

# WHAT'S STOPPING US?

**FRESH THINKING**  
on young people  
and society



Reflection 2 of a series of 4:

## THOUGHTS ON LABELS

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



# LABELS

## How they affect youth engagement and what we can do about it

When certain groups are viewed by others in their community as a problem or a threat, whatever the reason, they will probably end up with a label. From 'troubled youth' to those stigmatised because of sexuality, race, faith or other reason, labels create barriers to young people's positive involvement 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 13.

By analysing the latest research and data, interviewing young people, and seeking out thought-provoking, real-world examples, we know there is great potential to turn distrust and negativity into powerful, positive change.

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 labels, 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: **Systems**, **Inequality** and **Engagement**.

“...if people listen to the media and the television, and they get their information from that, then they assume that because one person's done one bad thing...that everybody else is going to do that... It's that stigma again behind teenagers...that one representative versus everybody else.”

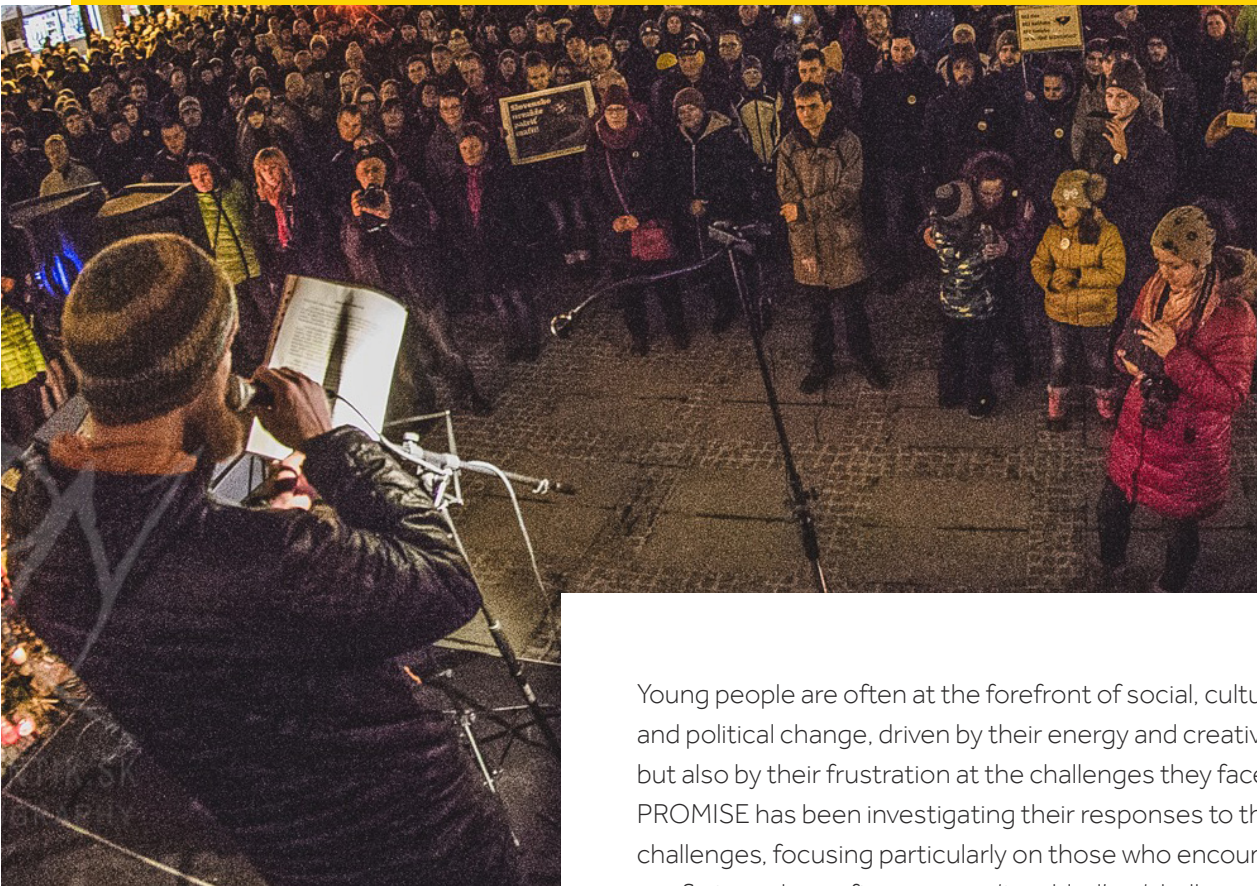
Kiera, female, 16, UK.

