



UPLIFT – Urban PoLicy Innovation to address  
inequality with and for Future generaTions

## Deliverable 3.2

# Case study report

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# 1 Executive Summary

In this case study report, we describe the process and findings of research activities carried out as part of the UPLIFT project in Tallinn, Estonia. UPLIFT project aims to understand the underlying process of the reproduction of urban social inequalities, and the role of public policy interventions and different stakeholders to alleviate the inequality trap. Identifying and understanding the drivers of inequalities and their interdependencies is needed to design successful interventions and services by stakeholders. This case study aims to outline and understand the individual life strategies of young people in vulnerable situations from Tallinn and investigate how these strategies interact with the inequality outcomes, the resources and the possibilities available for young people in the domains of education, employment and housing.

Our analysis is based on desk research and qualitative interviews. In order to learn about young people's life situations, we carried out several stakeholder interviews with local decision makers and youth policy implementers as well as 40 biographical interviews with local young people. There were 20 interviews with the young people currently within the age range 15–29 and 20 interviews with 30–43-years-olds, who were within the age range 15–29 at the time of the financial crisis.

Lack of early detection of young people's problems seems to be one of the major shortcomings in Tallinn schools that leads to early school leaving. Our interviews revealed that early school leaving, that can have severe consequences for young people's chances in the labour and housing market, is often related to the mental health problems students encountered at school (related to school bullying and learning difficulties). As finding and applying for proper services in case of the problems (e.g., learning difficulties, mental health issues, special educational needs) requires agency, the young people with parents, who have high agency and determination to ensure adequate assistance for their children, find themselves in a better position than young people, whose parents lack either the agency, will or knowhow about the opportunities in the welfare and educational system. However, the individual agency of young people themselves is equally important. The life stories of our participants demonstrate that the individual agency and capability is an important conversion factor to overcome the handicap of low education in the labour market. We also noticed that the low education seemed to be a greater obstacle at the labour market for females compared to males.

While the problems of young people with learning difficulties and poor socioeconomic situation or neglect at home was discussed both in stakeholder and participant interviews, the possibility that academically successful young people could be vulnerable was not mentioned in stakeholder interviews. The vulnerability and hidden problems of 'good behaving' and academically successful students (mostly girls) are often unnoticed or ignored in schools. The possibility that academically high achieving girls may have serious problems and they may not feel particularly good at school, have been largely ignored by specialists and policy makers.

However, the life stories of our participants demonstrated that ignoring the problems of academically successful students may lead to early schoolleaving and difficulties later in the labour market.

In the concluding chapter of this report, we also present a number of recommendations regarding policies and possible interventions that would support young people to reach their full potentials.

## 2 Introduction

The current document is the result of the research activities carried out in work package 3 (WP3) of the UPLIFT project<sup>1</sup> in Tallinn, Estonia. It aims to understand which micro, mezo and macro level factors influence vulnerable young people's decisions in education, employment and housing, and how young people create their own strategies and make choices within the possibilities available in the given locality.

The main research questions we analyse in this study are:

- What are the different factors in different levels (welfare system, intermediary institutions, family background, and individual characteristics) that retain vulnerable young individuals to live the life they would like to live or they should be able to live taking into account the possibilities the locality offers for them?
- Which are the factors that can be changed by means of Reflexive Policy Agenda – RPA – (a co-creation tool that includes vulnerable young people into policy design, implementation and monitoring)?

These two main questions rather serve as guidelines for the analysis, but are too broad to be answered fully, thus we have chosen those sub-topics in this framework that came out to be the most relevant in the local interview process. We aimed to focus on factors that cannot purely be explained by the deficiencies of the welfare systems, rather by the interactions between vulnerable young individuals and institutions as a response to the welfare framework.

Our chosen sub-topics are the following:

- 1) early school leaving in relation to the mental problems students encountered at school (related to school bullying and learning difficulties);
- 2) the importance of individual agency of young people in relation to family and institutional conversion factors;
- 3) the hidden problems of 'good behaving' and academically successful girls at school and the mental setbacks affecting their further educational and labour market career.

The methods of exploring the factors behind individual decisions are primarily based on interviews with local policy experts and policy implementers and 40 vulnerable young people: 20 currently young people between the age of 15 and 29 and 20 interviews with people aged 30–43 – who were between 15–29 at the time of the financial crisis of 2008. These interviews naturally revealed many, mostly already well-studied deficiencies of the national and local legislations and the welfare systems. Still, this case study report does not have the primary goal to formulate criticism about the general welfare policies and other structurally given

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the project can be found at: [uplift-youth.eu](http://uplift-youth.eu)

resources in Tallinn (this was already done in another work package of UPLIFT<sup>2</sup>); it rather aims to understand how these structural resources, policies, programmes, and services are implemented and how they influence the life strategies of young individuals.

The final aim of this case study report and the analysis of the interactions of the behaviour of individuals and the institutions is to discover and suggest topics for a future Reflexive Policy Agenda for each of our eight localities of WP3 of UPLIFT, including Tallinn. Reflexive Policy making lies in the centre of the UPLIFT project. It refers to a policy co-creation, refining process, which involves the target group of the policies (in our case vulnerable young people). This process aims to explore young people's narratives on their perceived reality about the locally available policies and services, and empower them to be part of the creation of knowledge on the policy framework. Moreover, this process takes young individuals' feedback on possible changes of policies seriously, and invites them to monitor the implementation of these policies. By nature, it means a power-balanced cooperation between local decision makers and the target group of local policies, which process relies on both groups' interests and knowledge. Thus, the current research aims to deal less with fundamental systemic deficiencies of welfare policies, as it would exceed the competencies of local actors, but rather aims to discover those topics that can be handled locally.

In this report, we first introduce the framework of the analysis in Chapter 3, and then we describe our methodology of the research and the analysis in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 first summarizes the main characteristics of the current life situation of vulnerable young people (40 interviewees) regarding their education, employment and housing conditions. Then we describe the main inequality traps we have discovered in our analysis, and the conversions that lead to the current outcomes (positions) of our interviewees. Finally, Chapter 6 contains the main suggestions for potential topics in education, employment and housing for a Reflexive Policy Agenda.

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<sup>2</sup> More details about the local welfare systems in 16 urban areas of Europe can be found at: <https://uplift-youth.eu/research-policy/official-deliverables>

### 3 Framework of the analysis

This section contains the theoretical framework for the case study analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the qualitative research that has been accomplished in eight UPLIFT locations: Amadora, Amsterdam, Barakaldo, Chemnitz, Corby, Pécs, Sfantu Gheorghe and Tallinn.

