

7. Conclusions: Identifying Opportunities for Youth Work Across Juvenile Justice Systems

Dragana BOGIĆEVIĆ, MA²⁵

Milica KOLAKOVIĆ-BOJOVIĆ, PhD²⁶

The analyses of Serbia, Greece and Portugal show that juvenile justice systems contain a range of educational, rehabilitative and reintegrative elements that extend beyond or built on the formal response to offending, often in a form of the practical evolution of the legal and institutional concepts through the synergy of professionals and programs engaging with youth work with youth offenders. Diversionary and community-based measures, institutional programmes, education, vocational training, structured activities and preparation for reintegration all reflect an orientation towards young people's development and future participation in society. Even more, they show that, not a clear cut, but a complementarity and synergy between the institutional and the community response, together with their continuity are important for successful reintegration of young offenders in the society.

Although these elements are organised differently across the three countries, the comparison reveals several common issues:

- 1) The existence of measures and services does not necessarily ensure their consistent implementation, accessibility or continuity.

Namely, the analysis showed that in all of the three countries there are gaps in ensuring continuity of the response and the support until a youth offender

²⁵ CEPORA - Center for Positive Youth Development, dragana.bogicevic@cepora.org

²⁶ Principal Research Fellow, Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research, Belgrade, kolakius@gmail.com

strengthens its own capacities and resilience to the extent needed to fully reintegrate into society. It also shows a significant difference in accessibility of available services across each of the countries, where the most of available services and programs are available in bigger cities. There is also a lack of organised, systematised and easily accessible information on available programs and services coupled with challenges associated with adaptation of both, available services and information on them to the needs of the especially and/or multiple vulnerable categories of youth offenders, such as migrants, youth from Roma community and youth with intellectual/developmental challenges. Finally, the analysis proves the existence of a number of positive examples of innovative and successful programs and initiatives that are yet to be subject to a countrywide roll-out.

- 2) The developmental value of the existing services depends on institutional capacities, the availability of professionals, cooperation between relevant sectors and the extent to which support provided within juvenile justice is connected with opportunities in the community.

This is particularly important at points of transition. Young people may move between community-based and institutional responses, return to education or training, or reach the end of a formal measure while continuing to face social, educational and economic barriers. In such circumstances, fragmented or short-term support may limit the value of otherwise relevant interventions and weaken the connection between experiences within the juvenile justice system and young people's longer-term pathways.

The analysis showed that the weakest point of this continuous process is the period of post-penal resettlement, i.e., the return to the community, especially in situations where adequate community support is lacking following intensive institutional treatment. This gap is associated with a lack of institutionalization and/or adequate staffing of the probation services coupled with their weak cooperation with the community-based programs and services that can bring a significant added value to the youth development and reintegration.

The international and European standards considered in this publication provide a common framework for understanding these challenges. Their emphasis on minimum intervention, education and development, participation, continuity and reintegration confirm that effective juvenile justice requires responses that address young people's broader developmental and social needs, rather than focusing exclusively on offending behaviour.

Within this framework, the three national systems reveal meaningful opportunities for youth work to connect with and strengthen existing juvenile justice responses. Its potential is particularly visible where current measures do not fully ensure sustained engagement, continuity of support or connection with young people's broader educational, vocational and social pathways.

Youth work can therefore provide an additional developmental layer within existing structures, helping to bridge gaps between formal interventions and the opportunities young people need for successful reintegration and participation in community life.

Taken together, the common elements and recurring gaps identified across the three systems point to a clear potential for youth work with young people in conflict with the law. They provide a basis for developing a youth work programme focused on employability, grounded in the developmental needs of young people and connected with the opportunities already present within juvenile justice and community settings.

In addition to the best practices identified in the three partner countries, this programme shall integrate a principle of joint and/or compatible institutional and community-based response to the needs of youth offenders, especially in terms of filling the gaps between the two regimes and ensuring the smooth transition from institutional or hybrid response/support to the community-based one as well as the transition from the community-based response/support to the successful reintegration and ability to address life challenges without conflicting with law.