# 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 was 13 years old and alone in a train carriage. And there were three drunken people... The man said (referring to her headscarf, which identified her as Muslim): *‘I suppose you think you look prettier like that? I don’t think so. I think you’re just as ugly in it’*...and then he opened the door with the train still going and threatened to throw me out, to see if God would protect me.”

Marvie, female, 18, Germany.

# 'THEM AND US'

## Labels and engagement

Our study covered 10 very different countries, with different population features, economies, and political, cultural, and social systems. These features affect the opportunities available for the whole population, and of course for young people, who must learn to navigate them.

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

### **To truly engage, young people need to feel they belong.**

Our research found that a key factor for transforming negative stigma into positive engagement was the feeling of belonging to a wider community of people sharing the same values.

*We heard from young people who felt part of a wider community, and, despite being stigmatised, were hugely motivated to campaign on issues that affected them.*

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### **Most young people who are labelled as 'troublesome' are also those who have experienced the greatest disadvantages in life.**

These may include poverty, family breakdown, domestic violence, bereavement, and a lack of consistent, positive relationships and role models. A cycle of isolation from society and disengagement, leading to further negative behaviours and problems, develops easily for these young people, but is much harder to break.

*Some of the young people we interviewed talked about feeling as if people were ashamed of them, of teachers giving up on them, and of older people and those with young children crossing the road because they were afraid of them. This sense of not being trusted, of not belonging, is clearly a barrier to positive engagement in any society.*

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### **For those who are stigmatised and labelled, stereotypes are easily created and often inaccurate.**

This creates unnecessary fear that a group may be more extreme and dangerous to society than they really are. Sometimes the media, in the course of developing news stories to attract audiences, feeds into this cycle, creating further isolation and mistrust.

*Some young people told us that by taking a stand for something they believed in, they came into conflict with other, more traditional groups. These conflicts often perpetuated mistrust towards young people, especially towards those that spoke, dressed or looked different.*

## Are we seeing what's really going on?

### Context matters

Young people who appear disengaged may in fact be making a huge effort, simply by, for example, managing to get to school. Their level of participation in society needs to be measured within the context of their lives.

*In Portugal, young people explained how the neighbourhood they came from was considered a place where conflicts are inevitable, and from which youngsters can't escape: "Getting out of the neighbourhood life and becoming a normal person, the neighbourhood problems follow behind. A person can never remain normal".*

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### Apathy is a statement

Apathy and withdrawal are important indicators of a young person's sense of powerlessness and hopelessness.

*Young people serving prison and probation sentences in Estonia showed a lack of self-confidence and fear of failure. This restricts young people from even trying things, from participating in social life or moving on with their career. Previous experiences that these things have already been tried, either by themselves or by others in similar situations, and failed, are seemingly relied on. This belief can mean returning to criminality as a way of life that 'works'.*