The framework of the analysis of this case study report is based on the **Capability Approach**, an attempt for better understanding and interpreting the nature of modern age poverty, social inequalities, human development and well-being, devised in the 1980s by the Nobel prize laureate economist-philosopher Amartya Sen. The Capability Approach understands certain life-pathways as results of a complex interplay of various factors: the nature of the system (e.g., economic, housing, education); individual perception of the system and other micro level, individually driven factors. Moreover, the main goal of the theory is to be able comprehensively capturing the factors that are constraining or enabling an individual to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. Our analytical framework builds on the Capability Approach; however, it implies some adjustments and complements it with the life-course approach and the transgenerational approach.

The starting point for understanding the life strategies of vulnerable individuals is to define the **resource space**, which is a complex socio-economic environment around individuals, consisting of all formal rights (e.g., laws and legislations) and possibilities (e.g., subsidy schemes, programmes against social inequalities), which defines opportunities for all inhabitants in a given location. This environment might be enabling, e.g., providing work places, subsidies, networks, while it might be restricting as well, e.g., providing segregated school system, unaffordable housing. The resource space, as it is, largely depends on the socio-economic context in which people live: constitutional rights, economic development of the place, degree of inequalities, thus, it varies from location to location. In addition to this, the accessibility of resources is conditionally determined. For instance, even if there is a subsidy scheme to buy a flat, it is only accessible in case of having savings (wealth), having a certain income level and under certain circumstances (e.g., having children). This is based on individual characteristics; thus, we define an **individualized resource space**, in which an individual can navigate. This individualized resource space is what we interpret as **real freedoms, real opportunities**.

However, young individuals have their own culturally and socially embedded perception of their possibilities that are not necessarily match with the so-called real opportunities: either by having unrealistic view or by not seeing those opportunities that theoretically would be achievable for them. This distinction is a new element compared to the original Capability Approach developed by Sen, as our analytical framework places great emphasis on the distinction between **real and perceived opportunity spaces** to understand the origin and the consequence of the gaps between the space of available possible actions and the perceived



possible actions. The mechanisms that cause the gaps between the two (e.g., blind spots, false perceptions or conditioned to illegal interventions) are those that make it difficult for an individual to choose those positions in life that best suits his or her abilities and remain in the widely accepted legal and socio-cultural environment.

Inside the individualised resource space, based on the perceived and real opportunities, one can take different positions: **functionings** (See in Table 1). In the original theory, functionings are defined as “various things a person may value being or doing”. In empirical terms, this can mean two things: 1) the actual and current achievement/outcome of an individual 2) a desired, valued outcome an individual would prefer doing instead of his or her current life choices. Thus, functionings are practically the achievements in a person’s life, which he/she either achieved in reality, or may value doing or being.

Table 1: Potential functionings (either current or desired) by domains

Education	Employment	Housing
Qualification (completed and on-going education)	Working conditions (legal/illegal, full time/part time, one shift/three shifts)	Tenure type (public rental, private rental, owner occupation)
Quality of qualification (value of qualification depending on the specific school and dropout history) <sup>3</sup>	Salary level	Quality of housing (neighbourhood, affordability, density)

*The main question of the case study analysis in UPLIFT is the mechanism with which these functionings (outcomes/positions/choices/desires) are chosen in the local resource spaces by vulnerable individuals.*

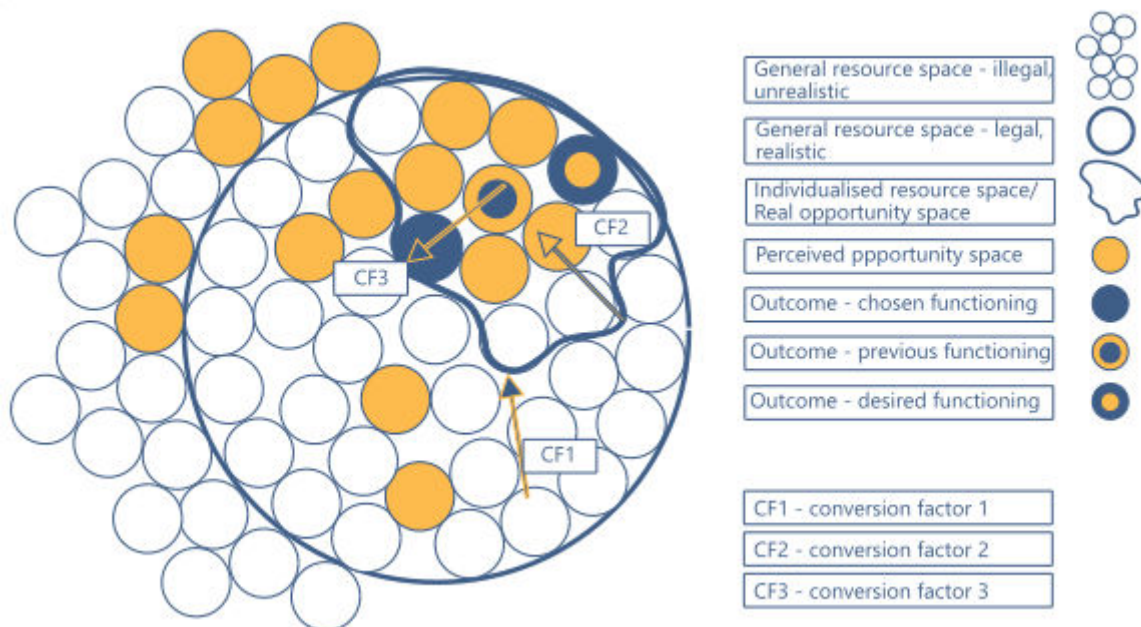
According to the original Capability Approach, individuals ideally choose from real opportunities based on what they value or desire. However, it is not necessarily possible to interpret the decisions made by individuals in a vulnerable life situation as value-based decisions, as they could be based on their everyday life difficulties (compulsion), or also be a consequence of past decisions. Hence, two ideal types of decision chains can be identified: 1) value-based and 2) path dependent – which are not easy to distinguish, as values are born by internalising the circumstances. In case of value-based decisions, the individual can live a meaningful and fulfilling life, while under the notion of path-dependency we understand patterns of past outcomes, which, in time, increase the likelihood of a limited number of future choices that are not necessarily advantageous for the individual. Understanding the outcomes from the perspective of a life-course approach is essential to be able to evaluate the agency

<sup>3</sup> The quality of a school is interpreted in a wide sense, outside of education, having socialising effects on students (e.g., functions/dysfunctions developed in schools that enable/disable functionings in the labour market or the housing market).

potential and the role of agency in the life-path of an individual. Thus, the **Life-course Approach** is an important additional component to the Capability Approach. Among the past life events and experiences, the behaviour of the family system and the childhood home environment play a key role, which provides a potential to understand what trajectories and possibilities an individual has. The theory of the **Transgenerational Mobility** contributes and valuably complement the capability approach with emphasizing the role of socialization and the parental experiences and behaviour as conversion factors.

