach, mapping, personalized planning, monitoring, and evaluation—we followed a structured research process. Initially, we conducted a thorough literature review, drawing on the most recent academic research and practical insights to identify effective strategies and prevailing challenges. This review laid the groundwork for the subsequent phase: conducting in-depth interviews with experts and practitioners in the field. These interviews helped clarify any gaps identified during the literature review, as well as address ongoing debates or points requiring deeper understanding.

In doing so, this evidence-based methodology not only enhances our understanding of effective personalized youth work but also directly informs the practical implementation of the five-step model, ensuring each stage—from outreach to evaluation—is tailored to meet the diverse and evolving needs of vulnerable youth.

Given the extensive scope of literature available on personalized and inclusive youth work, it was essential to clearly delineate our research boundaries in alignment with our core objectives:

Time Frame: We focused primarily on literature from the last 10 years to ensure the relevance and currency of our findings. Older literature was included in the initial database to identify shifts and trends over time.

Geographical Scope: While our core project targets personalized youth work specifically within the local context of Antwerpen, Marseille and Utrecht. insights were drawn from both international and national (Belgium, Netherlands and France) sources to ensure comprehensive scientific understanding and applicability.

Target Groups: Our research prioritized young people at risk of criminal involvement.

METHODOLOGY



This structured literature review provided foundational insights, allowing for targeted and evidence-informed recommendations aligned with our personalized five-step model for youth work. To complement and validate our desk research, we conducted in-depth interviews with key professionals active in outreach and reintegration work with vulnerable youth in Antwerp, Utrecht and Marseille. In each city we interviewed a minimum of 3 youth workers. These interviews were semi-structured, allowing space for the participants' narratives while ensuring alignment with our thematic framework. Participants were selected based on their direct, long-term engagement with at-risk youth, either through street work, addiction care, cultural education, or community policing.



All interviews were transcribed, thematically coded, and integrated into the research structure. Particular attention was paid to capturing key quotes, which are used throughout this report to illustrate systemic challenges and highlight the lived realities of both youth and professionals.



FINDINGS

This section presents the core findings of our desk and field research, based on a combined analysis of literature, interviews, expert insights, and practical field experience in three European cities: **Marseille**, **Antwerp**, and **Utrecht**.



To map the realities of young people at risk of criminal involvement, we conducted a comprehensive comparison of these cities' local contexts and policies. In addition, a "Table of Needs" was developed through an interactive process that included field observations, interviews with youth professionals, and co-creative sessions using tools such as Miro boards (see annex 1). These needs were categorised across key life domains: housing, education, employment, legal issues, mental health, civic participation, and cultural engagement. Insights from our local partners and the lived experiences of youth workers were essential to enriching the desk research and identifying both structural gaps and opportunities for intervention. What follows is a deep dive into the specific local dynamics of Marseille, Antwerp, and Utrecht, followed by a comparative needs analysis across age groups.





THE STORY OF THE 3 CITIES

This study, based on a desk report, analyses and compares three different European cities: Marseille, Antwerp and Utrecht. Each of these urban contexts has a different history, socio-political background and cultural composition, making their social contexts unique. Indeed, the differences between these three cities go beyond the historical and demographic aspect, being deeply rooted in the social fabric. These differences are also reflected in the strategies implemented by each of the three cities to involve marginalised youngsters. The ways in which Marseille, Antwerp and Utrecht conceptualise and address the growing problem of juvenile delinquency differ from each other in that they are shaped by their demographic contexts and specific socio-cultural dynamics. For these reasons, differences are also reflected and manifested in the policies and practices of intervention with vulnerable youngsters.



Marseille is a dynamic Mediterranean city, as well as being France's oldest and second largest city. As a port city, its identity has been shaped by centuries of migrations, exchanges and cultural stratifications, generating a distinctive atmosphere that blends South European with North African influences. Its 870,000 inhabitants are distributed over 111 different districts, some of which, especially those in the north, are among the most socio-economically disadvantaged in Europe.

Marseille is characterised by its dynamic energy but also by its facades adorned with street art, a distinguishable urban culture centred on rap music and popular expression that make the city a symbol of creativity but also of resistance and resilience. Cultural dynamism is a façade beneath which lies a complex socio-political context marked by structural inequalities, spatial segregation and youth marginalisation.

The main problems that Marseille faces are high youth unemployment, rapid gentrification and a deep-rooted illegal drug trade that has contributed to an image of danger and exclusion. In this context, initiatives have been created to see young people as agents of change, supporting them in orienting their competences and skills towards constructive life paths. In addition to their empowerment, another objective is social inclusion and socio-cultural involvement at both local and European level. The positive effect of these initiatives can be seen when youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds gain self-confidence, develop educational and vocational pathways and also take responsibility for their future as active citizens. Through the collaboration between local partners and training and advocacy actors, projects of this kind focus on confidence, visibility and solidarity, enabling marginalised young people to invest in their future and offering them concrete opportunities as agents of social change.



Antwerp is a vibrant, multicultural Belgian city where diversity is a hallmark of the city's identity. With more than 536,000 inhabitants and its historic waterways, it is one of Europe's largest ports and an important economic driver of the country, being world-renowned for the diamond trade and, as such, also faces challenges such as drug trafficking and illicit crime networks. Antwerp is a city of contrasts, where historical architecture coexists with modern innovation, expressing the dynamic character of the city, where different cultures, languages and traditions coexist. Behind this mosaic, however, lies a deeper social complexity: about one in three children is born into poverty. In most cases, these are children with a migration background, in a vulnerable condition, and this only reinforces the existing social divisions. To try to counteract this trend, more and more local youth initiatives are emerging aimed at empowering young people in need so that they are aware of their social role, their rights and duties but also of their future. Working with youngsters by promoting their empowerment means redefining a more inclusive approach based on young people's lived experiences, offering them accessible and inclusive programmes focused on developing their talents, skills and socio-cultural competencies. Redefining work with young people in difficulty means challenging traditional patterns, promoting policies that reflect real needs and providing local organisations, that are often supported by volunteers, with the necessary tools to implement sustainable and effective practices. Therefore, the city of Antwerp promotes a youth-oriented approach, creating opportunities for young people with which they can concretely fill gaps in education, housing, employment, culture, but also politics and everyday life. Therefore, working with and for young people means aiming to concretely improve their current living conditions but also trying to reshape systemic responses, demonstrating positive effects that society also benefits from when young people are seen, heard and supported.



The Dutch city of **Utrecht** is an important multicultural centre of about 375,000 inhabitants. It’s characterised as a dynamic and lively student city as well as an important economic centre with business districts and iconic canals that attract tourists. Utrecht is also a city where various diversities and social challenges converge due to a complex social fabric, where multiculturalism thrives but inequalities and social segregation persist. Although Utrecht profiles itself as a place where everyone, regardless of background, can feel at home, taking part in the collective spirit, challenges remain. These mainly address young people from disadvantaged socio-cultural backgrounds who suffer systemic discrimination in housing, employment and legal issues. These young people are targeted by stigma, as well as by concrete economic difficulties and lack of meaningful job opportunities, thus making them more vulnerable to crime.

This aggravates intergenerational poverty and, above all, increases a general distrust of institutions and authorities. For these reasons, the city of Utrecht has developed a city project targeting young people in need with the aim of providing them with tools and a space where they can understand and define their own purpose and build resilience. This project goes beyond traditional youth programmes, promoting solidarity and active citizenship, with the aim of amplifying their voice in political decision-making. In addition, the project aims to put these young people in contact not only with people in meaningful roles, such as social workers, teachers, but also with reference figures like Mustafa, who often have similar life experiences to those of the young people. Overall, the city of Utrecht is moving in the direction of creating projects for youngsters with socio-economic vulnerabilities that enable them to broaden their life perspectives in cultural, social but also housing and economic spheres. This aligns social engagement with outreach work, allowing Utrecht to become an increasingly inclusive city, but also to create models of how young people can be effectively guided from marginalisation towards inclusiveness in the society in which they live.







NEED ANALYSIS

Results extrapolated from the table of needs (see annex 1):

This report examines the differences and similarities in the needs of vulnerable youngsters aged 15-24 and 24-30 in three European cities: Marseille, Antwerp and Utrecht. These cities share common challenges that intersect with socio-economic and cultural dynamics that influence the needs of young people in vulnerable situations.

Young people aged **15-24** in **Marseille**, Antwerp and Utrecht face significant challenges in meeting their basic educational, cultural, psychological, economic, legal and civic needs.
In Marseille, there are clear disparities between central and peripheral areas: young people with a migrant background live in poor hygienic conditions, with limited access to basic services, almost no education support and mental health support. In the poorest areas, where these young people are most concentrated, early school dropout rates are very high, there is high youth unemployment and a general distrust in institutions and authorities.
Youth civic participation is also hampered by financial barriers that undermine the ability of young people to express their needs and contribute to the improvement of the community in which they live. A problem that frequently emerges in Marseille is youth crime, which is prevalent mainly among young people in vulnerable conditions. Indeed, a defining characteristic of youth crime in the French city is poverty, often extreme.

The city of Antwerp is struggling with the problem of youth homelessness, especially in communities and neighbourhoods populated by disadvantaged youth and those with a migrant background. These young people face a number of challenges, including early school dropout, exacerbated by language barriers, limited psychological support for low-income youth due to economic barriers, which are necessary to receive support, making it less inclusive.

"If a young person's living situation is unstable, school becomes irrelevant. You're focused on survival, not on passing math."
- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

Therefore, at-risk youth from low-income families, with migrant parents and without an education, are less likely to obtain stable and regular work, and if they are able to obtain it, it is underpaid and often undeclared. This exacerbates the vulnerable condition they already find themselves in, making them more susceptible to socio-cultural marginalisation and discrimination of various kinds, making them easier to target authorities such as the police. Regarding civic initiatives in Antwerp, these are existing and active but social and economic barriers make it more difficult for young people to access and participate, therefore they are excluded.

Also in Utrecht, the problem of financial instability, often inherited from families, complicates the situation of at-risk youth, which is aggravated by substance use, both by parents and by the youth themselves, and by housing instability. All these conditions threaten their living conditions and their academic performance, minimizing future employment possibilities and improvement of their conditions. In Utrecht, an increasingly widespread and entrenched phenomenon is youth crime. This is not strictly linked to poverty, as is the case in Marseille, but rather to the social status and money that young people can make, if they are involved in criminal networks.

"Young people don't always commit crimes out of need, but out of a desire for status or because it seems like the only route to recognition."
- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

In order to prevent substance use, the city offers support to young people through addiction clinics and community centres, which are free for young people until they turn 18. At the civic level, youth involvement is encouraged through local councils, but their contribution is rarely implemented, reinforcing disengagement and institutional distrust. The latter is fuelled by a general lack of trust in institutions and authorities due to discrimination that young people experience on a daily basis.

"It's frustrating for young people when they give feedback or participate in councils and nothing happens with it. Eventually, they disengage completely."
- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

Finally, the limited educational opportunities are also reflected in the lack of job opportunities, which only undermine the youth employment rate.
Overall, Marseille, Antwerp and Utrecht all show efforts to support vulnerable youngsters from 15-24, in addressing structural inequalities, socio-cultural exclusion and limited access to economic resources. However, these efforts are not sufficient to ensure an effective improvement in the conditions of young people who prove to be particularly rooted in the social construct.

Young adults aged **24-30** in **Marseille**, **Antwerp** and **Utrecht** also face similar challenges. These are mainly related to housing, education and work, culture, mental health, legal systems and civic participation.

In Marseille, young adults are often threatened by housing insecurity, exacerbated by rising rents and poor infrastructure. Educational and professional opportunities for young adults are limited, and cultural initiatives focus on the reintegration of young adults with criminal records, while remaining underfunded and inadequately supported at the national level. The labor market does not offer opportunities to young adults, forcing many of them into informal employment, exacerbating their economic instability. This also exacerbates their mental health, for which support is minimal. Similarly, the bureaucratic support provided by the city of Marseille is also insufficient and generic, thus failing to meet the specific legal needs of young adults, who remain confused and disoriented in navigating administrative systems.