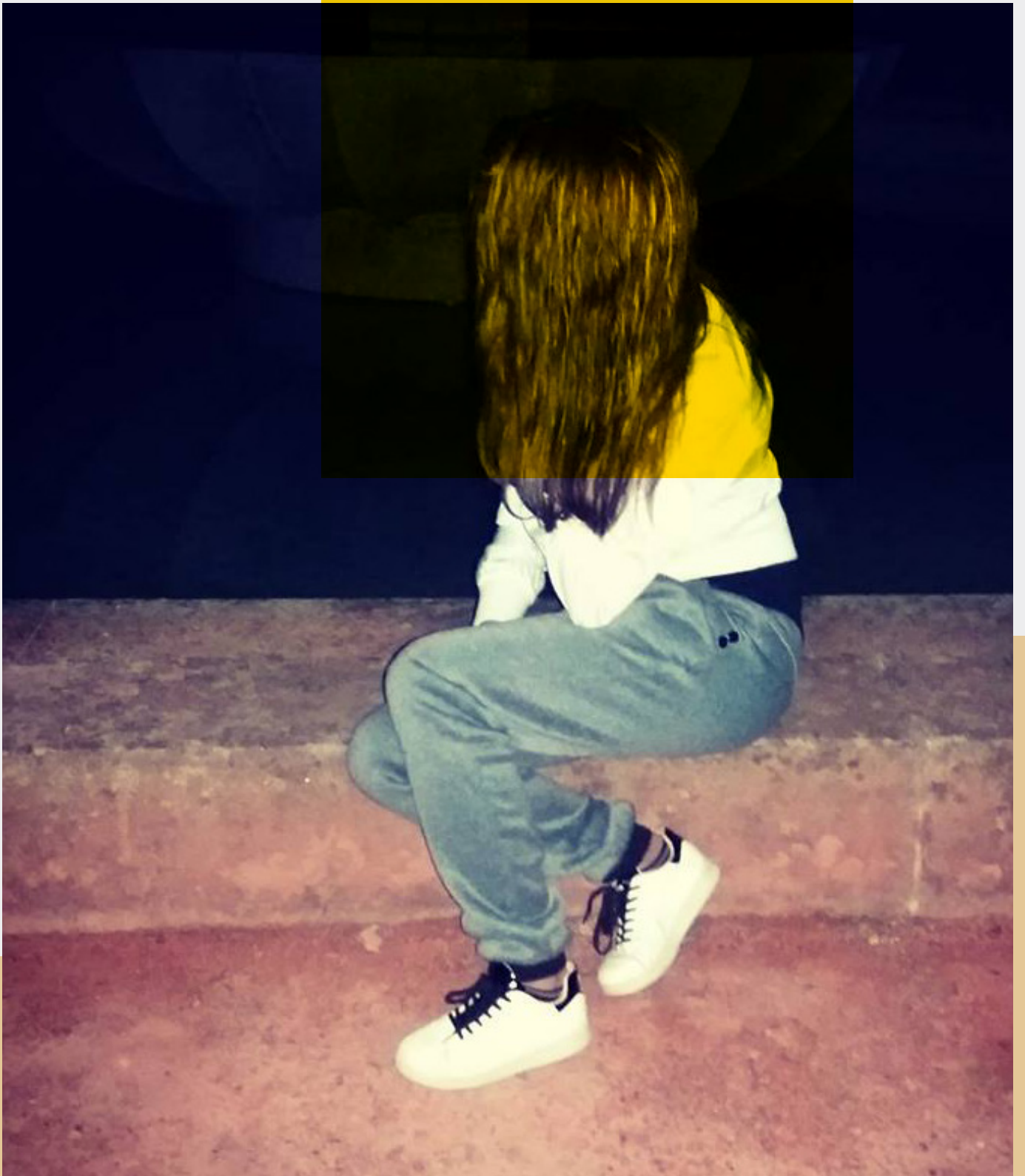
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### Acceptance is key

If a group is labelled and stigmatised, and if its members do not feel accepted and safe, they cannot be expected to engage.

*A Finnish research team talked to young people who felt insecurity because of gender, sexuality, race, or religion, particularly in urban spaces and on public transport. A rise in right-wing activism and anti-immigration rhetoric is fuelling the stigmatisation and fear, felt by many young people, across the different countries that took part.*





“One of my biggest dreams is to be a college professor and to teach gender studies to young generations...to teach them tolerance, to teach them to go out into the world, not just with an open mind to other cultures, but to every individual. To accept others how they are.”

Jo, male, 24.

# FIVE WAYS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

**1****Create safe spaces for engagement to develop.**

We need groups and physical spaces where young people labelled 'risky' or 'other' in their communities can feel they belong. Our most marginalised young people have often faced multiple disadvantages in life and a chronic lack of support. To find hope they need to feel respected and welcomed.

**2****Invest in engagement (and show its impact).**

Our research found that once social engagement begins, there can be a snowball effect. Young people who get involved in one area, often become positively active in other areas as well. Social engagement and inclusion in a community help young people to re-evaluate their personal experiences in a positive way.