The routes (conversions) i) from formal resource space to real opportunities (CF1 on Figure 1), ii) from real opportunity space to perceived opportunities (CF2 on Figure 1), and iii) from perceived opportunity space to chosen or desired functioning (CF3 on Figure 1) are paved by **conversion factors**: the interference of institutional and individual conditions that lead to the creation of individual life-strategies. Conversion factors refers to the fact that different individuals have different capabilities to convert public policies and formal rights into valuable opportunities (Kimhur, 2020: 4, CF1 on Figure 1). Certain conversion factors enable some elements of the opportunity space to be made visible and usable, while other factors have the ability to conceal the real opportunity space, resulting in a gap between the real and perceived opportunity space (CF2 on Figure 1), and a distorted decision about chosen functionings (CF3 on Figure 1).

Figure 1: A modified concept of the Capability Approach



Source: Own elaboration

One may think that the perceived resource space is part of the real resource space, and the conversion from real to perceived necessarily results in the reduction of choices. According to our research however, vulnerable young individuals tend to see options for themselves also outside the social norms and legal framework (real opportunities), thus are able to widen their

space of options even if it is not realistic from an external viewpoint or not valued positively by the society.

Our analysis of the interviews was based on four sets of conversion factors:

- **Individual conversion factors** (micro level conversion factors) focus on a person's psycho-social set, domain-specific capabilities, individual character (e.g., sex, intelligence, financial literacy, learning abilities, work ethics), things a person values (e.g., attitude towards education, certain professions) and his/her social network (including the secondary social group where an individual belongs to: neighbourhood, schoolmates, friends, etc.).
- **Family conversion factors** (micro level conversion factor as well) focus on the original family system<sup>4</sup>, where he/she was brought up, family's educational/employment background, values, beliefs and attitudes in the family, psychosocial environment.
- A special focus is given to **institutions** (meso-level conversion factors), where we are interested in how institutions narrow down, or rather correct, the perceived space of possibilities in their interactions with individuals. Institutional conversion factors focus on attitudes and behaviours of an institution<sup>5</sup>. Just as the individual conversion factors, institutional conversion factors work out differently for (different groups of) people (see exposure to institutional dysfunctions).

Even being embedded in individual behaviour, institutional response or family event we consider **crucial life events** as independent conversion factors, some of which may have a decisive role in widening or narrowing down the choices one has in certain situations.

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<sup>4</sup> Family system includes the position of the individual in the original family dynamics. For instance, whether it is a supporting and functional or a negative, dysfunctional environment.

<sup>5</sup> Institutionalized norms in our interpretation are the ones that are followed by most members of an institution. One widely known example is institutionalized discrimination, when a large majority of the members of the institutions systematically behave differently (in a negative way) with people belonging to a certain social group (e.g., ethnicity or gender).

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Interviews with Policy implementers/experts

Eight semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the experts took place in the autumn 2020 (see Table 2). Among the interviewed experts and implementers, there were representatives of Estonian Education and Youth Board, Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, and Tallinn Open Youth Centre as well as a couple of municipality level programs working with young people in vulnerable life situations (e.g., Hoog Sisse, STEP Programme). While the Estonian Education and Youth Board represents mainly the decision-making level, other organisations represent the implementation level. Whereas Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund and the two municipality level programs focus mainly on employment, Estonian Education and Youth Board and Tallinn Open Youth Centre take a somewhat broader view of different domains in young persons' lives (with a bit more emphasis on education though). We did not have an interview with any housing experts from Tallinn (e.g., someone from city property department) as the young people are not the target group of social housing in Tallinn.

Table 2: List of interviewed experts

Organisation	Position in the Organisation	Number of Interviewees
A support program for young offenders	Development manager	1
Unemployment Insurance Fund	Head of the youth department	1
Unemployment Insurance Fund	Youth counsellor	2
NEET-youth support program	Youth counsellor	1
Education and Youth Board of Estonia	Head of the NEET-youth services	1
Tallinn School of Services	Career counsellor	1
A open youth centre	Youth worker	1

### 4.2 Interviews with young people

Semi structured face-to-face interviews with the currently young people (between the ages of 15–29) and formerly young people (the ones who experienced hardships at the time of the financial crisis when they were between the ages of 15–29 and who are now between the ages of 30–43) took place from the beginning of November 2021 to the Mid-October 2022. We had 20 interviews with currently youngsters and 20 interviews with formerly youngsters.

In order to find participants, we contacted several organisations working with our target group (vulnerable youth and young adults). Our list of potential partners included organisations providing labour market services, basic- and highschools for adult learners (as the most of students in these schools are usually the ones who have dropped out from the education system at least once and later decided to continue their education), and organisations providing different rehabilitation services. In order to reach as varied target group as possible, we also made an attempt to find participants through social media channels. We published a call to participate in our study on the Facebook pages of the Institute of Social Studies and Institute of Ecology and Earth Sciences (both University of Tartu) and asked the followers to share this information with their acquaintances from the target group<sup>6</sup>. However, we found only one participant through the social media.

The recruiting of interviewees proved more difficult than anticipated. While we were aware that it is difficult to motivate young people in vulnerable life situations to participate in any research, we could not anticipate how difficult it would get due to the COVID-19 restrictions when young people were not allowed to gather in places they used to before the pandemic. Most of the gatekeepers were very wary with sharing young people's contacts as they considered it being at odds with EU data protection laws. Many gatekeepers declined even forwarding the invitation to participate in our study to young people as they considered it wrong to use the contacts of young people gathered for different purposes to inform them about the study.

We aimed covering as broad range of youth in vulnerable life situations as possible. However, the coverage did not end up as varied as we intended. Due to the (un)willingness of different gatekeeper organisations to collaborate with us, some groups may be overrepresented and others underrepresented in our sample. For example, thanks to the good cooperation with the basic and highschools for adult learners, the youngsters and formerly youngsters, who have re-entered the education system after a shorter or longer break, are likely to be rather strongly overrepresented in our sample. Similarly, the good cooperation with one particular rehabilitation centre may have yielded some overrepresentation of former drug and alcohol addicts with a criminal past, who are trying to turn a new page in their lives. The lack of cooperation with the organisations providing the labour market services, on the other hand, may result that we have an unproportionally low number of participants who have been unemployed over a longer period of time. Despite these limitations, however, we managed to reach young people and formerly young people with rather varied vulnerabilities and in very different life situations (*See sociodemographic background information of our sample in Table 3*). Our sample includes young people whose vulnerabilities rise from poor socioeconomic situation of the family, inadequate parenting practices, (mental) health problems, addictions,

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<sup>6</sup> Looking for vulnerable youth through university's social media channels may sound a bit unreasonable but one has to consider that there are many social workers, youth workers and other specialists working with the vulnerable youngsters and families among the students and graduates of the Institute of Social Studies.

etc., and their coping mechanisms and the level of help received from different institutions, i.e., the conversion factors, are just as varied.

