

1. Youth Work with Youth Offenders: The Scope and the Methodological Approach

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Since the lack of education and unemployment tend to be correlated with crime, programs aimed at reducing these two risk factors have been suggested as a means to reduce recidivism (Steurer et al., 2001; Hull et al., 2000; Batiuk et al., 2005; Vacca, 2004), as well as crime in general (Bushway & Reuter, 1997; Bouffard, Mackenzie & Hickman, 2000). Furthermore, the level of formal education, knowledge, skills and work experience of ex-convicts have significant influence on employment rate and overall life opportunities. Individuals belonging to this group are exposed to the particular risk of not getting employed due to the background of former convicts. For young people this means an early stigmatization and lack of life opportunities. (Kolaković-Bojović & Batrićević, 2020)

The project YW4Offenders aims to strengthen the quality and recognition of youth work programs for youth offenders in community and institutional settings. Within the project, a particular focus is placed on employability, namely on the development of skills and competences relevant for finding, maintaining and personal development through employment.

Bringing together experts from youth work, education, social protection and justice systems, the project connects partners from Serbia, Portugal and Greece who jointly develop, test and promote an innovative youth work program for youth offenders, oriented towards enhancing employability and developing competences relevant for employment.

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Within the project, partners are acting together in order to:

- Conduct the study visits and prepare a publication on the potential of youth work in working with youth offenders, with a particular emphasis on employability
- Develop a youth work program aimed at enhancing the employability of youth offenders, through a participatory process involving experts from different sectors
- Implement and evaluate the youth work program aimed at enhancing employability in Serbia, Portugal and Greece
- Organize training for experts working with youth offenders in community and institutional settings
- Implement promotion and dissemination activities to raise awareness of the project results.

Developed as a first step on the Project Team's way towards designing the youth work program for youth offenders, this publication was built based on the data collected during the three study visits of the Project Team to Greece, Portugal and Serbia, where they had the opportunity to have a direct insight into the legislative framework, organization and practices used to incorporate the youth work in treatment and reintegration of youth offenders.

Developed in such a way, it provides for a comprehensive overview of the juvenile justice systems in the three countries and explores the potential of youth work for youth offenders and the possibilities for its implementation in community-based and institution-based treatment, with the special focus on the potential of youth work in the following contexts:

- Youth work in the context of application of diversional models of juvenile justice proceedings.
- Youth work in the context of enforcement of penal sanctions and educational measures for juvenile offenders as a tool of their treatment.
- Youth work in the context of post-penal care as a tool for fostering a resocialization and reintegration as well as a mechanism to reduce the recidivism rate.

All the three abovementioned contexts are presented in this publication through the lens of:

- The theoretical concepts and potentials of youth work,
- The relevant international standards and policies, as well as through
- The landscapes of the national legal and institutional systems in Serbia, Portugal and Greece.

Taking into account all the differences between the national legal systems, this publication focuses on those youth who committed the crime being underaged in accordance with the provisions of the national legal system applicable to them.

Starting from the premise that the public policies in such a vital field should be based on the scientific evidence (Kolaković-Bojović, 2022), and focused equally on the current state of play, the main achievements and the present challenges, this publication was built based on the data collected during the three study visits of the Project Team to Greece, Portugal and Serbia, where they had the opportunity to have a direct insight into the legislative framework, organization and practices used to incorporate youth work in the treatment and reintegration of youth offenders.

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