Civic engagement among young adults is growing and is mainly expressed through protests and demonstrations.

In Antwerp, housing remains almost unaffordable for many young adults, especially those who do not have economic independence and sufficient means of support. Professionally, young adults are often stuck in low-paid or informal jobs due to the difficulties related to limited access to vocational training. Although Antwerp has a strong network of youth cultural organizations, the economic aspect limits the participation of young people who, lacking sufficient resources, cannot take part. This also affects the mental health aspect of young adults who often struggle with burnout and social isolation, increasing the demand for mental health services and platforms that promote resilience. The economic challenges of the city of Antwerp mirror those of Marseille: high youth unemployment, especially among young people with a migration background, either their own or their parents'; weak labor mobility exacerbated by temporary and/or informal and irregular contracts. In addition, the legal aspect is also hampered by unclear bureaucratic processes and a lack of support. At the civic level, the city of Antwerp promotes youth civic engagement through youth councils but fails to engage marginalized young adults, whose voices and needs often go unheard.

Compared to Marseille and Antwerp, Utrecht has no specific programmes for young adults, thus leaving them to their own devices. This is a symptom of the fact that there is not much difference with the 15-24 year old youngsters with regard to the previously identified aspects: mental health, substance addiction, housing and economic problems, where the latter also affect job stability and access to higher education. These difficulties weigh on the educational sphere and the employment dimension, negatively affecting their long-term prospects, aggravating their already vulnerable condition. The lack of social, mental and financial support discourages the civic participation of young adults, whose needs remain unheard by local councils, fuelling the disengagement of young people themselves.

Overall, although all three cities recognise the challenges faced by young adults (24-30), the differences between Marseille, Antwerp and Utrecht lie in the extent of state support, the presence and accessibility of socio-cultural, educational, mental health services and civic platforms. The inclusiveness of these programmes is inefficient, thus leaving many young adults in positions that exacerbate the vulnerable conditions in which they already find themselves, in addition to being in that complicated phase of life marked by the transition to adulthood.







NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 15-24

1

Primary Living, Essential, and Fundamental Needs

Ensuring young people with the have access to basic and fundamental needs means providing them with nutritious food, stable and safe housing and personal hygiene products essential to their well-being. This also includes supporting those in unstable housing situations to promote their safety. In Marseille, Antwerp and Utrecht, young people face significant challenges in meeting these basic needs due to evident economic inequalities, housing shortages and social exclusion suffered by young people in vulnerable situations.

In **Marseille**, the disparity between centre and suburban areas is increasingly evident: while those living in peripheral areas are experiencing economic and housing improvements, those living in the centre are suffering from deteriorating housing infrastructure, poor hygiene standards and limited living space. Many young people, especially those from migrant backgrounds, reside in unsafe and unhealthy housing, with limited access to essential services. Moreover, housing crisis is exacerbated by unemployment rates that limit access to better job opportunities, leaving youngsters stuck in poverty.

In **Antwerp**, homelessness among young people is a serious problem, especially since many of them live in poverty and social exclusion from an early age. Antwerp has the highest percentage of disadvantaged young people in Belgium[1] which hinders the fulfilment of young people's basic needs. Many young people grow up in precarious housing situations, with little support for the transition to stable housing or financial independence. The lack of adequate and affordable housing for young people exacerbates the problem, leaving many of them in precarious living conditions.

"In our work, we regularly meet youth who don't have a stable home but still show up to write, rap, or just listen — that says everything about their resilience."

- Arno, Chapp De Mic

1. Statistiek Vlaanderen, Population in poverty or social exclusion (2025), https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen/inkomen-en-armoede/bevolking-in-armoede-of-sociale-uitsluiting?utm_source=chatgpt.com

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 15-24

Similarly, in **Utrecht**, financial instability affects many young people due to the financial difficulties of their parents. In the long run, limited job opportunities and the rising cost of living make it difficult for young people to achieve financial independence. This problem is also exacerbated by substance addiction problems that can worsen already unstable living conditions by intensifying strained family relationships. To address these challenges, Utrecht is moving to implement initiatives to support youngsters in leaving the family home and finding alternative accommodation.

"Many of th e young people we support live in households where addiction and instability are the norm. That's where support has to start."

- H. Alami, fieldworker



Educational Needs

Educational needs include access to quality education, vocational training and digital literacy. Ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to complete their studies can reduce school drop-out rates and improve long-term employment prospects. However, barriers remain that prevent young people from receiving the education they need.

In **Marseille**, educational inequality is rooted in the socio-economic landscape of the city. Many schools, particularly those in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, have weak infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms and a lack of resources. These conditions lead to low motivation of both students and teachers, resulting in higher drop-out rates. According to OECD data, almost 40% of students from low-income backgrounds have academic difficulties, compared to only 5% of privileged students.[2]

2. OECD PISA 2015 Results: Excellence and Equity in Education. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2015-results-volume-i_9789264266490-en.html

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 15-24

> *"You can't keep young people in school if they don't feel seen. And when language becomes a wall, that isolation grows."*
> **- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM**

This educational gap is also exacerbated by difficulties in accessing education due to long waiting lists and a shortage of available school places, which make it difficult for many students to continue their studies. This reinforces poverty and the socio-cultural exclusion of vulnerable young people.

In **Antwerp**, drop-out rates are highest among students[3] with a migrant background, with about one in five students (24.3%) leaving secondary school without obtaining a diploma, a trend that has steadily worsened since 2017. A contributing factor to this problem is the growing number of students who do not speak Dutch, so language barriers are increasing and also affect their academic performance and social integration. In addition, the lack of support for struggling students leads many of them to disengage completely from school and the education system.

In **Utrecht**, drop-out rates are also high, and many students often skip classes. This is related to distrust in educational institutions, but also in authorities such as the police and the government. Many young people believe that these institutions do not take responsibility for their mistakes, causing resentment and disengagement. This mistrust can lead to the recruitment of young people into criminal networks, attracted by easy money through alternative (illegal) means outside traditional schooling.

> *"Many young people skip school not because they're lazy, but because they don't feel safe or seen there. Some are even recruited into criminal networks right outside the school gates."*
> **- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht**

3. Leuridan. P., Aantal schoolverlaters zonder diploma nog nooit zo hoog (2024). https://www.voka.be/antwerpen-waasland/nieuws/aantal-schoolverlaters-zonder-diploma-nog-nooit-zo-hoog

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 15-24

3

Cultural Needs

Cultural needs revolve around opportunities for personal self-expression, personal development and community engagement through the arts, sports and cultural activities. These experiences promote creativity, identity formation and social inclusion. However, in cities such as Marseille, Antwerp and Utrecht, economic and social inequalities often determine the possibility for young people to participate in cultural initiatives.

In **Marseille**, economic and geographical inequalities create significant obstacles to cultural and sports participation. Although some programmes exist to promote access to arts, sports and other cultural activities, many young people from low-income neighbourhoods struggle to access these cultural spaces, experiencing social exclusion. Therefore, many young people in vulnerable circumstances cannot benefit from the (often few) existing initiatives.

In **Antwerp**, youngster's cultural participation is influenced by their socio-economic background. Young people from low-income families or migrant backgrounds have lower participation in cultural and sports activities. Although there are several initiatives, many of them, especially those with parents without secondary school diplomas, hardly join a sports club, participate in a youth organization or attend a cultural association.

"Cultural spaces often exclude the very youth who need them most. We use music because it's free, accessible, and deeply personal — it gives young people a voice."

- Arno, Chapp De Mic

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 15-24

Similarly, in **Utrecht**, young people's cultural needs are not met due to their economic status, and this can have an impact on their exclusion from cultural activities. Existing cultural initiatives see operators acting first, aiming to involve young people in cultural activities, offering them an alternative to mainstream education. In this way, they can have a significant impact on their life and educational path.

"Cultural initiatives must do more than invite youth — they need to empower them. That only happens when young people feel like the stage belongs to them."
- K. Van Vondelen, social worker



Psychological and Social Needs

Meeting the psychological and social needs of young people requires accessible mental health support and safe spaces to help and support them when dealing with emotional challenges, bullying or family problems. These can also include spaces for free counselling, substance abuse interventions and programs that promote emotional well-being.

In **Marseille**, at-risk youth have limited parental support, as state assistance is primarily financial, with no guidance programs or emotional support. The French state provides financial aid only through "family allowances" which is monetary support and doesn't include parental training or guidance. Furthermore, in the most disadvantaged areas, there is a lack of specialized structures that provide guidance to parents so they can pass on social skills to their children. Overall, there is little mental health support, leaving problems unresolved.

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 15-24

In **Antwerp**, around half of young people experience victimisation, including cyberflashing, physical violence, street harassment or theft, and victims are often multiple victims. Schools provide some counselling, but resources are very limited. Violence such as extortion and vandalism mainly occur at school, physical violence is more common at school, in public places or at home, while sexual offences mainly occur in public places but also in private places. This type of violence can have irreparable consequences for young people if not adequately supported with adequate psychological support.

To support vulnerable young people who are struggling with mental health, the city of **Utrecht** offers free visits to addiction clinics, only for those under 18, with insurance covering the costs for adults. In addition, there are community centres that provide non-judgmental spaces where youth workers establish a relationship of mutual trust before addressing underlying issues. These centres often work with local organisations to better support vulnerable youngsters.

"Half of the issues we see are invisible. Young people carry trauma, frustration, and fear — but there aren't enough services to really support them."
- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

"Before talking about change, you need to build trust. That happens in small, consistent moments, not in intake interviews."
- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 15-24

5

Economic Needs

To meet the economic needs of young people, it is necessary to provide financial assistance, job opportunities, and training and guidance programs. This includes scholarships, paid internships, vocational training to prevent poverty and promote economic independence and employability of young people.

In **Marseille**, there is a lack of professional opportunities for young people and high rates of inactivity (24%)4, pushing them towards an informal economy. The lack of professional mobility limits young people in low-income jobs, or unemployment. In fact, 24% of people aged 15 to 24 are considered inactive. In Marseille, professional opportunities remain low but it is possible to break this trend by creating mentoring programs, and greater access to vocational training, thus creating opportunities also for unemployed young people.

In **Antwerp** many young people take part-time or summer jobs to support themselves. However, those from families with financial difficulties work more often out of necessity, but face more barriers to stable employment. Youngsters with a migrant background are less likely to have a secure job. Higher education students are much more likely to have a job (77.7%) than secondary school students (42.6%) who have less qualifications. This affects their economic needs.

"Some of our young people do everything right — they go to school, they work — and they're still stuck in informal jobs that go nowhere."

- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 15-24

In **Utrecht**, many young people are facing debt, mainly due to the high cost of education. Although organizations offer financial education programs to teach budgeting and household management skills, access to scholarships remains limited due to strict eligibility criteria that vulnerable young people do not meet, leaving them without adequate financial support. More inclusive scholarship programs and targeted financial support could help bridge this gap.

"We see youth taking jobs under the table just to help their families. They're not lazy — they're surviving."
- H. Alami, fieldworker

Bureaucratic and Legal Needs

Challenges related to legal and bureaucratic needs require support for legal protection and assistance with documentation for school, residence permit, work permits or migration issues (personal or family), problems with institutions or representatives of institutions such as the police and school. These challenges are exacerbated for migrants, asylum seekers and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who, in most cases, do not have information.

In **Marseille**, young people have difficulties with bureaucratic processes due to a lack of information about municipal services. However, it is common for youth organizations to help them with documentation, also offering support for young people from marginalized backgrounds who have had problems with institutions. Since many of them feel a lack of trust towards institutions, it is difficult for them to seek help and, on the contrary, they want to act against them.

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 15-24

In **Antwerp**, young people, especially migrants or asylum seekers, have difficulties with documentation, residence permits, work authorization and access to education. These exacerbate the situation for youngsters who also have difficulties learning Dutch negatively affecting their social inclusion. Establishing specialized support services for migrant families can offer them clearer information, legal assistance and targeted support policies to help these young people integrate more effectively in Belgium.