Table 3: Sociodemographic background of currently and formerly young people participating in the study

Agegroup	Gender	Nationality	Education	Living arrangement	Family members in the household	Children
15–17	8F/2M	All Estonians	All 10 have basic education	Living in the parental home with either (step)parents and siblings (7), single mother (2), or grandparents (1)	(Step)parents and siblings (7); single mother (2); grandparents (1)	No
18–29	6F/4M	All Estonians	Either basic education (7) or upper secondary education (3)	Living either in the parental home with parents and siblings (6), or with other relatives (3), or rents alone (1)	Parents and siblings (3); single mother (2); partner (3); sister (1)	No
30–42	11F/9M	16 Estonians, 4 Russians	Either no basic education (2), basic education (11); upper secondary education (3), vocational education (1), or BA (3)	Either renting an apartment (6), living in an apartment bought with a bank loan (2), owning an apartment (2), owning a house (2), living in a house bought with a bank loan (3), living in a rehabilitation center (4), or having no permanent living place (1)	Spouse and children (9), partner (7), alone (4)	Either no children (2), one child (4), two children (4), three children (2), or four children (2)

Interviews were done by an experienced interviewer, who has a training in social sciences and who has been working with the vulnerable target groups for years. She used interview guides that were common in each eight UPLIFT cases but occasionally also asked additional case-specific questions in order to get as much relevant information about participants' experiences as possible.

All interviews were done face-to-face. Most of the interviews were audio recorded. However, one participant from the younger age group refused to tape the interview; in this case, the interviewer took notes.

### 4.3 Analysing the interviews

In order to analyse the interviews, we used the Analytical Excel sheet that was the common methodological framework that all UPLIFT consortium partners agreed to apply. We hand coded the interviews according to the coding frame provided by the Analytical Excel sheet and entered the information about each participant into the Analytical Excel sheet. This information usually contained a short concise description of the participant's situation in different domains with the relevant quotes from their interview.

As we are using the personal life stories of real people as the units of our analysis and we present some parts of these stories in this report, it is very important to protect the confidentiality of our participants. Therefore, we have given them pseudonyms<sup>7</sup>, which we use instead of their real names to refer to their stories. Furthermore, we have left out a lot of identifying information or slightly modified some identifying information (e.g., changed the age of the participant one or two years), in order to make it less likely to reconnect the stories with real persons.

### 4.4 Group meetings

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the inventory workshop did not take place as originally planned. Instead of one bigger event, we organized two smaller events targeted to different stakeholders in order to discuss the project aims and methodologies with participants. On June 10, 2020, we organized an online event involving experts from the Tallinn City Government as well as NGO representatives (there were six participants from the field of youth work). On September 29, 2020, representatives from the state authorities most directly involved in youth policies (Ministry of Education and Research, and the Education and Youth Board) were present, as well as NGO and community representatives (altogether ten participants). This meeting took place on site. The goals of the meetings were met and we were able to gain valuable comments and recommendations for designing the research methodology for the research activities in Tallinn. Besides these events, we were able to contact and interact with stakeholder organizations and experts directly (incl. interviewees on

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<sup>7</sup> All pseudonyms are chosen either from the first hundred of the most popular first names in Estonia (homepage of the Statistics Estonia: <https://www.stat.ee/nimed/TOP>) or from the top ten most popular first names in the respective age groups (homepage of the Statistics Estonia: [https://www.stat.ee/nimed/TOP\\_AASTAD](https://www.stat.ee/nimed/TOP_AASTAD)).

WP3) to gain the useful knowledge that helped us to reach some of the goals we had for the original inventory workshop; also our project partner the Association of Estonian Open Youth Centers supported us in reaching the necessary information.

The Youth Town Hall Meeting was scheduled to take place in February 2021. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we had to postpone it to spring 2021 in hope that we could run this event in person. In cooperation with the Tallinn Youth Department, we found two suitable youth organizations to conduct the event with – Lasnamäe Youth Council and Mustamäe Youth Council. Both organizations are youth representative bodies in different districts of Tallinn (of these two, the Lasnamäe Youth Council represents the most vulnerable young people in Tallinn). However, we had to hold meetings online due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the tight schedule of young people. There were two online-meetings with youngsters. First one took place on the 20th of May with seven youngsters of Mustamäe Youth Council (seven youngsters and three organisers) and the second one took place on the 3rd of June with four youngsters of Lasnamäe Youth Council (four youngsters and three organisers). Both meetings were moderated by two experienced youth workers from The Association of Estonian Open Youth Centers and one involved expert from the University of Tartu; the long experience of youth experts in holding such meetings ensured the success of these meetings. We used different interactive methods during the sessions to make it more interesting and convenient for young people to participate. During the meetings, the moderator filled the digital interactive Jamboard, based on the thoughts and contributions of the participants, all three domains (education, housing, and employment) were addressed. We received valuable information from youngsters about their perceptions and experiences, the members of both groups were ready to continue cooperating with us in the future and, thus, the objectives of these meetings were met.

The social action workshop took place on October 13, 2021, with participants from ministries, the Education and Youth Board, the Unemployment Insurance Fund, and Tallinn City Government. The findings of the research results so far were discussed and participants contributed to planning and redesigning the services for young people to overcome the today's challenges. The interactive workshop took place on site with altogether 20 participants.

The storytelling workshop took place in September 2022 in person. A dozen young people from Tallinn, whose educational path has been left unfinished at the moment, discussed young people's educational, labour market and housing market prospects. The workshop was conducted by two team members from the University of Tartu. After some ice-breaking games, we used world-cafe format to get their feedback to our research findings and learn about their experiences regarding education, work and housing. The discussions were based on ideal-types of vulnerable young people, whose stories were created based on interviews with current and former youngsters. In order to encourage young people to speak their mind freely, we did not invite any stakeholders to this meeting.



## 5 Findings

### 5.1 Outcomes: what have vulnerable young people reached

In this subchapter, we provide a description of the main characteristics of our participants. We had 20 interviews with currently youngsters and 20 interviews with formerly youngsters. Out of 20 currently youngsters, 10 were under aged (15–17-years-olds) at the time of the interview (see Appendix 1, Table 1). Fifteen participants were male and twenty-five female. Most of our participants were Estonian-speakers, but we also had four participants from Estonian Russian-speaking community (all formerly young). We did our best to recruit more Russian-speaking participants but the Russian-speakers from our target group we managed to contact were much more reluctant to give an interview than Estonian-speakers we contacted. This was despite the fact that we offered an opportunity to have an interview in Russian.

