

WHAT'S STOPPING US?

FRESH THINKING
on young people
and society



Reflection 1 of a series of 4:

THOUGHTS ON SYSTEMS

Research findings, data, and case studies from 10 countries which shed light on the issues and make recommendations for change.



SYSTEMS

How do we harness the power and potential of all young people?

From the justice system and policing, to how schools, businesses, and community organisations operate, hundreds of systems enable, or inhibit, young people's positive engagement in society.



This is just a very short reflection from a major three-year project. If it inspires you to find out more (and there is much more information available), we tell you where and how on page 14.

By analysing the latest research and data, interviewing young people, and seeking out powerful real-life examples, we know there is vast, untapped potential.

Across Europe and beyond, by having a better understanding of young people's lives and what motivates and frustrates them, we can build stronger, more cohesive communities for the future.

Under the theme of systems, read on, for some:

- top-line reflections and findings
- what young people had to tell us
- what we can do about it
(recommendations for change)

You may also wish to read our other three reflections from this project on the following themes: **Labels**, **Inequality** and **Engagement**.

“They [police officers] saw us on our bikes...and they kept on like videoing us and that. And we were like, *‘Why you videoing us? What we done wrong?’* And they said...*‘It don’t matter what you done wrong. I can do whatever I want.’* One of my mates said, *‘Would you like it if I videoed you?’* And they...drove off, saying, *‘Watch it.’*”

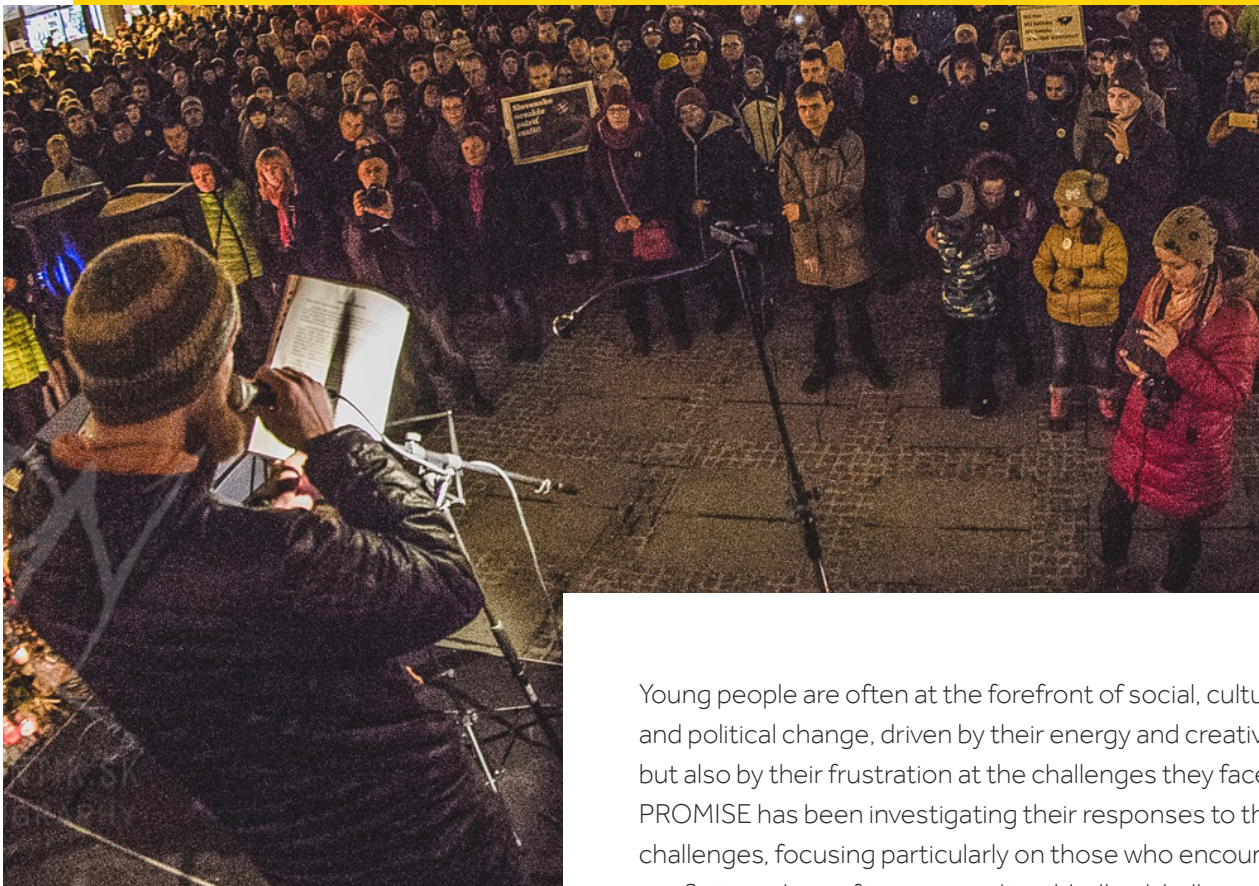
Troy, male, 13, UK.