"Even as professionals, we sometimes struggle to navigate the system. Imagine what that's like for a 17-year-old with no support."
- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM

In **Utrecht**, marginalised youngsters face discrimination in both education and employment, which limits their development opportunities. They also experience a lack of awareness of their legal rights and protections in the workplace, making them even more vulnerable to exploitation by employers. This leads to a general distrust of institutions that increasingly discourages young people from seeking help when they face legal or bureaucratic difficulties.

"A lot of youth don't even know what rights they have at work. That makes them easy targets for exploitation."
- K. Van Vondelen, social worker

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 15-24

7

Civic and Community Needs

Civic and community needs involve educating and raising awareness among young people about their rights, but also about their duties as citizens, and providing help to integrate into society. In addition, promoting active youth participation in local initiatives, making them more accessible and providing platforms for them to express their opinions on community and global issues.

In **Marseille**, civic education was introduced in schools in 2015, but its impact remains limited, as many young people do not engage in civic initiatives outside of formal education. Although youth participation in protests and social movements has increased, access to official civic representation remains low. Taking part in the city council of Marseille is an initiative that requires a financial contribution, and is therefore not inclusive, excluding from local governance those low-income young people who can afford it.

In **Antwerp**, many young migrants have difficulties integrating into social, cultural and civic activities, due to language barriers and lack of social connections, limiting their participation in civic projects. Despite various local initiatives, around 40% of vulnerable youth do not participate in local initiatives, sports clubs or youth organisations due to various constraints: lack of information, so many do not know what activities exist or how to join; language difficulties; social barriers; economic difficulties related to the costs of activities and transport to reach places. Therefore, in many cases civic initiatives are not always inclusive and risk excluding precisely those who most need to be involved.

"We try to engage youth in policy discussions, but many feel it's pointless because nothing changes. Civic spaces aren't truly accessible to them."

- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 15-24

In **Utrecht**, local councils in disadvantaged neighbourhoods enable young people to contribute to urban planning by taking part in decision-making, recognising the importance of young people's voices in shaping the local community. However, in practice, these initiatives are often not effective, as they do not integrate young people's input into final policy decisions. In the long run, this can lead to young people's civic disengagement with their community and a sense of frustration that exacerbates their vulnerability and social marginalisation.





"Young people want to be part of the solution, but when their input isn't taken seriously, they give up — and then the system blames them."

- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 24-30

1

Primary Living, Essential, and Fundamental Needs

Among the basic, essential and fundamental needs for young adults between the ages of 24 and 30, is having stable and affordable housing. Since this stage of life is often characterized by the search for independence, it is important to provide housing solutions for those pursuing higher education or starting a career, ensuring affordable and sustainable housing.

In **Marseille**, housing insecurity is a pressing issue, exacerbated by rising rent prices and a lack of affordable housing, forcing young adults into precarious living conditions.

In **Antwerp**, there are similar housing affordability issues, particularly for young adults with limited economic independence. There remains a lack of access to safe, affordable and youth-friendly housing options, especially for those in precarious housing situations. Many young adults, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, struggle with high rent prices and general rising costs, accompanied by limited access to basic necessities such as sustainable energy and healthy food sources.

"Some of our young people do everything right — they go to school, they work — and they're still stuck in informal jobs that go nowhere. Housing just becomes another dead-end."

- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

Also in **Utrecht**, most young adults seek independence, but do not have sufficient financial means to live independently. Moreover, this is compounded by the lack of effective collaboration between different services that can concretely support them, preventing the fragmentation of services and promoting the young person's transition to adulthood.

"Many of the young people we support live in households where addiction and instability are the norm. That's where support has to start."

- H. Alami, fieldworker

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 24-30

2

Educational Needs

Responding to educational needs means learning and developing new skills. This can be done through professional programs, workshops, training courses, certifications that allow young adults to improve their skills while continuing with their education or to build careers by expanding their perspectives and job opportunities.

In **Marseille**, there is a lack of awareness and access to information about available financial support and educational opportunities for young adults, preventing them from pursuing studies or vocational training. A major problem is the lack of funding for schools, despite the city offering social support for both students and young adults.

In **Antwerp**, many young adults remain stuck in low-paid or precarious jobs due to a lack of career guidance, access to job coaching and insufficient vocational training. Many young adults find jobs they don't like, work illegally or have no future due to temporary contracts. Despite efforts to integrate them into the workforce, support systems remain fragmented, leaving many of them without the tools needed to access specific and vocational training. This deprives them of the prospect of stable long-term employment.

> *"You can't expect people to build a future when all the training they get feels out of reach or irrelevant. We have to connect education with their reality."*
> **- Arno, Chapp De Mic**

In **Utrecht**, the lack of educational skills among young adults is widespread. For this reason, the city collaborates with M&K, offering programmes to support educational and personal development, focusing on the development of practical skills such as financial literacy, cover letter writing and problem solving. The training helps young adults understand how to navigate administrative systems, developing skills useful for further education or finding a job.

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 24-30

3

Cultural Needs

Young adults' cultural needs play a fundamental role in their identity building, personal development and active citizenship. It means facilitating cultural exchange programs, where young adults can express themselves, engage in activism and contribute to the progress of society, creating opportunities for the development of new skills.

In **Marseille**, access to recreational and sports activities is limited and decreases after the age of 26, making it more difficult to access recreational activities. There are programs that are mainly aimed at young adults with a criminal background, and these are engaged through cultural and educational initiatives, encouraging them, for example, to obtain a degree. This initiative, however, has not received support from the French government.

The city of **Antwerp** has a strong network of youth organizations that focus on cultural awareness of young adults, seeking to involve those who come from disadvantaged and marginalized backgrounds. These organizations are very successful and manage to reach a significant amount of new young people, increasing their cultural participation. However, affordability remains a major obstacle as many young adults cannot afford to participate in cultural programs, art workshops or sports clubs, leading to their exclusion from these experiences. This sharpens not only cultural differences but also social ones.

"Cultural participation is powerful, but it's still a privilege. When it costs money, vulnerable youth are excluded by default."
- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM

In **Utrecht**, the cultural needs of young adults are related to personal growth, planning for their future and social integration. Local initiatives aim to develop their individual skills, help them explore their aspirations and define concrete goals. The challenge is to form peer groups, based on similar goals, respecting each person's path and personal background.



Psychological and Social Needs

Addressing psychological and social needs means ensuring that the mental well-being and emotional resilience of young adults is guaranteed, which is essential for their personal and professional growth. These resources are also useful for building relationships, work-life balance, and managing stress and preventing burnout. Psychological support may also include specialized interventions for addiction recovery and support for specific trauma.

Young adults in difficult situations in **Marseille** need support programs to assist them in integrating into education or vocational training. They also need recognition of their previous educational or training backgrounds, which can be a new starting point.

In **Antwerp**, there is a growing demand for affordable psychological support services, including psychotherapy, counselling, crisis intervention and stress management workshops. This need is prevalent among young adults as many of them struggle to balance work, education and personal life, which leads to increased risks of anxiety, depression, burnout and isolation. Young adults also need more platforms to connect with like-minded peers, cultural groups and community networks, to build confidence and personal identity. Same goes for programs that provide young people with skills and tools to deal with failures, rejections and life challenges more constructively.

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 24-30

"Young adults are often balancing survival with ambition. If we don't address their stress and burnout, they'll drop out of every system we put them in."
- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

Emotional well-being is a critical issue for young adults in **Utrecht**, especially those facing addictions. There are support programmes focused on strengthening mental health, with interventions aimed at achieving long-term goals. These are complemented by services that offer customised support plans for detoxification. However, there is a lack of an approach that considers vulnerable young adults as individuals with potential, not as problems to be solved.

5

Economic Needs

Addressing economic needs for young adults means being able to achieve economic empowerment and job stability. This can be achieved by promoting access to well-paid jobs that match their qualifications and skills, supporting long-term employment and financial stability to address unemployment rates.

n **Marseille**, there is a mismatch between young adults' job skills and labour market demand, leaving many young people underemployed or forced into informal jobs, limiting their job opportunities. This lack of job stability and opportunities limits career mobility and economic security, making it difficult for young people to transition into long-term employment. Similarly, in Antwerp, many young adults work informally due to a lack of career advancement opportunities. Indeed, youth unemployment remains high, especially among young people with a migrant background and those from low-income families. Many young people work on temporary contracts or in informal or short-term jobs with no prospects for

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 24-30

career advancement. Those without a secondary school diploma face a higher risk of long-term unemployment and financial instability.

In **Antwerp**, there is insufficient support for socially vulnerable young adults in their job search, which is why they often feel left to their own devices in their job search.

> *"A lot of young people come to us with talent, but no access. No network, no stable contract, no path to grow — and then people are surprised when they give up."*
> **- Arno, Chapp De Mic**

In **Utrecht**, the economic needs of young adults are mainly related to the need for financial independence and long-term economic stability. Lack of adequate literacy and economic empowerment undermine their ability to achieve their personal and professional goals. Therefore, focusing on both is a crucial step towards realising one's life aspirations within the social structure.



Bureaucratic and Legal Needs

For young adults dealing with legal and bureaucratic needs can be a significant challenge, especially when it comes to contracts, residence permits, workplace rights and international mobility. Therefore, it is important to provide them with advice, administrative assistance and support for legal procedures or obtaining social benefits, especially when the requirements and information available are unclear. This means providing them assistance and making information more understandable through accessible administrative support.

In **Marseille**, the state provides general assistance but there is a lack of targeted programs for young adults, especially when they need assistance with documentation, legal issues or residency issues. In these cases, they can get administrative assistance but what is offered to them is generic help that may not effectively meet their specific needs. Clear guidance on legal issues is therefore lacking, resulting in many young adults being disoriented when faced with bureaucratic processes.

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 24-30

The situation in **Antwerp** is similar to Marseille, in fact, it is similarly characterized by a bureaucratic complexity that makes it difficult for young people to access legal and bureaucratic support services. These challenges are related to the procedures for obtaining identity documents, residence permits, social security and tax registration. Where available, information is unclear, which makes it more difficult to resolve administrative issues. Greater clarity is also needed regarding information on voting rights, advocacy programs to help young adults protect their rights and navigate bureaucratic systems with confidence.

> *"Even professionals get lost in the system — imagine how overwhelming it is for a 24-year-old with no one to guide them."*
> **- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM**

Also vulnerable young adults in **Utrecht** often struggle to navigate bureaucratic and legal systems, with issues related to contracts, residency and health care. Some local organisations provide legal-administrative assistance, helping young people to understand bureaucratic procedures and to know their rights. However, there is a lack of structured support offering personalised and practical help that has an impact on their daily life and future stability.



Civic and Community Needs

Young adults face civic and community needs and responding to these means encouraging both local and global citizenship, promoting social justice, inclusiveness and active participation in decision-making processes. This includes supporting youth-led social initiatives, encouraging activism and promoting volunteering, ensuring access to safe spaces where young people feel free to express their opinions, thus contributing to their community.

NEEDS ANALYSIS YOUTH AGED 24-30

In **Marseille**, civic engagement is increasing, particularly through protests and youth initiatives for political involvement. Young adults gather around social issues such as healthcare, education, employment and cultural rights, in order to develop policy proposals that can be discussed in the city council. These initiatives demonstrate a growing interest of young people in political participation, but most of them only mobilize in response to crises or when problems reach a critical point. Protest is a way for young people to express their concerns and make their voices heard by policy makers.

The city of **Antwerp** offers young adults access to local politics through youth councils and participatory democracy, giving them the opportunity to take part in the development of local policies. These initiatives demonstrate a desire to bridge the gap between young people and government, ensuring that young people have an active role and not a marginal one. In addition, there are also many volunteering programs, local activism and community projects, but more efforts are needed to include marginalized young people. Therefore, it is necessary to create projects that simultaneously strengthen the civic engagement of young people and promote their social inclusion, especially those in situations of greater vulnerability.

