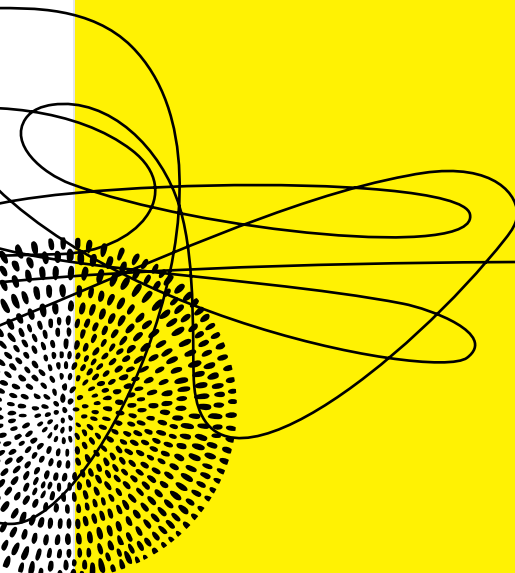




**RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR PUBLIC POLICIES
TARGETING YOUTH AT RISK
IN PORTUGAL, SPAIN
AND CROATIA**



XMEN
MASCULINITIES + EMPATHY + NONVIOLENCE

TITLE

Recommendations for Public Policies targeting Youth at Risk in Portugal, Spain and Croatia

COORDINATION OF THE X-MEN PROJECT: MASCULINITIES, EMPATHY**AND NON-VIOLENCE**

Tatiana Moura, Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra (CES/UC)

AUTHORS

Valentina Longo (Fundación Cepaim)

Elizabeta Matković (Status M)

Marta Mascarenhas (Centre for Social Studies /UC)

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Daniel Sansão (contagio.ag)

ILLUSTRATIONS

absurd.design

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Longo, V., Matković, E., & Mascarenhas, M. (2024). *Recommendations for Public Policies targeting Youth at Risk in Portugal, Spain and Croatia*. Coimbra: CES.

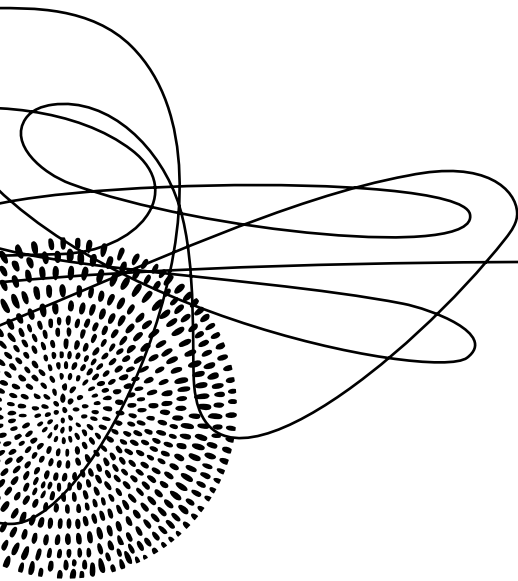
eISBN: 978-989-8847-79-9

June, 2024





**RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR PUBLIC POLICIES
TARGETING YOUTH AT RISK
IN PORTUGAL, SPAIN
AND CROATIA**





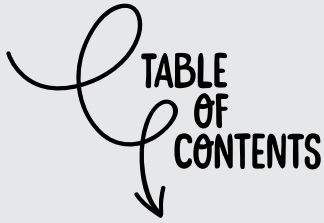
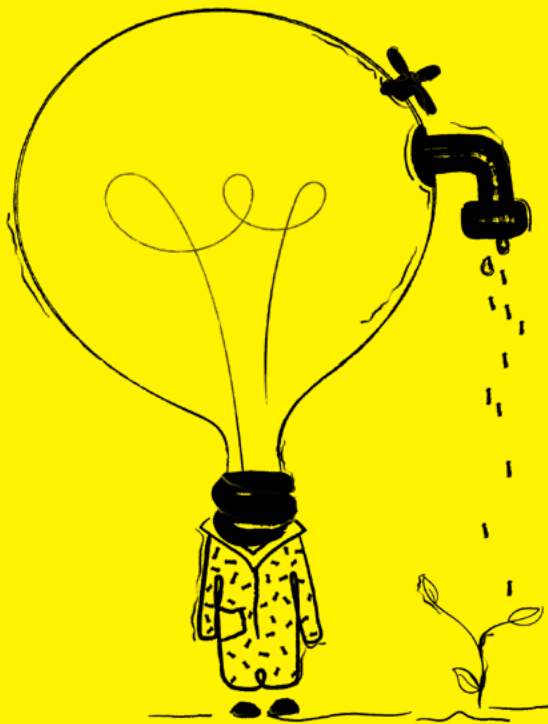


TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	7
RESEARCH FINDINGS	8
Commonalities between the three cases	9
Legal and social framework: tensions to be resolved	10
Intervention with young people embodying intersectoral vulnerabilities	11
RECOMMENDATIONS	12
Common recommendations	12
Country-specific recommendations	14



INTRODUCTION

This document summarises the main findings of the X-MEN Project: Masculinities, Empathy and Non-Violence (2022-2024) and presents the main recommendations based on research and interventions with vulnerable youth in three European countries. The X-MEN proposal specifically targets youngsters in Youth Detention Centres in Croatia and Portugal, as well as underage children and young people migrating alone in Spain.

In the case of young people with judicial measures, the project seeks to introduce the deconstruction of limiting beliefs and the perverse effects of a masculine socialisation based on stereotyped ideas of masculinity affirmed by force and dominance into their journey of re-education to become law-abiding citizens.

In Spain, children and youngsters who migrate to the country alone are exposed to situations of vulnerability and violence, both during the migratory journey and on arrival at host institutions. As such, the X-MEN project focuses on interpreting and addressing these situations, working to promote more caring and empathetic masculinities and building community ties centred on positive referents and anti-racist networks.

Based on the project's results and the assessment of the youngsters' experiences and contexts, X-MEN has designed a set of public policy proposals aimed at these young people, with a view to building strategies to prevent gender-based violence and promote equality, in line with the objectives of the European Strategy for Gender Equality 2020-2025, as well as reforming child protection and juvenile justice systems.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this section, we present the main findings of the X-MEN project, starting with an overview of the research process in each country and then highlighting the main results.

Spain: Youngsters migrating alone

The research was based on qualitative research techniques, specifically interviews and focus groups with professionals and with young Moroccans without family references in the Moroccan context (youngsters who have not emigrated) and with young people formerly under guardianship in Spanish territory who migrated as underaged children/youth in 2020. A total of 35 people took part in this phase of the project as interviewees, both individually and in groups.

The distinctive feature of the study is the application of the intercultural gender perspective to the emigration of male children, trying to detect the routes of violence in their migratory experience and the role of the gender relations and schemas in their culture of departure – in contrast to those of arrival – as one of the unexplored factors in the motivations of these male underaged children/youngsters to emigrate without adult accompaniment and at serious risk.

Croatia: Youngsters in youth detention centres

An in-depth analysis was made of two correctional institutions in Croatia: one located in Turopolje, which houses 35 young men, and the other in Požega, housing 11 girls.

Researchers used a qualitative approach to collect data through observations, interviews and assessments of the young people in these institutions. They focused on residents' experiences, their backgrounds, interactions with staff and the living conditions they faced. Additionally, researchers col-

lected data on the young people's socio-economic background, school results, mental health status and relationships with their peers and families.

The data collection process involved a multidisciplinary approach that included input from social workers, psychologists, educators, and other professionals who work with these young people.

Portugal: Youngsters in youth detention centres

The research team carried out qualitative and quantitative research in six Portuguese Youth Detention Centres (3 in Lisbon, 1 in Coimbra, 1 in Porto and 1 in Vila do Conde). The study involved various stakeholders, including young people who have been subject to detention measures, professionals working in institutional settings and decision-makers involved in youth policies and gender equality initiatives.

In order to gain access to the young people's life stories and the challenges they faced up to the moment they arrived to the youth detention centre, innovative research techniques such as ethnofiction were used. After retrieving important information about the youngsters' socio-economic background and their journey prior to being institutionalised, the youngsters in focus groups were asked to jointly construct the end of a story on a boy/girl with a similar life trajectory and to explain how he/she got there. This allowed the researchers to obtain relevant insights on the youngsters' personal and school challenges, gender socialisation specific experiences and their perception of their own reality.

Commonalities between the three cases

Despite the contextual differences and legal constructions of the three groups, we can draw some parallels that highlight the commonalities of the cases taken into consideration. We focus on the common challenges of supporting youngsters' lives, as they often face detrimental conditions to their development, personal growth and future prospects.

Legal and social framework: tensions to be resolved

In all three countries, a tension emerges between the official objectives of the legal and procedural rules that frame the groups of young people in the project. In all cases, the aim is protection and rehabilitation, this latter applying in the case of young people with judicial measures. Nevertheless, the results of the time spent in youth detention centres for their young residents are detrimental to their mental health and psychosocial well-being, while at the same time not effectively addressing or preventing juvenile delinquency.