Participants told us about great variety of problems, inequalities, vulnerabilities and challenges they have faced. Several participants had rather troubled childhood. Fourteen of our participants (2 currently and 12 formerly young) suggested that they did not receive enough support from their parents as a child and adolescent; in case of three participants, authorities found that they were victims of neglect. Two currently young and four formerly young participants lived with different relatives as a child because of social and economic problems of their families. One formerly young participant and her family were evicted from her childhood home with a court decision, when she was a teenager and after that, a single mother household could not afford decent housing anymore. One currently young and seven formerly young participants talked about domestic violence in their childhood homes and one currently young and nine formerly young participants report severe alcohol problems of their mother, father or stepfather. One currently young and two formerly young participants were removed from their birth families: currently young participant was adopted from the substitute care at the age of seven and two formerly young participants grew up in substitute care institutions.

One experience, what most of our participants share, is interrupted education. Thirty-four (15 currently and 19 formerly young) of our participants have dropped out of school or left the school before graduating either basic school<sup>8</sup> or high school<sup>9</sup>. Fifteen (9 currently and 6 formerly young) of our participants have experienced long-term school bullying in different forms, but most often in a form of social exclusion. The participants, who talked about bullying, often also mentioned mental health issues. Twelve of our currently young participants had learning difficulties in some or all subjects. The lack of learning motivation and reoccurring misunderstandings with teachers also come up in several interviews. However, there are also

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<sup>8</sup> In Estonia, attending school is compulsory until a person acquires basic education (9 grades) or until they turn 16.

<sup>9</sup> Completion of upper secondary education is not mandatory in Estonia, but only a marginal number of pupils do not continue their education either in an academic track (*gümnaasium*) or in a vocational track of upper secondary education after finishing basic school.

participants, who were high achieving and/or talented pupils and in some interviews, some teachers were praised as young people's solid supporters, who made an extra effort to solve their pupils' social problems (e.g., by organising extra set of books or a warm school meal for young people who could not afford it).

At the time of the interviews, all ten under aged participants had graduated basic school. In the age group 18–29, three participants had upper secondary education and seven basic education. The achieved education level was the most varied in the formerly young age group: two participants had less than basic education, eleven had basic education, three had upper secondary education, one had vocational education, and three people had BA from higher education institution. However, as mentioned above, the interrupted education paths were rather common among our participants. For example, except for one case, participants with higher education did not go to university directly after high school: they dropped out from high school as teenagers, acquired upper secondary education many years later and were very proud (and still quite surprised) that they managed to graduate from the university around their 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Many of our participants have entered labour market in a rather young age. While three of our underaged participants are already active in the labour market, 13 out of 20 of the formerly young started working already as teenagers. More than a quarter (8) of the formerly young are now quite settled in the labour market having steady jobs or, in one case, having become a rather successful small entrepreneur. It seems that economic crises in 2008/2010 did not affect our formerly young participants severely because only two of them mentioned losing their job because of the recession. Seven out of twenty currently young people have some kind of a job but their jobs can hardly be described as steady. All in all, eighteen (8 currently and 10 formerly young) of our participants admit facing (or having faced) difficulties in the labour market. In case of the currently young people, this means not finding appropriate job or finding only project based temporary job or part time job. These jobs with temporary work agreements are mostly found through the acquaintances of young people's parents, which indicates that young people were not able to appropriate job in the regular labour market. In case of formerly young people, the difficulties in the labour market include low salary, having multiple low-paid jobs in order to make ends meet, short-term employments, part-time jobs, doing odd jobs, not finding appropriate job, and also working on black market (in construction sector). These difficulties are in most cases caused by their early school leaving and low education level. Another rather widespread reason for difficulties with finding and keeping a job are different health problems. Fourteen (8 currently and 6 formerly young people) of our participants have problems with physical or mental health (or, in some cases, both). For example, three of our participants (2 currently and 1 formerly young) have autism or Asperger syndrome. In general, mental health problems are brought up in the interviews a lot more often than physical illnesses. The diagnoses that came up in more than one interview include depression, anxiety disorder, ADHD and eating disorders. Because of different health problems, six (4 currently and 2 formerly young) of our participants have only a partial ability to work. Furthermore, five (all formerly young) of our participants struggle either with drug or

alcohol addiction. While couple of our interviewees have been rather successful with conquering their addictions, others have had several setbacks and have found their way to rehabilitation centres more than once.

Because of facing difficulties in the labour market and having different health problems, several of our participants have received different social benefits and services. In the group of formerly young, six people have received labour benefits (two of them during the Covid-19 crisis and one during the previous economic crisis), two people have received free training (funded by the Unemployment Insurance Fund, and three people are currently registered with the Unemployment Insurance Fund. In the group of currently young, four people receive labour benefits and a couple of people receive other benefits from Social Insurance Board (one person also has a rehabilitation plan at Social Insurance Board). Only one young person has participated in local municipality's program for NEET youth.

Concerning the living conditions, six of our formerly young participants rent apartment, two have bought apartment with a bank loan, three have bought a house with a bank loan, two own an apartment, two own a house (or actually, their partners do), four live in a rehabilitation center, and one has no permanent living place (she commutes between relatives and friends). Most of our currently young participants live with their parents and siblings, with couple of exceptions, who live with other relatives (e.g., grandparents) or who live in a rented apartment alone. Six of our participants (all formerly young) talk about having problems related to the housing and six (3 currently and 3 formerly young) of our participants describe the neighbourhood they are living in negative light. The problems mentioned by our formerly young participants are related to high living costs and the big proportion the rent constitutes in their household budget. One participant is frustrated that her income allows her to rent only microsize apartment that is too small for her. Two formerly young participants have applied for social housing but have not received it because they did not meet the conditions. Our currently young participants do not claim that they have any problems related to the housing but it is clear from several interviews that their living conditions are far from ideal. For example, one young women lives in a small single room apartment with her grandmother and according to her, it allows her more room and privacy than she had in her parental home, where a small apartment was overcrowded because of many siblings. Another young woman in her twenties and her partner share a small flat with her parents and younger brothers. Therefore, it is not surprising that, while several of our participants are quite content with their current living conditions, there are several who dream of housing that is more spacious. Five currently young participants admitted that they would like to live separately from their parents or other relatives (either alone or with a partner) but they could not afford decent housing if they wanted to live separately. Though there are a couple of formerly young participants, who cannot afford renting an apartment or who can only afford renting microsize apartment (20 squeremeters or less), the more widespread problem among the formerly young is related to buying a home. Five formerly young participants complain that it would be very difficult to get a bank loan to improve their living conditions and buy their own flat or a house because of low income and high price level in Tallinn FUA, or because of recent unemployment. A couple

of formerly young participants, who have bought their homes with the bank loan, also mention the difficulties with paying it back.