In **Utrecht**, responding to civic and community needs means promoting inclusion, social justice and active citizenship. There are local initiatives that, through information tools, support young adults' participation and involvement in the community. However, there is often a lack of safe and inclusive spaces where they can feel heard and understood, regardless of their background, gender or ethnicity. Furthermore, it is crucial that organisations work together, ensuring visibility and trust for youth initiatives in the community.

"You can't build civic engagement on token gestures. If young people's voices are only heard but never used, it becomes theatre."
- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

5 STEP MODEL

1 STEP 1: GOING OUT AND BEING THERE

The category of "vulnerable youth" refers to a heterogeneous group of young people who face unstable life circumstances and who are currently experiencing or are at risk of developing one or more serious problems such as school failure or dropout, mental health problems, substance and/or alcohol abuse, unemployment, long-term poverty, delinquency and serious criminal behaviour (Arbreton et al., 2005; Quinn, 1999). These young people often come from families considered vulnerable and, therefore, experience multiple social and psychological difficulties (Treskon, 2016).[5]

"We go out onto the street because many of them won't come to us — not out of disinterest, but because they've been disappointed too often."
- H. Alami, fieldworker

Due to multiple adverse life experiences, young people are unlikely to seek help, as the developmental struggles experienced have created a distrust of authorities and public services, including child protection agencies and social workers6. Furthermore, due to past or ongoing experiences, they may have absorbed roles and lifestyles that place them in opposition to authority figures such as parents, teachers, social workers and other authority figures (Klepp & Aarø, 2017).[6]

"Many of these youth have learned to survive on instinct — authority, to them, often equals danger or disappointment."
- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM

5. Filges T, Dalgaard NT, Viinholt BCA, (2022). Outreach programs to improve life circumstances and prevent further adverse developmental trajectories of at-risk youth in OECD countries: A systematic review. Campbell, p.1.

6. Ivi, p.4.

5 STEP MODEL

Having said so, "youngsters at risk" (Mäkelä, Mertanen, & Brunila, 2021), are a broad group of young people from different backgrounds and life situations, who are also generally considered to also have problems with social, educational, transition from education to work and social engagement. Therefore, the term "at risk" is generally used as a label to refer to young people who deviate in one way or another from a normative way of being, acting and living. Since young people considered "at risk" are often seen as a threat to economic growth and society, it is believed that they should be directed towards education, employment or other economically recognisable forms of activity (Kiilakoski, 2014).

"We don't see them as 'at-risk' youth — we see them as potential waiting to be unlocked. But first, you have to show up, consistently, where they are."

- Arno, Chapp De Mic

Many of the "at-risk youth" often come from socio-economically disadvantaged and dysfunctional families (Treskon, 2016), they have often experienced a series of negative events such as poverty, emotional or physical abuse and neglect, out-of-home placement, living with drug-addicted parents and unstable life situations that have led to a lack of continuity in their education. Vulnerable youth often lack stable reference figures and appropriate adult role models, which leads to a lack of life skills and compromises their ability to seek appropriate help. It is often the case that, after the first negative experiences, a feeling of deep resentment towards the authorities and professionals takes root, so that vulnerable youngsters are unlikely to seek help on their own.

Many young people, especially those between the ages of 8 and 25 have experienced or are at risk of experiencing negative outcomes such as failure or dropping out of school, starting to live on the streets, beginning to abuse substances and/or alcohol, having difficulty finding employment or unemployment, living in prolonged

7. Mäkelä, K., Mertanen, K., & Brunila, K. (2021). *Outreach youth work and employability in the ethos of vulnerability.* Power and Education, 13(2), pp.100-115, p.101.

8. Filges T, Dalgaard NT, Viinholt BCA, (2022). Outreach programs to improve life circumstances and prevent further adverse developmental trajectories of at-risk youth in OECD countries: A systematic review. Campbell, p.3.

9. Ivi, p.7.

5 STEP MODEL

"You have to work together with other organizations, with other people, with your network [...] or make bridges to organizations."
- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM

Indeed, if left alone, the target population of marginalised youth risks developing even more serious problems in the long term, which, besides being harmful to the young person himself, also have negative repercussions on society. With vulnerable youth, "going out and being there"[10] means aiming to ensure the promotion of their well-being, to improve their conditions of vulnerability and to prevent illicit behaviour, such as substance use. This age is, in not a few cases, also marked by other "risk factors", the most common of which is dropping out of school,[11] which profoundly affects the life course of young people and is often accompanied by substance use that only makes their conditions even more vulnerable (Klepp & Aarø, 2017). Therefore, these young people need structured support, coordinated actions by different services whose synergy supports and sustains them on their path,[12] and helps them face the challenges due to both their age and conditions.
Involving these young people also means directing them towards care or assistance services, so that they turn to social workers, educators, socio-pedagogical and health workers.

What most distinguishes outreach work approach is that of intercepting young people in their environment, identifying that segment of the population, namely vulnerable youth, who are generally difficult to reach.[13]

"The most important part of outreach is not waiting. You have to move toward them, speak their language, and accept that trust takes time."
- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

10. Ivi, p.4.
11. Oldeide, O., Holsen I, Fosse, E., (2020). Youth perspective on outreach service: A safety net for at-risk youth in a municipality, Children and Youth Services Review, p. 116.
12. Ibidem.
13. The city of Oslo (2020), *The Oslostandard for Outreach Work with Vulnerable Young People*, p. 8.

5 STEP MODEL

The task of the outreach workers consists first of all in identifying their needs, gradually building a relationship of mutual trust between worker and young person, and then involving them in socio-educational activities. Through these activities, it is possible to find solutions to the problems that affect the young person in his or her social context and environment, while also trying to prevent further marginalisation and foster social integration.

> *"You don't always see immediate change. But you hear it in how they talk about themselves — they go from 'I can't' to 'maybe I can.' That's where it starts."*
> **- Kristel Van Vondelen, social worker**

Focusing on the needs of vulnerable youth means creating the conditions for them to develop greater autonomy and to be able to adapt more easily within their community. This approach aims to promote a path of lasting growth, rather than merely providing immediate solutions which, although they may provide a solution to current problems, are only effective in the short term without addressing the causes of the problems. In order for outreach programmes to be effective, it is essential that they are designed and associated with a specific service or a combination of several services offered by one or more organisations addressing a target population.

"Outreach work"[14] is a social activity that also consists of designing preventive and early interventions that are tailored to the individual needs of each young vulnerable person, with the aim of preventing, reducing the risk or intervening as early as possible in an already difficult life situation.[15]

14. Ibidem.
15. Andersson, Björn (2010), Erfarenheter av uppsökande arbete med vuxna och unga vuxna – en rapport baserad på fem forskningcirklar om uppsökande arbete. FoU i Väst/GR, 2010, cit. In The city of Oslo (2020), The Oslostandard for Outreach Work with Vulnerable Young People, p. 8.

5 STEP MODEL

To do this, it is essential that outreach workers establish a proximity relationship with the target group, while also maintaining a central role as mediators between the young people themselves and other social and leisure services.

> *"We often say, 'we don't give solutions, we walk with them until they create their own.' That's real empowerment."*
> **- Arno, Chapp De Mic**

The methodology on which the fieldwork is based is characterised by the systematic presence of practitioners in the local communities where vulnerable young people live. Field work in local realities consists of ensuring satisfactory living conditions for young people through the reorganisation of resources between young people and the local community. To do this, it is necessary to establish structured cooperation between the different services, directing actions that facilitate positive changes at individual or group level.

These actions, for example, can take the form of encouraging young people to move away from particularly problematic areas by putting them in touch with socio-cultural initiatives in their neighbourhoods.[16] Another objective of outreach work is related to substance and crime prevention, through early measures and early intervention that outreach workers, together with local services, can provide to young people, intervening in vulnerable life situations.

> *"Some of these young people are one decision away from a criminal record — and one conversation away from a different path."*
> **- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw**

16. The city of Oslo (2020), The Oslostandard for Outreach Work with Vulnerable Young People, p. 8.

5 STEP MODEL

The essence of outreach work[17] is that social workers do not wait sitting behind their desks for people, in this case young people, to come to them asking for help but, on the contrary, they take the initiative by trying to intercept them and offer them help and support (Van Doorn, 2009; Kruiter & Klokman, 2016). The starting point is that practitioners make their way into the world of those they want to reach (Van der Lans, 2010). In this way, the youth worker gradually builds a relationship of trust with the young person, so that they can feel safe sharing their issues and concerns. Once this relationship has been established, it is possible to lay the foundations for mutual trust, which is essential for maintaining a relationship of respect and faith between the young person and the social worker. This is likely to contribute to a gradual improvement in the young person's vulnerable situation.

By intervening early, professionals can prevent problems from escalating and are able to connect socially isolated groups with other citizens and institutions (see Cornelissen & Branssen, 2008; Holsbrink, 2009; Lupi & Schelling, 2009; Matthijssen, 2014; Nicis Institute, 2010; Verplanke & Tonkens, 2013). hese are some of the social benefits that can potentially be achieved through outreach work and all those who practice it.

Within the general framework of the "going out and being there" approach is "street youth work",[18] a specific form of youth work that aims to help and support those young people whom "traditional" forms of social work cannot reach. This approach is therefore based on physically 'reaching out'[16] to young people in the streets, neighbourhoods, youth centres, parks or wherever young people congregate (Laukkanen, 2014).

In this way is it possible to engage the target group, establishing the trust necessary to build a solid relationship with each youngster and the youth scene of the city in question. Awareness-raising work therefore consists of reaching out to vulnerable young people in the local community who are most in need of help and support, through preventive interventions. The work carried out by youth workers is therefore essential: they focus on marginalised young people with evident and structural problems, such as dropping out of school, unemployment, drug use and juvenile delinquency, which are often compounded by a high risk of social and health issues[19]

17. Omlo, J., (2017), WAT WERKT BIJ Outreachend werken Kansen en dilemma's voor sociale wijkteams, p.8.

18. Mäkelä, K., Mertanen, K., & Brunila, K. (2021), Outreach Youth Work and Employability in the Ethos of Vulnerability. Power and Education, 13(2), 100-115, p.101.

19. The city of Oslo (2020), The Oslostandard for Outreach Work with Vulnerable Young People, p. 4.

5 STEP MODEL

Taking all these issues into account, the main challenge of "going out and being there" approach is therefore, above all, to reach those young people who do not yet show visible symptoms of vulnerable behaviour but who are often among those most in need of support.

"You don't reach youth with a flyer or a lecture. You reach them by standing next to them, listening to their story, and showing up again next week."
- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM



2 STEP 2: MAPPING TALENTS & DREAMS

The category of vulnerable youth, who are in particularly vulnerable conditions,[20] in most cases do not ask for support or help on their own, even when it is urgently needed.[21] This happens for various reasons: because they are not able to ask for help; they do not know who to turn to, due to a lack of information about the appropriate services; they do not trust the services and social workers; or, they are not able to recognize the seriousness of the situation they are in.

"A lot of them don't think they're allowed to dream anymore. That's why we start small — a skill, a goal, something that's theirs."
- Arno, Chapp De Mic

20. Distelbrink, M., Yassine, D., (2023), Aansluiten bij de leefwereld van jongeren. Ondersteuning van meiden bij Girls Forward, Utrecht, p.7.
21. Rauwerdink-Nijland, E. & Metz, J.W. (2019). Werken en leven in de rafelrand. Cijfers over de doelgroep en hun ervaring met het straathoekwerk in Amsterdam en omgeving. Amsterdam: Volksbond Streetcornerwork/ Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Lectoraat Youth Spot in Distelbrink, M., Yassine, D., (2023), Aansluiten bij de leefwereld van jongeren. Ondersteuning van meiden bij Girls Forward, Utrecht, p.7.