In the case of children/youth migrating alone, the legal tension consists of being between two different and opposing legislative frameworks: child protection and migration, the first being welcoming and the other opposing. Policy proposals for both groups must reinforce and guarantee initiatives that place the rights of at the youngsters at the centre, as well as protection measures through institutional strategies and multi-sectoral responses that guarantee that they are treated as children and that any decision made about the lives of these individuals must prioritise their best interests.

As far as the social framework is concerned, we are always faced with stigmatised groups, depicted as a threat to the safety and/or rights of other citizens, revealing prejudices of class, age, ethnic origin and racist attitudes. Faced with this negative picture, a profound change in the approach to these youngsters is essential, based on respect for their integrity and dignity. The transition from dangerous to vulnerable youth is necessary to create possibilities for change and is a responsibility that societies must assume. Changing narratives means broadening the futures they can live.

Intervention with young people embodying intersectoral vulnerabilities

In all three cases, the youngsters have been or are being exposed to violence and violent contexts. In order for professionals to be able to intervene with young people, a basic understanding of trauma and its gendered components is essential. Professionals first need to recognise it in their daily work, which is a prerequisite for addressing and dealing with it. A trauma-informed gender lens can offer some counterbalance to the inevitable feelings of hesitation and insecurity when interacting with young people who have suffered disproportionate amounts of adversity and traumatic events.

Our studies show a general lack of tailored programs capable of dealing with the wide range of difficult situations of a diverse nature experienced by the youngsters, which further exacerbates the challenges faced by young people within the facilities. In particular, mental health issues are quite common, as well as experiences of racism and classism.

Isolation - as a physical, emotional and social problem - affects not only young people with judicial measures, but also young migrants who have no mobility restrictions. Nevertheless, in both cases, the institutional setting creates a separation from the surrounding community. X-MEN's research underlines the need to work in and with contexts, understood in a broad sense (i.e. not only the youth's family and neighbourhood, but also the geographical context and the wider political-institutional system), in order to lay the foundations for life after leaving the facility and to create bonds within the wider community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Common recommendations

Change of framework

The legal and intervention framework must be orientated towards the best interests of young people, both in the case of children migrating alone and boys and girls subject to judicial measures. The protection system must prevail in cases of migration and restorative justice practices must replace punitive ones.

Community and inclusive framework

Residential and youth detention centres need to evolve towards a more community-based approach in order to promote young people's social, educational and socio-occupational inclusion, by being more connected to their contexts in the broadest sense (i.e., not just their family, their neighbourhood, but also the geographical context and the wider political-institutional system). This will also make it possible to build a safe and solid network that is sustainable in the long term after leaving institutional facilities. It is also necessary to promote better coordination with the education system.

Evaluation of the current system and institutions involved

The need to evaluate the operating principles of the institutions and procedures where young people live and to establish a clear perspective on the protection of children/youngsters that guarantees the best interests of boys and girls.

Professional training

Professionals need specific and compulsory training in gender and in-

tersectional perspectives to enable them to work with young people based on their specific needs. More specifically, initial and ongoing training for professionals should cover thematic areas such as gender equality, the construction of caring masculinities, notions of developmental psychology (with an emphasis on the adolescent phase) and trauma, as well as conflict management and mediation. Professionals should also receive adequate training to detect their own prejudices and biases when working with vulnerable boys and girls.

Organisational culture of residential facilities

Each institution has its own organisational culture (dynamics, history, leadership style, decision-making, models of masculinity/femininity, etc.). Active reflection and review of this specific culture, starting from its actual functioning, is necessary to foster a transformative approach. This process needs to include all the staff at the centres, not just educational professionals, in order to create a coherent organisational culture. Another important aspect to be revised concerns staff working conditions: understaffed and overworked teams, lack of adequate professional training and precarious labour cannot guarantee adequate educational work.

Intervention programs

It is vital to design and implement programs that are holistic, addressing the educational, emotional, social and psychological needs of young people, tailoring intervention programs to the cultural and gender needs of the residents. In particular, it is necessary to include work on the social construction of masculinities and their relationship to violence in the architecture of the programmes.

Transition to adult life

It is required to ensure proper guidance and mentorship through the development of itineraries for the emancipation and transition of young people to adult life, guaranteeing them material and human resources.

Psychosocial support and mental health

Improving young people's access to mental health support is essential, incorporating therapists and psychiatrists who adopt a gender and trauma lens, as well as specialised substance abuse and emotional regulation programmes.