THE PROMISE PROJECT



An introduction

PROMISE (Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement) is a major EU-funded research project exploring young people's role in shaping society: past, present, and future.



Young people are often at the forefront of social, cultural, and political change, driven by their energy and creativity, but also by their frustration at the challenges they face. PROMISE has been investigating their responses to these challenges, focusing particularly on those who encounter conflicts and are often seen as 'troubled' or 'challenging'.

Through a better understanding of the experiences, values and attitudes of European youth and those young people least heard by decision-makers, PROMISE got to the heart of the barriers and opportunities for social engagement and stronger societies.

THE PROMISE PROJECT

Fact and figures

12

PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

including universities, NGOs (non-governmental organisations), research and educational institutes from across Europe

10

COUNTRIES INVOLVED

Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia, the Russian Federation, Spain, and the UK

3

YEARS OF IN-DEPTH RESEARCH

beginning in 2016 and concluding in 2019

22

REAL-LIFE PROJECT CASE STUDIES GATHERED

12,666

SURVEY RESPONSES

comparing social and political engagement across the generations



A MIXED METHODS APPROACH

quantitative data to explore differences in youth attitudes and behaviour across Europe; ethnographic and participatory research methods to look more closely at youth engagement and innovation



POWERFUL TESTIMONIES

gathered from hundreds of young people aged 13-32, with older respondents looking back on their younger years



ANALYSIS

of existing data involving around 8,500 young people



RECOMMENDATIONS

practical, take-home recommendations for policy makers and stakeholders

“ I wanted to get a job, but I wasn't motivated to get a job. But coming here and when (youth worker) started speaking to me about jobs, he made me get up and think about it, and realise '*I want to do that.*' So, then I started looking for jobs and I found one I liked, an apprenticeship, ”

Jacob, male, 17, UK.

SYSTEMS AND CONFLICT

Every country is different, from its demographic structure to its political, cultural, and social systems. These features affect the opportunities available for the whole population, and of course for young people who face the challenges of becoming adult citizens.

Despite the differences, however, many clear themes and findings emerged:

A huge barrier to young people's engagement is conflict with systems.

Many of the formal interventions they face (for example, the justice system, welfare system, civil, legal) serve to re-stigmatise and re-embed conflict, rather than to resolve it.

For example, we heard from young people whose responses were viewed as 'causing trouble' when they deeply cared about many issues but felt no one in authority would listen. Finding ways to incorporate youth support in all areas (education, employment, social), particularly for those facing multiple life challenges, is crucial to their social and political engagement.

Another hurdle to participation is a lack of investment in 'alternative' systems for young people.

As well as mainstream institutions like schools and colleges, we need informal systems to enable young people to express themselves and grow. Some may be run by charities or community groups, others might be established or run by young people themselves.

Many of the young people we talked to felt disconnected from their local community, particularly by those in power. If young people feel excluded and unwanted, without cultural or social opportunities and places to go, they will become more marginalised and disengaged.