5 STEP MODEL

All these possible scenarios and underlying reasons, only aggravate the already vulnerable situation of marginalised youngsters. Therefore, the role of youth workers in many of these cases is fundamental in supporting young people, especially when they act directly in the living environment of their target group, i.e. on the street, in parks or in community youth centres. In this way it is possible to have a complete and real overview and knowledge of what is happening to vulnerable young people and of those mechanisms that do not ensure them the right support.[22]

> *"You have to meet them where they are — literally and emotionally. That's the only way to learn what drives them."*
> **- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM**

Outreach work focuses on improving living conditions and resilience of groups of people in places where there is socioeconomic inequality, social exclusion and human rights violations. Another way in which advocacy workers act is by supporting young people in developing skills, general and/or specific, with which they can make their way in society.[23]

> *"We ask: what are you good at, what makes you feel proud? From there we build motivation, and that creates change."*
> **- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw**

In outreach work, it is essential to help young people recognize and value their own ideas, encouraging them to express themselves freely and to believe in their abilities. To help them discover and cultivate their potential, it is crucial that youth workers stimulate an open and constructive dialogue with them, asking questions about their interests, aspirations and future projects, thus setting a path of personal growth.

22. Rauwerdink-Nijland, E. & Metz, J.W. (2018). Ontwikkelen en beschrijven van definitie en waarden in het straathoekwerk. Amsterdam: Volksbond Streetcornerwork/ Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Lectoraat Youth Spot. Niet gepubliceerd, interne documentatie in Distelbrink, M., Yassine, D., (2023), Aansluiten bij de leefwereld van jongeren. Ondersteuning van meiden bij Girls Forward, Utrecht, p.7.

23. Omlo, J., (2017), WAT WERKT BIJ Outreachend werken Kansen en dilemma's voor sociale wijkteams, p.11.

5 STEP MODEL

This helps youngsters strengthen their self-esteem, learn to know themselves better and develop talents that perhaps they were not even aware of having before. Furthermore, creating an environment in which they feel listened to and understood helps to strengthen their confidence in themselves and in others, learning to be aware of themselves and their value and to reflect on their choices and the path they wish to take for the future.

Mapping talents is a fieldwork practice that often has a strong informal educational component, that is, teachings take place in an alternative way to traditional methods. is a more effective practice that also allows young people to build relationships in local and community contexts such as clubs or youth centres, and on the street or in various neighbourhoods.

Mapping dreams and talents can often make a real difference in the lives of young people living in vulnerable conditions, thanks to the support they receive, perhaps for the first time, within their social environment.

> *"I never force anyone to talk — sometimes it's just writing, sometimes it's a beat. But in that process, they reveal what they care about."*
>
> **- H. Alami, fieldworker**

Providing opportunities for personal growth to youngsters, who wouldn't t normally have access to them, means activating pathways to enhance their skills and talents, motivating them to develop their full potential. This involves promoting their empowerment and recognising that, if properly supported and stimulated, especially in the early stages of their journey, these youngsters can reach their potential.

The main objective is to actively support this target group in building their self-esteem and developing a deeper understanding of their abilities. This can be done by creating a safe environment, where everyone can feel free to express themselves and cultivate their talents, whatever they may be. Through interactions between operators and young people, the latter are encouraged to grow thanks also to the tools that the operators themselves provide them to be able to better understand their aspirations and take concrete steps towards achieving their dreams and ambitions.[24]

24. Distelbrink, M., Yassine, D., (2023), Aansluiten bij de leefwereld van jongeren. Ondersteuning van meiden bij Girls Forward, Utrecht, p.13.

5 STEP MODEL

"Some of them were told for years they had nothing to offer. We're here to prove otherwise."
- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

Youngsters growing up in socially vulnerable situations face challenges such as having insufficient access to resources and opportunities for personal development.[25] They often experience a lack of encouragement and support from people in their social environment (Abdallah, 2017), as well as encountering discriminatory experiences, conflicting relationships, low parental education levels, or parents who have to deal with problems such as addiction, illness or migration-related problems. Most of these young people grew up in low-income families and often face economic hardships that significantly impact their daily lives and future opportunities.

In addition to financial hardship, many of them lack the essential resources, whether economic, social or cultural, that would enable them to meaningfully engage in society. This lack of access to tools and support systems often leads to their exclusion from educational, professional and social opportunities that could otherwise foster their personal growth and development.[26] The stress caused by financial instability, combined with limited access to quality education and local resources, can lead to reduced self-esteem and sense of belonging. Additionally, there are social, emotional and psychological challenges that these young people often face alone. In fact, many of them struggle with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression or trauma, which further exacerbate their condition.

"There's a lot of silence in their lives. No one asks what they hope for. When we do, it shocks them — in a good way."
- Kristel Van Vondelen, social worker

25. Sonneveld, J., Rijnders, J., Metz, J., Van Regenmortel, T., Schalk, R. (2020), The contribution of professional youth work to the development of socially vulnerable youngsters: A multiple case study, Children and Youth Services Review V. 118, p. 2.

26. Ibidem.

5 STEP MODEL

Young people who accumulate negative and adverse experiences within their social context are more at risk of developing problems in the transition to adulthood (Vettenburg, 1998), and will most likely need support services and social assistance. Mapping their talents is a way to support them become independent adults, contributing to the personal development of those who are more socially vulnerable, strengthening their social network, improving their social participation and ensuring they receive adequate support.[27]

"You have to help them see it — not everyone knows their own strengths until someone reflects it back to them."
- Arno, Chapp De Mic

Each young person has specific needs, and youth workers can play a key role in identifying them. Through targeted methodological approaches and, above all, a direct relationship with youngsters, youth workers seek to develop their social and personal skills.

"We don't deliver lectures. We create space — and in that space, young people step forward with things they didn't know they had in them."
- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

Non-formal learning experiences are designed to cultivate essential life skills, including self-responsibility, prosocial and socio-emotional skills.[28] Acquiring and strengthening these skills can increase youngster's ability to effectively participate in different social contexts. In addition to these, there are also specific skills, linked to particular talents or vocations that each of them possesses and would like to develop but, often, they do not know how to do it or don't have the necessary resources and/or knowledge to do so.

The role played by youth workers enables vulnerable youngsters to become more aware and cultivate these skills, helping them to identify their strengths and providing them with the tools to hone their talents. This helps to strengthen their sense of responsibility and improve their self-confidence, but it also helps them improve their socio-emotional skills.

27. Ibidem.

28. Ivi, p.5

5 STEP MODEL

Consolidating these skills enables young people to place themselves in different social contexts and participate more actively in society, taking responsibility for their own personal growth.[29] By interacting with vulnerable young people, youth workers also encourage them to reflect on their life goals, prospects and future ambitions.

> *"Sometimes the only thing they've ever heard is 'you won't make it.' We change that by walking with them, not above them."*
> **- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM**

This approach can also help youngsters to improve their academic performance, encouraging them, step by step, to achieve better results in their academic and professional paths. Mapping dreams and skills is, therefore, a way to prevent the risk of early school dropout and youth unemployment. Through ongoing dialogue, youth workers share with young people the importance of education and employment in building an independent life, both financially and personally. By making vulnerable youngsters more aware of long-term benefits of these opportunities, youth workers contribute to their personal, social and economic

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> *"You can't separate their dream from their struggle. So we hold both: the pain, and the potential."*
> **- Kristel Van Vondelen, social worker**

29. Ibidem.

30. Ivi, p. 9.

5 STEP MODEL

To be effective, the approach adopted by youth workers must be multidisciplinary: in this way, they contribute to a real expansion of social networks and the development of life skills among vulnerable youngsters. Furthermore, this method allows youth workers to better adapt to the specific needs and problems of young people, working within their context and socio-cultural environment. By integrating different perspectives, the multidisciplinary approach contributes to the expansion of the social networks of vulnerable young people, while also promoting the development of essential life skills.



Mapping the talents and dreams of vulnerable youngsters is a step that allows them to strengthen their skills and facilitate their personal and social growth, which is often hindered by adverse life events such as economic hardship, family instability or social exclusion, especially for those who grew up in disadvantaged and vulnerable contexts. In this scenario, the role of youth workers is crucial because it also involves actively and continuously supporting these young people, promoting their resilience and providing them with the tools they need to make the most of their abilities.[31]

"Helping them name a talent is just the start — staying there while they develop it is the real work."
- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

30. Ibidem.

5 STEP MODEL

3

STEP 3:
PERSONALIZED APPROACH

A personalized approach in youth work acknowledges the unique needs, experiences, and aspirations of each vulnerable youngster. Rather than applying standardized solutions, personalized interventions recognize and build upon individual strengths, vulnerabilities, and life contexts. Research consistently underscores the effectiveness of these tailored approaches, highlighting how they foster deeper trust, resilience, and improved social outcomes compared to generalized methods (Makela et al., 2021; Sonneveld et al., 2022). This is also the findings we had based on our interviews with the youth workers in Antwerp, Marseille and Utrecht.

> *"Some youth drop out after one talk, and others come back when they're ready. You have to stay open to that rhythm."*
> **- H. Alami, fieldworker**

Really, at its core, youth work is a fundamentally human-centered practice—a careful balance of listening, connecting, building trust and guiding that empowers young people amid life's complexities. Sonneveld and colleagues' (2020) comprehensive study vividly demonstrates how personalized, multi-dimensional interventions by professional youth workers can transform the lives of socially vulnerable youth. Over 12 months, researchers observed 23 youths and 20 dedicated youth workers, capturing not only tangible outcomes but also the nuanced, relational journey of each young individual. These interventions were uniquely adapted, focusing deeply on individual narratives and personal histories, significantly enhancing each young person's self-confidence, resilience, and agency. This particular research really brought to light not just outcomes, but also the intricate journey each young person undertakes with their youth worker—a journey built on trust, perseverance, and deep respect for individual stories and aspirations (Sonneveld et al., 2020).

30. Ibidem.

5 STEP MODEL

"You can't guide someone if you haven't taken the time to understand what matters to them."
- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

"They've heard 'no' so often that sometimes just listening — really listening — is already a breakthrough."
- Kristel Van Vondelen, social worker

In practical terms, youth workers often act as stable anchors, guiding vulnerable youth through turbulent periods. Each youth worker adapts their approach to the unique narrative and lived experiences of the young people they support, carefully considering individual circumstances and specific challenges. By listening deeply and genuinely engaging with youths' stories, these professionals establish empathetic spaces where young individuals feel truly understood—often for the first time in their lives. Such understanding and genuine interaction enable youth workers to provide more than immediate emotional relief; they create an environment conducive to meaningful and sustained personal growth (Sonneveld et al., 2020).

Through personalized activities closely aligned with individual interests, passions, and goals, youth workers successfully ignite intrinsic motivation, foster a sense of belonging, and encourage youths to develop clear personal aspirations. Whether through artistic expression, sports, or informal dialogues, these interventions consistently resonate deeply with young people, addressing their fundamental emotional, social, and psychological needs. The interventions go beyond surface-level engagement, targeting the root of vulnerabilities to build self-confidence, resilience, and a stronger sense of personal agency. Youth workers strategically utilize these personalized approaches to empower young individuals, helping them to recognize and harness their unique strengths, often transforming their outlook and future trajectories positively (Sonneveld et al., 2020).

5 STEP MODEL

"You have to recognize early on if there's more going on — trauma, mental health — and bring in the right help before it spirals."
- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM

"The moment they feel it's their plan — not yours — everything shifts. That's when real growth starts."
- Arno, Chapp De Mic

Personalized youth work plays a pivotal role in bridging the gap between vulnerable youth and specialized support services. Youth workers are trained to recognize early indicators of deeper or underlying issues, such as mental health concerns, family instability, or potential crises. By proactively identifying these signs, they are able to effectively connect youngsters with targeted professional resources, ensuring timely and appropriate interventions. This proactive and integrated approach significantly reduces the likelihood of the situation escalating and helps to maintain stability in youngster's lives. Thus, youth workers act as vital intermediaries, ensuring that the necessary support structures and interventions are promptly activated, tailored specifically to each young person's needs (Sonneveld et al., 2020).

One of the key strengths highlighted by research on personalised youth work is its voluntary nature. Young people who choose to participate actively engage with youth workers, creating relationships based on empathy and genuine mutual respect. Professional youth work therefore revolves around the experiences, needs and interests of young people themselves, reinforcing the importance of making personal choices. Aligning young people's aspirations with the contexts in which they find themselves makes the personalised approach more effective and impactful, enabling young people themselves to face the complexities of life with greater confidence and optimism (Batsleer, 2008; McGregor, 2015).