**3****Education matters.**

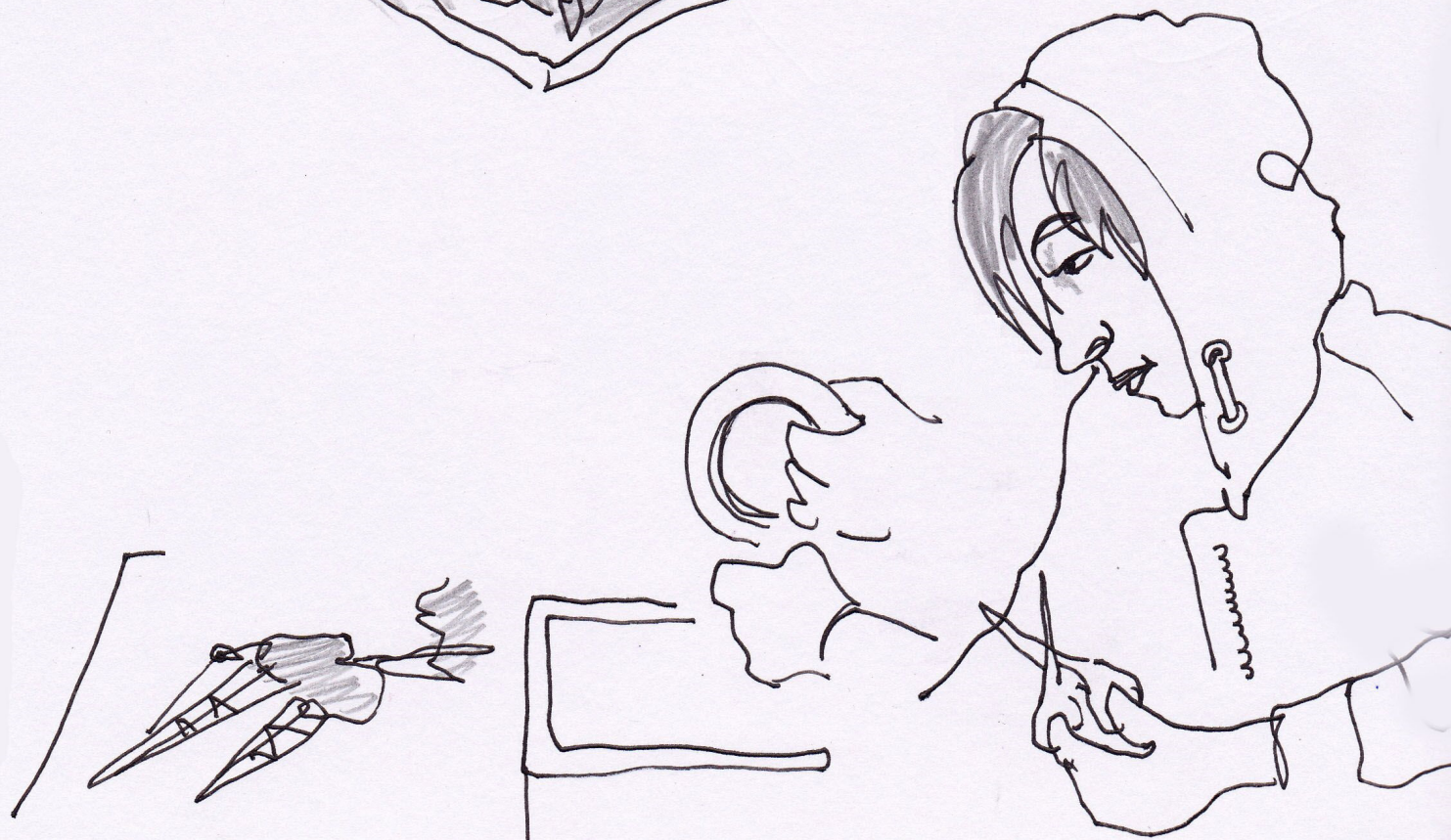
Some countries are further ahead than others in terms of mandatory education, but all countries need to support education on issues that can potentially lead to labels and discrimination, such as gender and sexual diversity, hate crimes, religious faiths, inequality, and immigration. This is particularly important for those agencies in positions of power, such as those making up the criminal justice or welfare systems.

**4****Challenge stereotypes.**

We know stereotypes affect young people's views of themselves and the views of others towards them. We need to develop and fund initiatives that actively challenge stereotypes, sharing research, case studies, and facts and figures with the media and with both the public and key opinion formers in our communities. In an era of fake news and online sharing of extreme views, this is more important than ever.

**5****Build opportunities to mix the younger and older generations.**

Our research showed a huge positive impact when younger and older people got involved in projects where they had shared goals and interests. We need to fund and support activities that break down barriers of mistrust and enable younger and older people to mix. This will create stronger communities that can better withstand adversity, that better understand their past and hold greater optimism for the future.



# 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](http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk) to help raise awareness, share, and discuss the issues raised. We welcome your thoughts and insights.

## Acknowledgements

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