To get the best out of young people, systems must offer supportive and positive relationships.

An overwhelming finding across all our work was that the more young people can trust, the more they will engage.

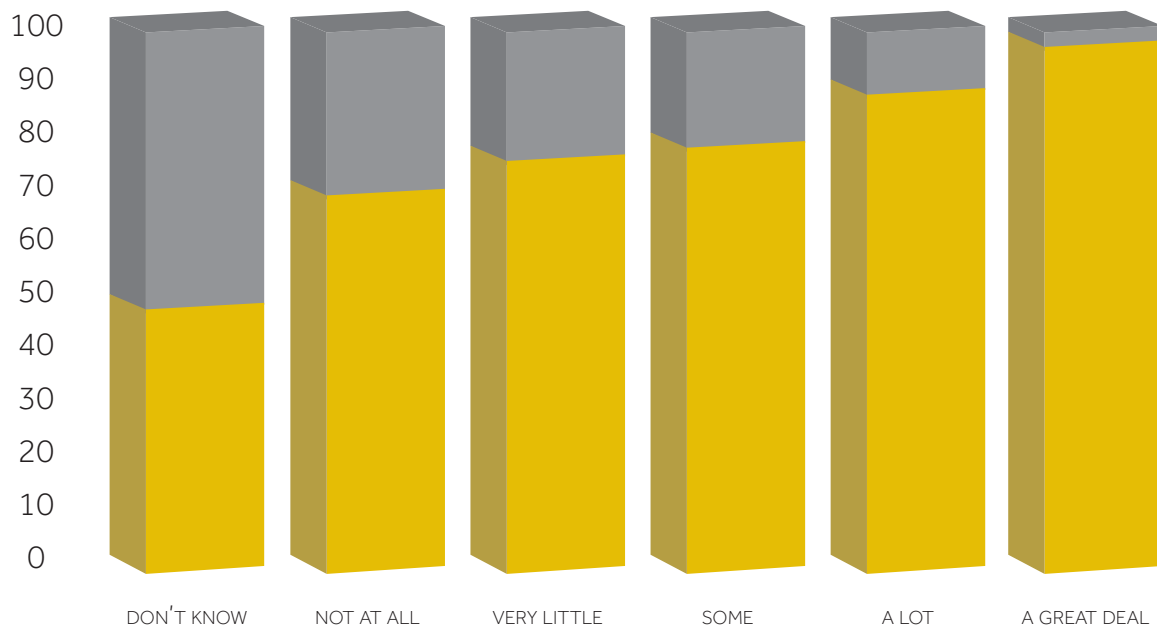
Our research found that even more than trust in political institutions, it is trust in other people that is most able to increase political and social engagement. And it is those young people who are the most disadvantaged who tend to have the most contact, often negative contact, with 'systems'. They are also most likely to have experienced a lack or loss of positive relationships and support in their lives.

Belief in systems: government

The greatest system affecting all citizens is government itself, so we asked young people how much they felt they could influence it. PROMISE researchers found that those least politically and socially active are also least likely to think their government gives them a voice. By contrast, young people who are engaging in everyday political and social activities are more likely to feel their government represents them.

For young people who are not engaged in formal systems, this belief that they have no voice can become a cycle that leads to further exclusion.

Opinion that “my voice is heard”: correlation between opinion and engagement



RESPONSE

- ENGAGING IN ACTIVITIES
- NOT ENGAGING IN ACTIVITIES

*everyday engagement activity level based on donations, political statements or online activities, regular volunteering, helping other people or helping in the local area.

Responses to conflict

Young people who feel they have no voice or purpose can get into conflict with mainstream society. Those we talked to tended to respond to conflict with systems in three main ways:

Staying in conflict (for example unemployment, school indiscipline and failure or criminal activity)

In the case of young migrants without a work permit in Spain, staying in conflict meant engaging in illegal businesses, like street vending or selling drugs, to get money.