"We don't force anything. If they choose to engage, even for five minutes, that's a win. From there, we build."
- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

5 STEP MODEL

A vivid illustration comes from Belgium, where a youth worker closely collaborated with a 16-year-old disengaged from traditional education. Instead of imposing conventional educational pathways, the worker dedicated time to informal, trust-building activities. This genuine connection enabled the young person to articulate their true interests and subsequently embrace personalized interventions, significantly enhancing their life prospects (Cristiaensen et al., 2023). Similar experiences were noted by countless research a.o. Van Dijk, Koetsenruijter, and Sieckelinck (2023) in Amsterdam schools, emphasizing that tailored support crucially enables youth to recognize and nurture their unique talents.

Effective personalized youth work is deeply rooted in theories such as Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Social Resilience Theory. PYD emphasizes youths' strengths over deficits, fostering personal agency and competencies in supportive environments where young individuals feel valued and empowered (Lerner et al., 2011). Social Resilience Theory complements this by highlighting youths' capacity to leverage personal, social, and cultural resources to navigate adversity, advocating a multi-methodic approach involving mentorship, peer support, and long-term relational engagement (Metz, 2020; Ungar & Teram, 2000). Building trusting relationships is foundational in both of these approaches, providing psychological safety, fostering honest communication, and preventing disengagement from support services (Metz, 2020; Sonneveld et al., 2022).

"One young person watched for months before saying a word. When he finally spoke, it was about trust — not rap, not school. Trust."

- Arno, Chapp De Mic

"Some of these youth have never had an adult stay consistent in their lives. Just showing up week after week already builds trust."

- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

5 STEP MODEL

A personalized approach also demands profound comprehension of young people's unique contexts, requiring youth workers to blend internal (emic) perspectives—appreciating personal motivations, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences—and external (etic) perspectives, which contextualize individual struggles within broader societal issues such as socioeconomic challenges, discrimination, or systemic inequalities. Effective youth work involves equipping practitioners with the skills to understand and navigate these diverse contexts, enabling culturally sensitive and contextually informed interventions that significantly enhance youth engagement and foster deeper trust-based relationships. For instance, training programs like Amsterdam's "Universiteit van de Straat" effectively trains youth workers to deeply understand street culture, enabling culturally sensitive interventions that significantly improve youth engagement (Amsterdam Municipality, 2023).

> *"We need to stop labeling and start listening. Every young person has context, not just problems."*
> **- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM**

In a personalized approach also flexible and adaptive strategies are central, allowing young people to define their own success and progress through nonlinear pathways supported by micro-goals that build confidence (Makela et al., 2021). France's "Impact Jeunes" initiative exemplifies such adaptability, employing personalized coaching and local community networks to markedly improve education and employment outcomes among disadvantaged youth (Apprentis d'Auteuil, 2023). Mentorship further enriches personalized youth work by providing relatable role models who foster resilience, motivation, and self-confidence through tailored support. Programs like "Girls Forward" in the Netherlands showcase the effectiveness of peer mentoring, where relatable young women share experiences and challenges, significantly enhancing overall engagement and program effectiveness (Distelbrink & Yassine, 2023).

Practical initiatives such as "Jongerenwerk op Maat" in the Netherlands, France's "Le Bus des Possibles," and Belgium's "Brave Spaces" underscore the transformative power of personalized approaches. These initiatives create tailored interventions within local communities, encourage honest dialogue on sensitive issues, and holistically address multidimensional disadvantages, respectively, profoundly

impacting vulnerable youth's emotional resilience and social integration (Cristiaensen et al., 2023; Apprentis d'Auteuil, 2023). However, personalized approaches face challenges, particularly concerning measurement. Funding entities often emphasize quantifiable outcomes, like employment or educational attainment, potentially undermining personalized strategies. Yet, as argued by De St. Croix (2018), youth work's profoundest impacts often defy simple metrics, residing instead in meaningful relationships and transformative personal growth.

> *"We've seen massive change in youth that never shows up on a form. But it's there — in how they talk, carry themselves, show up."*
> **- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht**

Policy implications highlight the need for increased funding, professional development for youth workers, and enhanced cross-sector collaboration, fostering integrated support networks essential for effective personalized interventions.

4 STEP 4: PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Building upon the personalized approaches previously discussed, the next critical phase in youth work involves creating a Personal Development Plan (PDP) tailored to each vulnerable youngster individual's unique circumstances. Unlike generic interventions, a PDP explicitly captures the unique ambitions, challenges, and life contexts of each marginalised youth, outlining structured yet flexible steps toward achieving concrete personal goals.

> *"Some don't even realize they've made a plan. We keep it light, ask what they want, what they dream of—and build from there."*
> **- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw**

Personalized plans ensure continuity in care and reinforce the resilience and agency young people need to thrive in complex and challenging environments. Recent research by De Jong and De Wit (2023) highlights PDPs as indispensable instruments, especially when addressing the most vulnerable young people who

5 STEP MODEL

experience complex, intersecting challenges, often placing them at risk of criminal behaviour or severe social marginalization. In their extensive study, De Jong and De Wit (2023) illuminate how specialized youth workers actively co-create PDPs alongside young people themselves, shifting the traditional dynamic from guidance alone to authentic collaboration. They emphasize that PDPs should not be regarded as static or administrative instruments, but rather as iterative processes that privilege the young person's perspective and adapt to changing circumstances. The study emphasizes that effective PDPs are not simply administrative tools but vital bridges between traditional youth work and specialized youth care. Their findings show that youngsters that are facing with complex challenges, benefit significantly from long-term, interventions that are tailored around their personal realities, aspirations and goals, and lived experiences.

"It's more like a shared direction than a document. If they change course, we change with them."
- Arno, Chapp De Mic

By closely examining a diverse group of vulnerable youths, the researchers found that when PDPs were genuinely co-created, actively involving youngsters in defining their goals, strategies, and milestones, these young people became more engaged, resilient, and hopeful about their future. Crucially, PDPs have a dynamic and adaptable approach, continuously evolving to meet the changing needs and realities of each youth.

"I always ask them to come up with the first step. No matter how small. If it's theirs, they'll walk it."
- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM

Accordingly, youth's active participation in crafting their own PDP is not simply encouraged, but it's essential. Through a narrative-driven approach, PDPs become personalized pathways. Clear and achievable goals, aligned with the youngster's dreams, interests, and circumstances, inspire genuine commitment, allowing each each of them to gradually build confidence and self-efficacy through each achieved step.

5 STEP MODEL

"Every time they reach a small goal, it's proof to them that change is possible. We celebrate that like it's gold."
- Kristel Van Vondelen, social worker

A particularly compelling illustration comes from the detailed Human Rights Watch (2024) examination of unaccompanied migrant youths in France. Despite encountering severe and intersecting difficulties, from housing instability to disruption of their education, the study reveals how standardized policy solutions are often ineffective for these youngsters, because they neglect individual circumstances. In contrast, personalised PDPs have proven to be very effective in similar contexts, clearly outlining specific strategies tailored to each youth's immediate needs, providing clarity and direct pathways to stable housing, healthcare access and educational success.

Because a PDP is not just a procedural tool or checklist, but it is a co-creative process that encourages youngsters to take ownership of their own development path, strengthening their sense of purpose and self-efficacy. Further exploring this practical dimension, the initiative "Specialistisch Jeugdwerk voor de 2%" described by De Jong and De Wit (2023) provides another valuable example. Youth workers engaging with the most challenging cases within this 2% category emphasize a PDP model deeply integrated with specialized youth care services. Through clear, practical objectives and concrete follow-up steps, the PDP becomes a crucial mechanism for stability and continuity.

Effective PDPs are structured around actionable components rather than broad theoretical insights. Research conducted by Tilburg University (2023) particularly emphasizes the effectiveness of clear and personalised goal setting in the lives of marginalized young people. According to this study, successful PDPs define both practical short-term goals, such as securing reliable transportation, attending vocational workshops, or regularly meeting mentors and inspiring longer-term visions, such as completing formal education, gaining stable employment, or improving family relationships.

"You can't set it and forget it. We check in, we adjust, we ask again. Life changes fast at their age."
- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

5 STEP MODEL

It is important to emphasise that effective implementation of PDPs relies on consistent, personalised coaching rather than ad-hoc interventions. The French initiative “Impact Jeunes”, developed by Apprentis d'Auteuil (2023), exemplifies this through clearly defined and achievable steps that youth workers and participants actively revisit and adjust at regular intervals. Each youth’s progress is closely monitored and celebrated, reinforcing motivation and commitment at every stage. Another concrete element for the effectiveness of PDPs, as stated in step 3, involves cultural and contextual sensitivity, but this sensitivity must go beyond general understanding and translate into actionable strategies within each PDP.

> *“For some, the idea of ‘planning your future’ feels alien. You have to translate it into their world, not yours.”*
> **- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht**

Amsterdam’s "Universiteit van de Straat" offers practical training in recognizing and effectively responding to cultural contexts, enabling youth workers to develop plans that are not merely responsive but culturally resonant. PDPs developed through such approaches clearly articulate specific cultural considerations, ensuring that youngsters feel genuinely understood, respected and empowered within the planning process (Amsterdam Municipality, 2023).Regular evaluation and flexibility within the PDP are also critical. PDPs are living documents that must continuously respond to the changing circumstances of each young person. Research from the University of Antwerp (2023) specifically highlights the necessity of regular adjustments based on shifts in living situations, relationships, health, or personal ambitions. Youth workers regularly revisit the PDP with the young person, refining it to reflect new realities and opportunities, ensuring the plan remains relevant, supportive, and motivating at every stage.

Regular evaluation and flexibility within the PDP are also key. PDPs are dynamic documents that must continually respond to the changing circumstances of each young person. Research from the University of Antwerp (2023) particularly emphasises the need for regular adjustments based on changes in living conditions, relationships, health or personal ambitions. Youth workers regularly review the PDP with the youngsters, refining it to reflect new

5 STEP MODEL

realities and opportunities, ensuring that the plan remains relevant, supportive and motivating at every stage.

> *"He wouldn't even look me in the eye at first. Now he sends me demos and asks what he should charge for a gig. That's what a PDP can do."*
> **- Arno, Chapp De Mic**

> *"You need to plan with—not for. I don't show up with a format, I show up with questions."*
> **- H. Alami, fieldworker**

A practical example clearly illustrates this process: Lucas, a 17-year-old who had dropped out of formal education, worked closely with his youth worker to draw up a detailed PDP initially focused on his passion for music. Early steps included participation in informal local music workshops, a clear and manageable goal. Gradually, as Lucas's confidence grew, the plan evolved, incorporating more ambitious goals as enrolling in a professional music production program. Consistent evaluation and adaptation of the PDP ensured that Lucas felt a constant sense of progress and personal growth, ultimately leading to stable employment within the creative industry.

To foster widespread adoption of effective PDPs, policy implications become clear. Investment in youth worker training must specifically target skills in creating, evaluating, and revising highly personalized plans. Moreover, promoting integrated support networks among educational institutions, employers, healthcare providers, and local community organizations provides comprehensive resources that ensure the practical effectiveness of PDPs. Policies should explicitly encourage flexibility in intervention planning, allowing youth workers and young people the freedom to dynamically adapt PDPs to real-time circumstances.

> *"Without time and trust, a PDP is just another form to fill. The system has to give us space to do this properly."*
> **- Kristel Van Vondelen, social worker**

5 STEP MODEL

5

STEP 5: EVALUATION

In essence, Personal Development Plans embody the true essence of personalized youth work, effectively transforming youngster's aspirations into tangible and achievable outcomes through structured yet flexible pathways. When thoughtfully designed, continuously refined, and effectively implemented, PDPs can profoundly alter life's trajectories of vulnerable youth, empowering them with the confidence, resilience, and purpose necessary to navigate life's complexities.