Research and evaluation

Supporting research on the X-MEN project population is crucial, as it is necessary to further identify their specific needs while they are in the facilities, as well as afterwards. Moreover, studies on prevention and protection are needed to identify the factors that increase vulnerability and which could be avoided thanks to preventive measures. Research can help ensure that children's rights, such as access to education, health and a safe environment, are respected and promoted. Understanding the underlying causes of exclusion and vulnerability is key to addressing the social and economic inequalities that affect these young people. Finally, Programme Evaluation can measure the effectiveness of existing programmes and services for children at risk, identifying areas for improvement.

Country-specific recommendations

Spain

- To formulate a stable state strategy for comprehensive attention to protecting the rights of children and adolescents in the context of migration.
- To create a state coordination body to ensure the rights of migrant children and centralise information, action and monitoring for the effective implementation of homogeneous administrative action by regional governments.

- To interpret and address the vulnerability and violence suffered by these girls and boys through Organic Law 8/2021, of 4 June, on the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents against violence.
- Identification of the specific needs and formal determination of the best interests of the child with all the guarantees, by public officials and specialised and trained professionals.
- To create and strengthen control, supervision and accountability mechanisms to guarantee children's rights by public administrations at all three levels (state, autonomous and municipal) during the processes of arrival, reception, care and intervention with unaccompanied migrant children.

Croatia

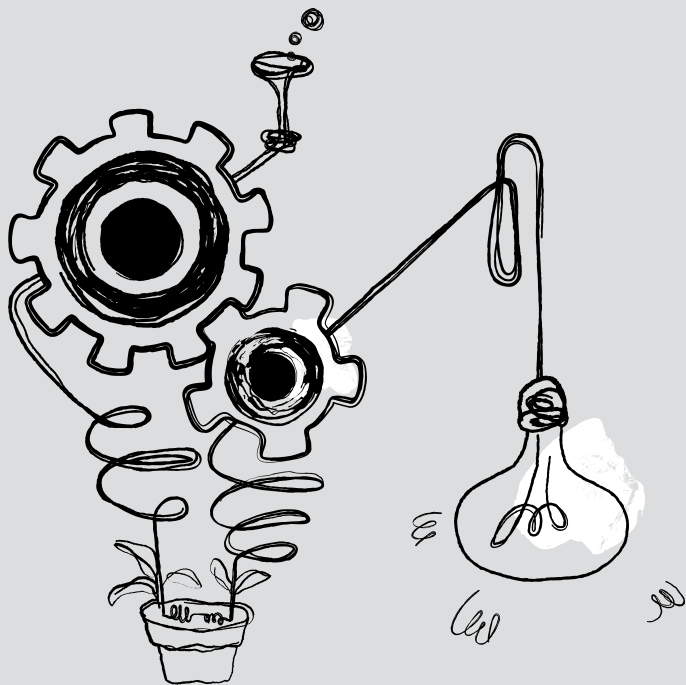
- The need for significant reform of the correctional system, advocating for the development of alternative approaches to juvenile justice that prioritise the best interests of children.
- To ensure that staff receive training on gender, sexual diversity and health education in order to better support young people. To guarantee that staff are equipped to recognise and deal with discrimination based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and other factors.
- To develop and implement programmes that cater to the cultural and linguistic needs of young Roma and other minority groups.
- To implement proactive measures to reduce verbal and physical violence in correctional facilities and youth detention centres. Provide conflict resolution training to both residents and staff in order to create a safer and more supportive environment.

- To advocate for significant reforms in the juvenile justice system to prioritise rehabilitation over incarceration. Eliminate the use of imprisonment for young people and develop alternative measures that focus on their development and well-being.

Portugal

- To encourage the state to act in vulnerable areas, creating sustainable family support structures (e.g., Family Support and Parental Counselling Centres and support mechanisms for professional reintegration) and leisure spaces, as well as promoting endogenous community development initiatives.
- To invest in creating channels of direct communication and concerted intervention between the Child Protection System and the Juvenile Justice System.
- Support further research that seeks to trace the possible continuity of young people's trajectories from the Promotion and Protection System to the Juvenile Justice System, also seeking to analyse whether there is, in fact, a differentiated treatment of both systems depending on the gender of the subjects.
- To support new research that seeks to trace the possible continuity of young people's journeys from the Child Protection System to the Juvenile Justice System, also seeking to analyse whether there is, in fact, a differentiated treatment of both systems depending on the gender of the subjects.
- To open up youth detention centres to innovative solutions and proposals, making them permeable to the outside world, gradually and progressively broadening the responsibility of young people and their access to the outside world.

- To provide ongoing and diversified training for professionals, with a special focus on mediation and conflict resolution strategies, emotional management and trauma, as well as investing in creating better working conditions for these professionals, in order to avoid burn-out and ensure them the necessary stability to fulfil their duties as reference figures for young people.





STATUS **M**



Funded by
the European Union