In Estonia, some young people used survival strategies, for example by accepting and displaying their 'ex-offender label' among peers, young people may earn some benefits: peers with similar backgrounds may respect them, while 'enemies' will be afraid.

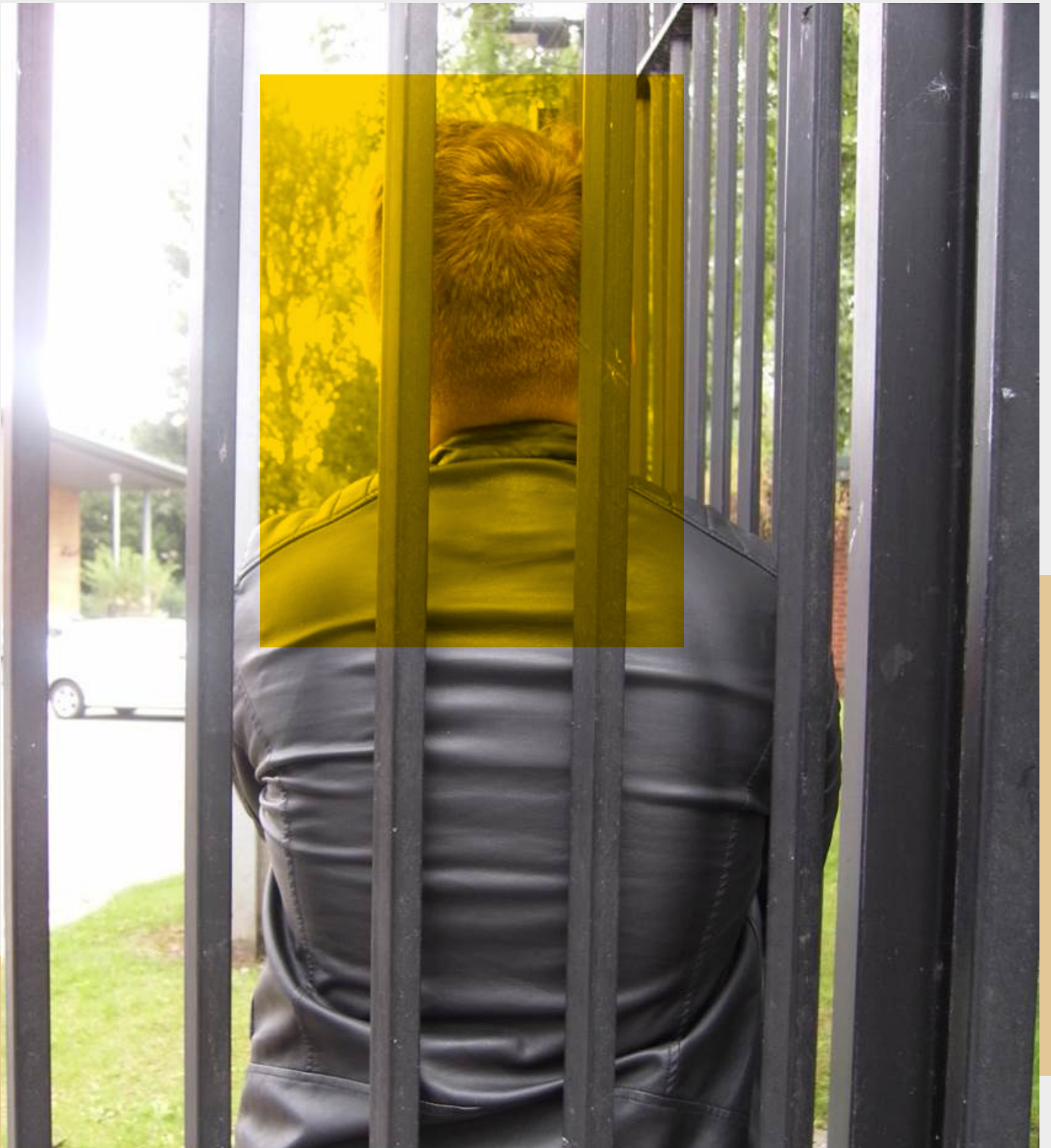
Actively searching for support and opportunities (within mainstream systems)

Despite their negative experiences in education, many of those we spoke to, mostly from the Portuguese and the British case studies, attempted to carve out opportunities by attending college or 'second chance' schools, focusing on their positive aspects and strongest areas, and seeking specific skills training such as cooking or mechanic's courses.