The final evaluation is a crucial, reflective phase in youth work, systematically assessing the effectiveness of interventions and personal development plans (PDPs) implemented throughout the prior steps. This evaluative process is not merely an endpoint but rather an ongoing, integral component of the youth work cycle, providing essential feedback that guides continuous improvement and adaptation of strategies and interventions. Research consistently emphasizes that regular evaluation, when conducted thoughtfully and collaboratively, significantly enhances the quality and relevance of youth interventions, ensuring they remain responsive to the evolving needs and aspirations of vulnerable youth (Makela et al., 2021; Sonneveld et al., 2020).



"We don't just look at results — we look at what shifted. Did they start showing up? Speaking differently? That's progress too."

- Kristel Van Vondelen, social worker

5 STEP MODEL

Effective evaluation processes encompass both qualitative and quantitative methods, capturing not only measurable outcomes such as employment rates or educational achievements but also subtler transformations like improved self-confidence, strengthened social networks, and enhanced emotional resilience. In their comprehensive research, De Jong and De Wit (2023) highlight the importance of capturing these nuanced outcomes, emphasizing that traditional metrics alone often overlook critical changes in youths' lives. Their study reveals that meaningful evaluation must integrate youths' personal narratives and experiences, ensuring their voices remain central and actively inform future interventions.

"Sometimes I realize in hindsight I could have said or done something differently — and I learn from that. That's part of our growth too."
- H. Alami, fieldworker

One compelling illustration of effective evaluation practice comes from the "Impact Jeunes" initiative by Apprentis d'Auteuil (2023) in France. This program integrates ongoing, personalized follow-ups and reflective conversations with young participants, allowing youth workers to continuously assess and refine intervention strategies. Through structured dialogue, youth workers gather invaluable insights into each individual's evolving circumstances, effectively adapting PDPs to better support long-term educational and employment goals. This evaluation approach ensures interventions remain dynamically aligned with the lived experiences and aspirations of young people.

"If we don't adjust along the way, we lose them. Life moves fast for them — our plans have to keep pace."
- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM

5 STEP MODEL

Similarly, the research on multidimensional child well-being conducted by the University of Antwerp (2023) underscores the necessity of comprehensive evaluations addressing intersecting vulnerabilities such as housing stability, health concerns, and social integration. This holistic evaluation method highlights that successful youth interventions must consider the entire socio-cultural and economic environment influencing young individuals' lives, reaffirming the importance of evaluation as a tool for addressing systemic as well as individual challenges.

"Their story isn't just school or work. It's also housing, friends, family — all of that matters when we're measuring progress."
- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

Effective evaluation practices also emphasize collaboration and participation, ensuring youth are active partners rather than passive recipients in the evaluative process. Amsterdam's "Universiteit van de Straat" initiative demonstrates the transformative impact of engaging youth in evaluations, using culturally sensitive methods that resonate deeply with their experiences and perspectives (Amsterdam Municipality, 2023). By empowering young individuals to articulate their own assessments of interventions, youth workers significantly enhance youths' sense of ownership, accountability, and agency. We would like to end this step by adding that evaluation happens through relationships, not just metrics!

"We ask: how do you feel it's going? What would you change? Their answers help us adjust the course."
- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

"Sometimes youth say, 'I didn't like that part.' And we listen — that feedback makes the next round stronger."
- Arno, Chapp De Mic

5 STEP MODEL

Youth workers are encouraged to consistently utilize these comprehensive evaluation strategies to refine and enhance their practice. Regular reflective sessions and systematic evaluations can enable them to critically assess their effectiveness, ensuring they remain sensitive to the evolving realities and needs of vulnerable youth. These structured evaluations not only strengthen intervention outcomes but also contribute significantly to professional development among youth workers, equipping them with the insights and skills necessary for adaptive, impactful youth work.

"It's not always about a big turnaround. Even small changes — showing up on time, calling back — are wins we reflect on together."
- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

In conclusion, the final evaluation step in youth work represents a critical opportunity for reflection, learning, and continuous improvement. By systematically integrating comprehensive, participatory evaluation methods into youth interventions, youth workers ensure their practice remains relevant, responsive, and impactful. This ongoing evaluative process not only enhances the quality and effectiveness of interventions but profoundly reinforces the resilience, agency, and empowerment of vulnerable youth, guiding them confidently toward sustainable and meaningful futures.

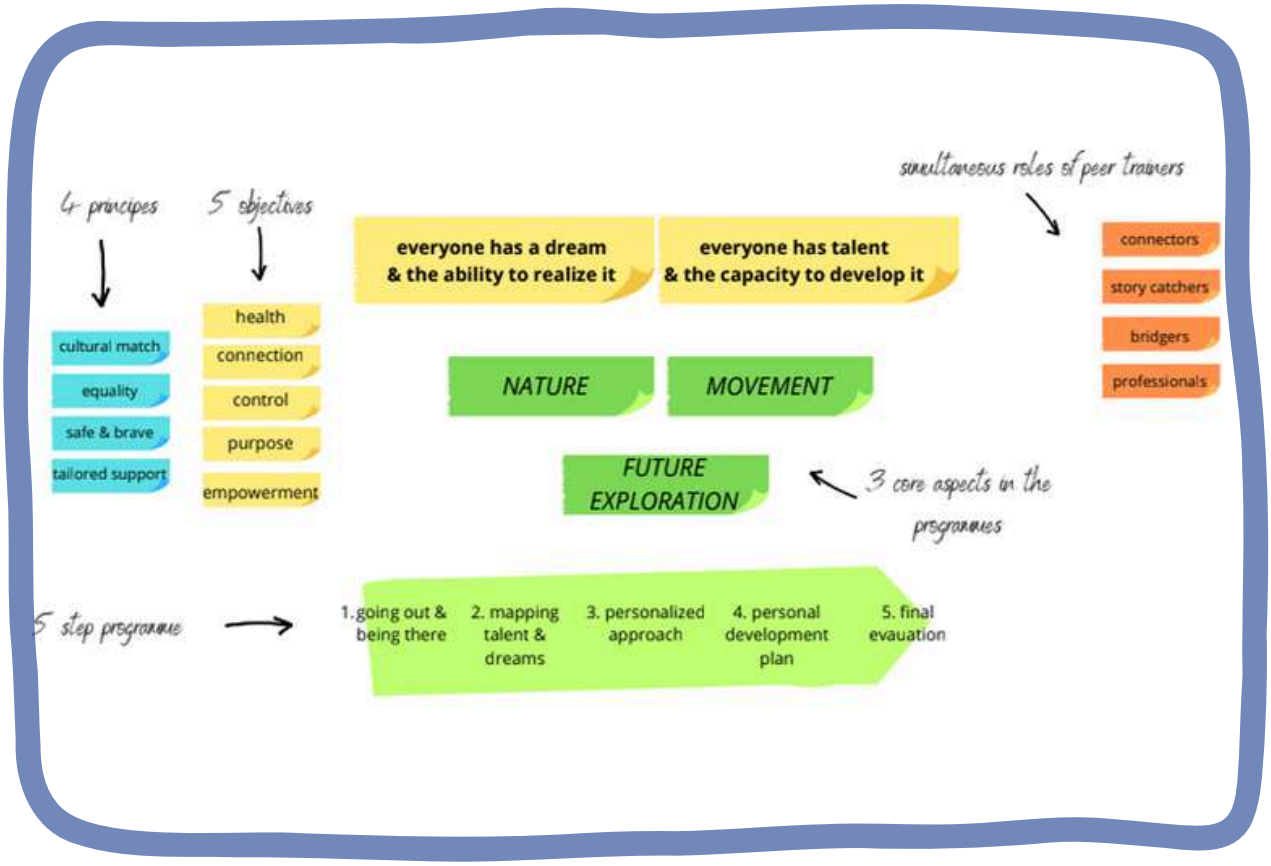
"If we don't take time to look back with them, they can't see how far they've come — and we can't see where to go next."
- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

PRINCIPLES, OBJECTIVES AND THE ROLE OF TRAINERS

The five-step youth work program described here above is not a stand-alone framework; it is thoughtfully complemented and enriched by a set of guiding principles, clear objectives, and defined roles for youth workers, as outlined in our summary. These elements collectively ensure a coherent and impactful approach to supporting vulnerable youngsters.



We are streewise framework:



PRINCIPLES, OBJECTIVES AND THE ROLE OF TRAINERS

In our research we have found 4 foundational guiding principles: cultural match, equality, safe and brave spaces and tailored support. The principle of cultural match emphasizes the importance of aligning interventions closely with the personal, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds of young individuals. This alignment ensures genuine resonance and effectiveness of interventions, as evidenced by various programs such as "Universiteit van de Straat" in Amsterdam, which highlights the significant impact of culturally sensitive practices in youth work (Amsterdam Municipality, 2023).

"It makes a huge difference when they see someone who talks like them, walks like them, and understands their world."
- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

Equality ensures fair and unbiased access to resources and opportunities, while safe and brave spaces foster environments in which young people feel secure enough to express themselves authentically and tackle challenging personal issues.

"The moment they realize they can speak without being judged — that's when the real conversation starts."
- Kristel Van Vondelen, social worker

Tailored support signifies a deeply personalized approach, acknowledging that every individual's journey and needs differ significantly.

PRINCIPLES, OBJECTIVES AND THE ROLE OF TRAINERS

"What works for one youth doesn't work for another. We adjust constantly — pace, language, even the setting."
- H. Alami, fieldworker

"We don't just work on what's broken — we help them find what makes them strong."
- Arno, Chapp De Mic

Aligned with these principles we defined five clearly objectives: health, connection, control, purpose, and empowerment. These objectives are addressing both immediate and long-term developmental needs. Health involves supporting both physical and mental well-being; connection relates to developing meaningful social skills; control emphasizes managing emotions and behaviours constructively; purpose involves helping young individuals identify and pursue meaningful personal goals; and empowerment focuses on fostering self-esteem, confidence, and autonomy. These objectives align with international findings, such as those presented by Sonneveld et al. (2022) and Metz (2020), emphasizing the importance of holistic personal development in effective youth work.

The youth workers in our framework also simultaneously fulfil multiple, nuanced roles to effectively engage with and support young individuals. These roles are clearly defined as connectors, story catchers, bridgers, and professionals. Connectors possess the social skills and empathy required to form genuine, lasting relationships with young individuals, often grounded in shared experiences or deep cultural understanding. This skillset ensures youth feel valued and understood, creating a foundational trust essential for effective engagement.

PRINCIPLES, OBJECTIVES AND THE ROLE OF TRAINERS

"If they don't feel seen by you, nothing else matters. Connection comes first."
- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

Story catchers play a critical role in creating safe and brave spaces where young individuals are encouraged to share their narratives openly and authentically. They possess exceptional listening skills, both verbal and non-verbal, capturing the depth and nuances of each individual's story.

"They don't always tell you in words. Sometimes it's music, silence, or showing up late — but it's all part of the story."
- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM

Bridgers act strategically to connect young people with relevant professional support networks, from educational institutions to specialized mental health services, ensuring comprehensive care tailored to individual circumstances. They know which actors are active within and around the target group (they know the care map like the back of their hand) and know which people match with which support staff.

"It's not just about knowing the system — it's about knowing who fits where, and who can truly help this person right now."
- Arno, Chapp De Mic

Professionals uphold high standards of integrity, confidentiality, and trustworthiness, embodying a consistent, reliable presence in young people's lives.

PRINCIPLES, OBJECTIVES AND THE ROLE OF TRAINERS

"Being professional doesn't mean being distant. It means being consistent, respectful, and real."
- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw

Central to these roles and objectives we belief is that every individual has a dream and the inherent ability to realize it, alongside possessing unique talents with the capacity to develop them further. This human-centred vision is supported by three core program aspects—Nature, Movement, and Future Exploration—which encourage young individuals to actively explore their environments, physical capacities, and future possibilities.