Three of our participants (all formerly young) have a rather voluminous criminal record and they have been in prison either because of crimes against property or violent crimes against persons.

## 5.2 Resource space: formal freedom of choices for young people

Tallinn is the capital of Estonia with a population of 445,688 in 2021. Nearly half of Estonian population lives in Tallinn FUA and the migration trends show the increase of population. The population of Tallinn FUA is multi-ethnic; Estonians and Russians forming the largest ethnic groups. In 2021, there were about 129,000 young people aged 7–26 living in Tallinn (Statistics Estonia, 2022a).

### 5.2.1 Education

In **the domain of education**, the core form of youth inequalities in the FUA of Tallinn run along ethnic divide. The data of school attendance, study results and higher obtained education level refers to the evident inequalities between Estonians and Estonian-Russians (Estonian-speakers and Russian-speakers). Ethnic segregation in the Tallinn FUA can also be found in the separation of Estonian and Russian language schools (students of Russian-language schools form about one fourth of total young population). The issue is targeted by national and local policies that aim to increase the number of subjects taught in Estonian at Russian schools. These policies aim to improve the situation of young people with Russian mother tongue in Estonian language skills, continuing their studies in higher education and gaining their better perspectives later in labour market. In Russian-language municipal upper secondary schools, the transition to the Estonian language of instruction was started in 2007/2008 academic year. Since 2011, the general education system development plan for 2007–2013 stipulated that in the first year of upper secondary Russian-language school at least 60% has to be taught in Estonian. The evaluation of the outcomes of the transition to the Estonian language of instruction in Russian-language schools shows that it has given good results (measured with national exam results and opinion polls) and has equalised Russian-speaking students with Estonian-speaking students (Sau-Ek et al., 2011). Nevertheless, as pointed out also in latest Estonian education strategy for 2021–2035, Russian schools' students still show lower performance measured with study results and national exam results. Except ethnic segmentations, also gender differences can be found from Estonian education – as usually females perform better in education (Estonian education strategy 2021–2035).

Tallinn's Basic and Secondary Education Development Plan 2009–2014 lists unequal teaching quality between schools, low integration of the children of new immigrants and no regulation of their Estonian language studies, as well as low Estonian language skills of the staff of Russian-language schools among the main shortcomings in the local education. As a result, the shift of the language of instruction in Russian-language schools from Russian to Estonian has been much slower than planned and not implemented in all schools in Tallinn FUA.

Furthermore, it has been said by UPLIFT WP2 interviewees that students who have a visual, speech or hearing disability, intellectual disability, emotional or behavioural disability, or have special educational needs, are getting less attention than needed.

### 5.2.2 Employment

In **the domain of employment**, the core form of youth inequalities in the FUA of Tallinn run along ethnic and gender dimensions. Furthermore, young people as a group are in a disadvantaged position in the labour market. Tallinn FUA is the area in Estonia where the fastest rise in salaries and living standards has taken place and there is a trend towards a decrease in unemployment since 2000s. However, there are risk groups with a higher-than-average unemployment rate to whom the benefits of booming economy have not reached and young people aged 15–24 are among these groups. Young people also earn less: in 2017, the average gross monthly income in Tallinn FUA was 1283 euros but for employees up to 26 years of age, the gross income was 906 euros per month (Telpt *et al.*, 2018).

Young people were among the main risk groups in the labour market during both the 2008–2010 crisis and the Covid-19 crisis (Estonian Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan, 2014; Marksoo, 2020; Saar and Helemäe, 2017). For example, due to the Covid-19 crisis, which affected Estonian economy since March 2020, the unemployment rate of young people (aged 15–24) increased significantly in the second quarter of 2020 from 14.1% to 18.4% which is the highest number from 2013 (Marksoo, 2020). The Covid-19 crisis affected specially youth, Estonian Russians and women because activities in which the representatives of these groups are often employed (accommodation, catering, tourism, trade, culture, entertainment and leisure activities) were hit the most (Rosenblad *et al.*, 2020).

Estonia has the largest horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the European Union and one of the largest gender wage gap. According to the data of 2013, the horizontal gender segregation rate (concentration of women and men in different sectors) among the employed was 37.4% in Estonia and remained about same of 37% in 2019. The vertical gender segregation rate (concentration of women and men in occupations) was 40% in 2013 and decreased to 34.6% by 2019. Because of high gender segregation, in 2017, the average monthly gross income of men up to 26 years of age was 1002 euros and of women up to 26 years old, it was 806 euros. A survey by Piirits (2018) shows that although the high gender segregation and gender wage gap has been policy objectives for long period, there are still significant differences in labour market indicators with respect to gender and nationality. According to Estonian 2015 integration monitoring study, only 1 out of 3 respondents of Estonian-Russians perceive their opportunities to get a good job in the private sector to be equal to those of Estonians.

Informal working has been an issue in Estonia since 1990s and it does show any signs of reduction. Informal workers are vulnerable to market conditions and economic shocks as their work is not protected by law with respect to occupational safety and health, social protection, or discrimination normally provided to workers in an employment relationship. It mostly

affects non-Estonian workers and those who can be described as doing precarious work – low paid, below or at the poverty level, with uncertainty regarding the continuity of employment and the risk of high job loss (Distribution of envelope wages in Estonia, 2016). Informal wages are also more often paid to young employees who are seen as less stable workers.

The main employment policies are made and implemented on national level in Estonia and local municipalities rather deal with the elaboration and implementation of social work policies with particular attention to youth employment. The key target groups stated in employment policies of Tallinn city are youth and the long-term unemployed (Tallinn Development Plan 2014–2020), although policies dedicated to the last group actually dominate. Youth unemployment is well covered by the national policies; despite the fact that youth employment in Estonia is below the EU average. NEET youth has been the main target group in latest youth policies. New national measures aiming to increase the flexible forms of work (e.g., teleworking, part-time work) are stipulated to force which can have an effect especially in young age cohort when allowing to work besides the studies and from more distant rural areas. However, ethnic inequalities and lowering the barriers of Russian-Estonian youth to enter in labour market are not sufficiently covered by the national policies.

### 5.2.3 Housing

In **the domain of housing** the core form of youth inequalities in the FUA of Tallinn run along ethnic and family background dimensions which are related to the lower income of young people and less opportunities for Russian-speakers. 15–29 age cohort is in a more difficult situation in the housing market than older age groups because they earn less and do not have start-up capital for buying the real estate in a situation where property prices rise much faster pace than income. Estonia is the country with the fastest growing real estate prices in the European Union – both of house prices and rents. As the result, approximately one quarter of the young has not started their independent housing career by the time they are 30 years old (Kährik et al., 2003).