Turning conflict into opportunity (within alternative systems)

An Italian Artistic Start-Up project, run by its users, found that common experiences of marginalisation and hardship (from years spent in street gangs) led them to develop a strong sense of belonging. This sense of belonging was something that could be transferred to the local community, enabling these young people to become involved in local life.

Through the medium of art, the young people learned to use their street origin as an asset, something they could share with younger generations, getting them involved in their arts projects. By so doing, the stigma of marginality had become a strength by which they aim to create change in society.



“ I found [here] a blank sheet that said, “...*we will not judge you*”. Everyone has always judged the way I talk, my gestures... Then when I first got here it was like: wow, these people are cool! These people are not paying attention to the way I talk but to what I am saying! ”

Marc, male, 21, Spain.
(about a support project set up and run by young people)

FIVE WAYS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

1**Conflict generates conflict.**

This was the view of many of the young people we spoke to. If we want to enable young people in conflict with our systems to make positive change, we must create systems that avoid locking them into cycles of failure.

2**Schools and legal systems must better support the most troubled and disadvantaged young people.**

School failure and problematic behaviour at school were among the most frequent conflict-heavy experiences reported to us, particularly in our Portuguese and British case studies. Negative expectations by teachers and frequent school exclusions have a devastating impact on young people's educational paths.

Research has also found that young people with criminal backgrounds often feel they are treated as suspects and are more harshly judged by social services, probation officers and court judges. If stricter sanctions are imposed, these limit new opportunities for positive change, such as getting a job, attending a youth programme, or training course, moving to another city or country, and being able to afford somewhere to live.

3**Investment in youth clubs, programmes and in spaces for young people makes a huge, positive difference.**

Reliable, long-term funding for youth work and services is needed, along with spaces for young people. Cities are often very restricted when it comes to distributing space to different groups. Without any opportunities to explore different views, ways of life and ideas, prospects for young people are low and engagement in society drops.

4**Greater appreciation of the effort and value of youth-led initiatives is needed.**

There is huge potential for positive change, even in the least likely places. Self-organised groups with bottom-up approaches need to be treated equally to formal, established youth groups; systems are needed that empower and listen to the ideas and concerns of all young people, particularly those who face the biggest life challenges.

We need easy-to-access funding opportunities for informal youth-led activities and to raise awareness of these. We must work with wider initiatives such as the new Youth Dialogue initiative, a core element of the United Nation's 2030 Youth Strategy, in order to access opportunities for all young people.

5**Relationships are key to success and systems must adapt to recognise this.**

If based on empathy, trust, and confidence, and if adapted to young people's needs and traits, relationships, such as those found with many youth workers, can be experienced as sources of structure, safety, and empowerment and can provide real turning points in young people's lives.



It's the first time it's been quiet



Do you want me to help you or go away and leave you alone?



COLLEGE
STUDENTS

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Visit the [PROMISE website](#) where you can:

- Read any of the [22 case studies](#), searchable by country.
- View analysis of our case studies by '[Cluster](#)' [theme](#) (Education, Justice and Society; Culture and Politics; Economy, Leisure and space; and Gender and Sexuality).
- Read [policy briefs](#) for each case study, giving clear recommendations for policy change.
- View the [quantitative data](#) the project analysed, looking at European or country-specific facts and figures and [country and European-wide reports](#) on the wider context.

Connect with us

You can also connect with us on Twitter @H2020PROMISE and via our website www.promise.manchester.ac.uk to help raise awareness, share, and discuss the issues raised. We welcome your thoughts and insights.

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