"Sometimes clarity doesn't come in a conversation — it comes in a walk, a song, a quiet moment after basketball."
- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht

These aspects foster a dynamic approach to youth work that engages young people physically, emotionally, and intellectually, building intrinsic motivation and resilience essential for meaningful personal and social change. These carefully integrated elements from our interviews, combined with evidence from relevant research and practice examples from Antwerp, Marseille, and Utrecht, demonstrate the critical importance of a coherent, holistic framework in effectively addressing the complex and diverse needs of vulnerable youth.

"Every part matters — the connection, the challenge, the reflection. Without all three, it doesn't stick."
- Kristel Van Vondelen, social worker

Through the strategic integration of clear principles, targeted objectives, defined roles, and dynamic program aspects, the outlined five-step methodology achieves a robust, impactful approach capable of profoundly transforming the trajectories of vulnerable youth towards empowered, meaningful, and socially integrated futures.

GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite considerable efforts at the local and European level to support vulnerable youth, several structural and systemic gaps continue to hinder effective outreach and long-term reintegration. The following section brings together desk research findings and field-based insights gathered in Antwerp, Marseille and Utrecht, highlighting key areas where youth support remains insufficient or fragmented.

One of the most pressing issues is the lack of structural cross-sector coordination. While youth workers often collaborate with schools, mental health services, or legal support on an ad-hoc basis, there is rarely a durable framework that ensures all involved actors communicate and align on shared objectives. This leaves many young people navigating disconnected systems on their own, and increases the risk that they fall through the cracks. As noted by F. Van Den Bosch, from UDM:

> *"Even as professionals, we sometimes struggle to navigate the system. Imagine what that's like for a 17-year-old with no support."*

A second major gap concerns legal and bureaucratic invisibility. Many young people, particularly those with a migrant background or precarious residence status, lack access to clear information about their rights and entitlements. As K. Van Vondelen, social worker in Utrecht, explained:

> *"A lot of youth don't even know what rights they have at work. That makes them easy targets for exploitation."*

These legal barriers, coupled with low trust in institutions, create an environment where vulnerability is reinforced rather than addressed.
Another common pattern across the field research is the disillusionment youth experience when invited to participate in civic spaces, but see no concrete result from their involvement. In Utrecht, several professionals noted that while local youth councils exist, young people's recommendations are rarely implemented. This perceived tokenism undermines trust.

GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

> *"It's frustrating for young people when they give feedback or participate in councils and nothing happens with it. Eventually, they disengage completely,"*

said J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht.

Cultural and personal development opportunities are often inaccessible due to economic or social barriers. In Antwerp, for example, low-income youth are often excluded from arts programs or sports clubs due to cost, transport issues, or lack of awareness.
Arno from Chapp De Mic noted:

> *"Cultural spaces often exclude the very youth who need them most. We use music because it's free, accessible, and deeply personal, it gives young people a voice".*

Additionally, youth workers themselves face systemic limitations. They are expected to play the role of connector, mentor, guide, and social worker, but often lack the resources, training, and time to fulfil these roles sustainably.

Several interviewees stressed the emotional labour of the job and the need for reflective spaces and structural support. As Arno from Chapp De Mic noted,

> *"Authenticity is everything. If they sense you're not real, they shut down."*

Finally, short-term funding cycles and project-based thinking hinder deeper impact. Several respondents highlighted the mismatch between the time it takes to build trust and the pressure to deliver fast, measurable results.

> "We've seen massive change in youth that never shows up on a form. But it's there — in how they talk, carry themselves, show up".

said J.W. de Koning. These qualitative shifts are often undervalued in funding logic, even though they are key to preventing recidivism and long-term disengagement.

GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

These gaps reveal an urgent need to rethink how youth work is positioned, funded, and integrated within the broader welfare and civic ecosystem. While some innovations already exist, the opportunities ahead lie in scaling and embedding practices that foreground youth agency and systemic equity.

First and foremost, outreach youth work must be recognized as a long-term investment rather than a short-term intervention. This includes funding models that prioritize process over output, and that give youth workers the space to build lasting relationships rather than ticking boxes. In line with this, intersectoral teams that combine legal, psychological, and educational expertise could offer more coherent support pathways, reducing fragmentation. Secondly, legal literacy and advocacy should become core components of outreach work Youth workers must be equipped with tools and partnerships that allow them to guide young people through bureaucratic procedures, including housing applications, school enrolment, and employment rights. On the civic side, the opportunity lies not in creating more consultation spaces, but in transferring actual decision-making power.

Co-creation models, where youth help design and evaluate policies or programmes, could bridge the current gap between engagement and impact. Cultural participation also needs to be reframed. Initiatives like Arno from Chapp De Mic show how non-formal spaces can be powerful engines for empowerment and identity-building. Scaling such practices means lowering financial barriers and investing in local infrastructure.
Finally, the role of the youth worker must be protected and nurtured. Ongoing, practice-based training and emotional support are essential to retain skilled professionals in the field.
As Fouad from Skillz Antwerpen put it:

> *"Sometimes just showing up — on a street corner, at a skate park — makes the difference. It's not about offering a solution right away, it's about being a steady presence".*

In sum, the challenge is not just to fill gaps, but to create ecosystems of support where young people feel seen, valued, and equipped to shape their own futures.

RECOMENDATIONS
For Youth Work Organizations

Youth work organizations across Utrecht, Antwerp, and Marseille play a pivotal role in addressing the complex and layered needs of young people at risk. However, to enhance their impact, several strategic and operational improvements can be considered:

1 Prioritize practical, flexible training formats.

Many grassroots organizations are volunteer-driven and operate with limited time and capacity. Traditional multi-day training modules are often inaccessible.

> *"We don't have the time or people to follow a full week of training. Give us something useful we can apply tomorrow — short, real-life, and straight to the point."*
> **- Fouad, Skillz Antwerpen vzw**

Training for youth workers should focus on real-world situations, preferably using case-based learning, simulations, and peer exchanges.

> *"Training needs to be real-world and hands-on. The ability to simulate real-world scenarios and practice techniques in a safe space enhances effectiveness."*
> **- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM**

Content could include topics such as trauma-informed approaches, navigating bureaucratic systems, de-escalation techniques, and identifying early signs of radicalization or mental health concerns.

RECOMENDATIONS
For Youth Work Organizations

2 Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration

Youth workers often serve as bridges between young people and specialized services, but many express the need for clearer, more consistent cooperation with social services, schools, mental health institutions, and police.

> *"Sometimes we're doing work that technically isn't ours — guiding someone through a legal process or medical intake — because no one else steps in on time."*
> **- K. Van Vondelen, social worker**

Building strong, structured partnerships and local support networks ensures youth workers don't have to carry the entire burden of care alone.

3 Embed reflection and self-care in practice

Organizations must ensure youth workers - especially those with lived experience - receive adequate emotional and professional support.

> *"Youth workers can't pour from an empty cup. They need coaching, peer support, and the space to reflect, otherwise they burn out."*
> **- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM**

Supervision, intervision, and time for reflection must be built into project timelines and funded accordingly.

RECOMENDATIONS
For Youth Work Organizations

4 Focus on culturally relevant and creative methods.

Youth workers often serve as bridges between young people and specialized services, but many express the need for clearer, more consistent cooperation with social services, schools, mental health institutions, and police.



"Music is our method — it's how they express trauma, hopes, and who they want to be. We build trust through that."

- Arno, Chapp De Mic



RECOMENDATIONS
For Stakeholders and Policymakers

While many cities have recognized the importance of youth work in theory, its execution is often undermined by rigid policy structures, short-termism, and inadequate funding mechanisms. Based on the gaps identified, we recommend:

1 Move from project logic to long-term investment

Most youth workers operate within project cycles, often no longer than 1 to 3 years. This discourages continuity and sustainable relationship building.

> *"You can't expect deep change if your funding ends right when trust is being built."*
> **- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht**

Youth work requires time. Multi-year frameworks and core funding — not just project-based subsidies — are necessary to allow for stable, long-term support.

2 Increase flexibility and trust in funding models

Youth workers consistently describe funding requirements as overly bureaucratic and misaligned with real needs. Grant systems should allow room for adaptation, experimentation, and youth-driven processes.

> *"Real youth work is messy. If you force it into neat boxes, you lose the magic."*
> **- F. Van Den Bosch, UDM**

RECOMENDATIONS
For Stakeholders and Policymakers

3 Invest in local, culturally anchored initiatives

Local organizations rooted in the community have higher legitimacy among at-risk youth. They understand the context and often share cultural or linguistic backgrounds with the target group.

Cities like Antwerp and Utrecht illustrate the value of local, culturally sensitive programs such as Skillz Antwerpen and Chapp De Mic, which effectively address the specific cultural and social realities of at-risk youth. Policymakers must prioritize direct funding to such grassroots initiatives, allowing youth organizations the autonomy to innovate and adapt to local needs. Moreover, clear metrics must be developed collaboratively with youth workers to reflect the genuine outcomes of trust-building and personal empowerment, rather than mere numeric targets. Policies must recognize the value of these organizations, even if they lack formal structure or professionalized staff. Mentoring programs and accessible support for these micro-organizations should be institutionalized.

4 Bridge the gap between education, housing, and youth support

Young people's needs are cross-sectoral. Integrating youth work into broader urban policy domains — such as affordable housing, education reform, and mental health — is essential for holistic inclusion.

5 Listen to youth voices — and act on them

Youth councils, feedback loops, and participation mechanisms often exist in name only. Policymakers must not only consult young people but demonstrate how their input translates into real action.

> *"When nothing happens with their feedback, they give up. And then the system blames them for disengaging."*
> **- J.W. de Koning, wijkagent Utrecht**

CONCLUSION

This desk research has provided a grounded and multi-layered understanding of the needs, challenges, and possibilities surrounding vulnerable youth in Marseille, Antwerp, and Utrecht. While these three cities differ in culture, infrastructure, and institutional frameworks, they share an uncomfortable reality: young people growing up in structurally marginalized conditions face overlapping struggles. Whether it concerns precarious housing, early school leaving, lack of access to mental health support, racial profiling, or limited chances on the labor market — the root causes lie not in individual shortcomings but in systemic gaps.

Yet, despite this reality, what we've witnessed — both in literature and in the testimonies from the field — is not just a story of vulnerability. It is also a story of strength, resistance, and potential. Youth workers, outreach professionals, and community leaders across the three cities consistently describe how trust, cultural connection, and personalized engagement can transform lives.

Their work often begins with the simplest but most profound gesture: being there. Listening. Creating space for young people to speak, act, and take ownership of their own development.

From Skillz Antwerpen to Jellinek Utrecht and Chapp De Mic, from the wijkagent in Overvecht to social workers in the neighborhoods of Marseille — the interviews reveal a shared ethic: youth work is not transactional, it's relational. Whether through hip-hop workshops, late-night street conversations, informal check-ins or long-term mentorship, it is clear that effective youth work cannot be standardized. It must be responsive, situated, and deeply human.

However, the reality is also that much of this work is done under strain. Interviewees highlighted how the flexibility and adaptability that make youth work effective are often undermined by rigid funding structures, short-term projects, and a lack of political recognition.

CONCLUSION

Volunteer-based organizations, like Fouad's, rarely have the capacity to attend lengthy trainings or produce formal metrics — yet they deliver transformative impact daily. AS one of our interviewees adequality formulated:

> *"When you focus too much on systems or reporting, you risk losing sight of the actual young person standing in front of you."*

Our 5-step model, developed through this research, reflects both academic insight and street-level experience. From "Going Out and Being There" to "Final Evaluation," it centers youth agency, cultural relevance, and community-based trust. But for such models to succeed, they must be matched by structural support — from local policymakers, funders, and education systems. As several interviewees warned, without a shift in how youth work is valued, we risk losing the very people and spaces that are closest to those most at risk. And when youth workers burn out or disengage, young people lose critical allies in their lives.

Ultimately, this research confirms that marginalized youth don't need more control or punishment — they need time, space, and people who believe in them. They need systems that adapt to their realities, not the other way around. And they need pathways that make it possible to move from survival to meaning, from disconnection to belonging. If we truly want to build inclusive cities, we must stop framing these young people as the problem — and start seeing them as part of the solution.



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