Young people whose parents support their children financially or help by providing their own real estate as mortgage for their children loan, are in better position. In less affluent families, the result is often that more than one generation have to occupy the same dwelling as the young people have limited possibilities to entry to the housing market (Kährik et al., 2003). Young people in the early stages of their housing career and those who cannot buy their own home depend on the rental market. The rental market in Estonia is dominated by the private sector and is highly dependent on economic cycles: prices are rising fast, contracts are made so that they can be cancelled at any time and there is no stability in rental prices (Kährik and Väiko, 2019). For young adults, who are entering to the rental housing market, the housing costs are high even in the case of an average monthly income because the number of cheaper apartments for rent is limited.

Housing deficit and poor condition of housing influence the youth who want to enter the housing market in Tallinn FUA. There is a minor deficit of housing in the FUA of Tallinn (Kährik

and Väiko, 2019). However, the condition of housing is another matter. In Estonia, there is currently about twice less of housing per person than in more developed European countries (Kährik and Väiko, 2019). With the rise of living standards and incomes, the demand to housing increases (Tallinn Development Plan 2004–2012). In Tallinn FUA, cheaper apartments can be found from soviet time panel housing estates and towns outside Tallinn (Mägi et al., 2016). Between 1950s and 1990s, large-housing estates were built in the outskirts area of city centre and most of the Russian-speaking in-migrants accommodated dwellings built on soviet time (Hess and Tammaru, 2019). The soviet time spatial segregation in housing has been reinforced as Estonians, who have higher income and more possibilities, move to single-family houses, leaving mainly Estonian-Russians live in Soviet time apartment housing (Mägi et al., 2016).

The domain of housing is characterised by low policy regulation. In 1990s, Estonia implemented thorough reforms towards neoliberal housing markets (Tammaru et al., 2016a). Soviet-era public housing tenants became private owners of their homes (Kährik, 2000; Lux, Kährik and Sunega, 2012). The share of public housing dropped from 61% in 1992 to 4% by 2000 (Kährik, et al., 2003). Therefore, the state had almost withdrawn from housing policy by the 2000s and the housing market operated on market economy principles. Today, the owner-occupied housing constitutes about 80% of the total housing stock (Hess and Tammaru, 2019) and the share of private rental market is about 15% (Kährik and Väiko, 2019). The share of tenants in total is the largest in the capital Tallinn – approximately 22% (Kährik and Väiko, 2019). The high ownership rate as a result of mass restitution policies left to public sector only minor possibilities to form housing policies. The main mechanism of local governments is offering affordable rental dwellings – the social housing – that has often negative reputation for mid-income youth because it is occupied by most low-income groups. However, such free market conditions have led to warning signs of an increasing level of socio-spatial inequality (Tammaru et al., 2016b).

According to the Estonian Constitution and the Local Government Organization Act, the domain of housing is the responsibility of local government. Local government (a city or municipality) defines the groups, who need support in housing, and finances and organizes the construction and maintenance of social housing. Social housing in Tallinn FUA is in general municipality owned and the share of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or public-private partnership projects providing social housing is almost none. The share of municipal housing is small: it makes up only about 2% of the total housing stock of the city (Tallinn Development Plan 2004–2012). The new social housing is mainly located in the districts of Lasnamäe and in the Northern Tallinn, contributing to the further increase of socio-spatial inequality in the city, and consists of 5- to 15-storey apartment buildings (Kährik and Kõre, 2013; Kährik and Väiko, 2019).

#### 5.2.4 Cross-sectorial youth policy

Youth inequalities and different problems that young people face are targeted by **the cross-sectorial youth policy** in Estonia. The roles and functions of stakeholders are described in the Estonian Youth Work Act (2010) according to which Ministry of Education and Research is

responsible for the preparation and monitoring of the national level programmes of youth work, financialization of local youth associations and administrative supervision in the field of youth work. Municipalities determine the priorities of youth work, and consult and support the youth programmes and youth projects of youth associations.

The key policies have been targeted largely to NEET youth. The Youth Field Development Plan 2021–2035 aims to increase youth involvement and employment readiness by providing employment through voluntary and paid work experience for young cohort and especially NEET youth. This goal is targeted by the key policy interventions – Estonian Youth Guarantee and related The Youth Prop Up programme. Estonian Youth Guarantee intends to help young people under the age of 29 return to work when they become unemployed by providing individual and group counselling, services of job-related training, job search workshop, and job practice. The Youth Prop Up programme (2015–2022) aims to support young people aged 15 to 26 years who are not currently involved in any kind of studies or employment (NEETs). The activities are identification of the NEET youths, establishing a trusting contact, developing their practical knowledge and skills, facilitating their entry into labour market, and keeping in regular contact with the participants for at least six months after their exit from the programme for follow up support and assistance if required (for an extended overview of Estonian policies targeting NEETs, see Paabort and Beilmann 2021).

## **5.3 Why young people cannot exploit fully their potentials**

### **5.3.1 Early school leaving causing severe consequences for young people's opportunities in the labour market**

Early school leaving is rather stigmatising for young people in Estonian labour market as, according to the latest census, the half of the Estonian urban population aged 25–64 have higher education and more than fifth have master's degree (Statistics Estonia, 2022b). Therefore, it is not surprising that, when describing the most vulnerable young people, our interviewed experts start to talk about early school leavers. They mention learning difficulties as one of the main causes for early school leaving and precarious position in the labour market. Among the young people, learning difficulties was mentioned as one of their main problems in school particularly often by the younger age group. Diana (17), Sandra (18), Karl (17), Karina (16), Elena (16), Oliver (17), Markus (18), Alina (18), Maria (23), Ingrid (17), Helen (16), Anna (17), Margarita (17) and Julia (17) are all young people, who experienced learning difficulties



in basic school (most often in science subjects) and who are finishing their selection year<sup>10</sup> at a vocational school or an adaptation year<sup>11</sup> at the vocational rehabilitation center.

### Providing learning aid at school as a conversion factor

Individual, family and institutional factors in different settings altogether contribute to increase the likelihood for one person to leave the education before successfully finishing it. **Providing a learning aid at school** is one of the institutional level conversion factors to facilitate better educational outcomes and lead to less likelihood to leave school at a young age. Well adjusted and professional learning aid can help to overcome young people from their lower individualised resource space (compared to their classmates) which is often caused by health issues of these young people or/ and lack of an environment at home that would support learning and educational achievements. Ingrid, Helen, Anna and Karl mention that the school offered them learning aid in the subjects they were struggling. Karl admits that, without learning aid, he would probably *"still be in basic school"*. And Karl is not the only one, who is slightly surprised that he managed to graduate from basic school.

*"And I can't imagine how I graduated from basic school, because in the 9th grade I just didn't go to school for about five months. /.../ I have trouble concentrating all the time because, well, I was diagnosed with ADHD. But, well, I didn't know that at the time, I just thought I was extremely stupid."*

*(Oliver, 17)*

Interviewed experts also claimed that learning difficulties are often not the result of young person's poor academic abilities, but rather a consequence of health issues, problematic situations at home and/or inadequate learning environment. Indeed, most of our young participants with learning difficulties have had their challenges, which made succeeding in school difficult. Oliver, who has been diagnosed with mood disorders, depression and ADHD, is not the only one with mental health issues. Diana has diagnosed with depression, Maria and Margarita suffer from attention deficit disorder. Karina has mental health problems, which began in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, when her classmate died.

### Smaller size classes and individualised learning facilitate educational achievements

In other cases the too large size of classes (consisting of 30 students or more) have not been suitable for the individual needs of young people. Kevin, who is diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, and Artur, who is diagnosed with autism, found the school environment extremely tiresome and unsuited for them: they were not able to stand many people around them during

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<sup>10</sup> It is a yearlong program, which provides students information about the different specialities and career choices and, furthermore, through short term practice placements, they can also find out how a certain speciality and work environment suits them. It is a new and innovative development in Estonian education system and only a small number of vocational education centres offer such programs for young people, who have failed to continue their studies in regular vocational education programs.

<sup>11</sup> Please see the previous footnote about the selection year. Different vocational schools use slightly different terms for similar programs.

the long schooldays. Because of learning difficulties, which became evident in the 6th and 7th grade, Kevin had to change schools.

*"I was under such a heavy study load and there were so many students with me, and then I started to realise that it doesn't suit me. I need a more personal approach from the teachers."  
(Kevin, 19)*

Kevin attended a small class in another basic school on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades and that suited him much better. Martin and Kevin found learning in a large group challenging. They are much more satisfied with the flexible and supportive learning environment at a high school for adult learners.

*"The teachers are also very nice and help and always, when you have not done some homework, for example, they don't immediately fail you somehow, but they try to find some kind of solution." (Martin, 21)*

The experience of more individualised, flexible learning environment have encouraged Kevin, and Martin set rather ambitious educational goals. Kevin even wants to continue his studies at a university to acquire doctorate in the future. While Kevin's plans may be overly ambitious due to his inability to work independently, Martin's intention continuing his studies in IT preferably at some European university may not be entirely unachievable as he graduated from the upper secondary school for adult learners with very good results, he passed the state exam for mathematics almost without preparation, and he has excellent English skills.

#### *The lack of ability to intervene in case of school bullying leads to early dropouts*

Sandra, Elena, Alina, Ingrid and Anna have experienced longterm school bullying. Sandra and Elena, for example, experienced social isolation and rejection by classmates throughout the basic school.

*"I didn't talk to them very much, well, I rather didn't... I basically talked to only one classmate for four years, who joined us from the sixth grade... Nobody really talked to her. I didn't really talk to anyone there for a measly five years." (Elena, 16)*

Different individual, family and institutional conversion factors have intervened to influence functionings. Experiencing school bullying and social isolation is a sign of serious deficiencies in an individualised resource base and a lack of conversion factors (individual, family or institutional) that could support individual coping. The ways, how the educational institutions (on school level, teachers, and classmates) have handled the problems in association with other conversion factors, influence a young person's ability to cope with bullying and fight back. Lack of early detection of violence (either physical or psychological) and assistance by school personnel (teachers, school psychologists, social pedagogues) – caused by either lack of specialists and/or lack of intervention skills in case of school bullying have led to dropouts and increase of mental health problems in case of young people who have experienced bullying. Alina remembers that the school did nothing to stop the bullying. Ingrid had to change schools because the bullying got so bad and there was no institutional support provided.

These cases of mental health issues and bullying have one common nominator – a lack of help and attention from school. This is an expected finding because previous qualitative research in Estonian vocational schools have demonstrated that schools tend to ignore bullying cases and leave the victims to their own devices (Beilmann, 2017; Beilmann and Espenberg, 2016; Espenberg et al., 2012). If the young people, who suffered because of mental health issues or bullying, would have got timely support, they might have done much better at school. Not to mention that in case of the death of student, Karina and all of her classmates should have been in the centre of the attention of the school psychologist. Unfortunately, however, there is **a lack of support personnel (school psychologists, school social workers, etc.)** in Estonian schools, which leaves many vulnerable young people without the timely assistance. Interviewed experts consider it a serious problem in case of young people in vulnerable life situations; especially as the families of these young people may also lack the resource space to help their offspring in such difficult situations.

*Strengthening the institutional resource space to support students with learning difficulties: providing special training course to support learning skills and self-regulation*

All these young people mentioned in this subchapter have rather low chances of succeeding in the education system. Several on them have failed to realise their plans regarding the desired education: Sandra tried to start a vocational training last fall but it turned out to be too difficult; Karl also wanted to start vocational training but could not get in because of the stress during the interview; Alina and Julia both tried to continue her education at a vocation school specialising as a chef, but did not get in; Markus wanted to continue his education at the Astangu vocational rehabilitation center, but did not succeed. Therefore, they have had to accommodate their plans with the reality. Now, they all continue their education taking a selection year at a vocational school or an adaptation year at the vocational rehabilitation center. Interviews with the experts reveal that they are a few lucky ones to have such an opportunity.

Only a small number of vocational education centres in Estonia offer young people, who have failed to continue their studies in regular vocational education programs, an opportunity to partake a yearlong program that aims to help young people to overcome gaps in their previous education and figure out what kind of vocation would be suitable for them. Furthermore, such programs are project based. Therefore, there is a need for more programs like that but it is uncertain whether the existing programs will have funding in few years.

*Agency of parents as an important conversion factor supporting their descendants' access to services and preventing early school leaving*

While our young participants mentioned that they have not received much assistance from education and social systems, there are examples of vulnerable young people, whose parents have fought for their access to different services. Martin (21), Kevin (19) and Artur (20) are three young men who are somehow in a rather similar situation. They all have serious health problems, they still live at home with their parents, they have dropped out of school in some

point, they have almost no work experience and they all find socialising extremely difficult. However, they all also come from supportive families and they have plans for continuing their education. In fact, they have taken steps to do so. Kevin and Artur are both currently studying at a high school for adult learners and Martin is a rather recent graduate of the same type of school.

Indeed, the parents of these young men have done everything what they can to support their sons in their studies. Martin's mother, for example, has paid for private tutors and e-courses to help her son to deal with the lag in some subjects. All Kevin's educational choices are made with the support and guidance of his parents. Continuing his studies at a high school for adult learners was also recommendation of his parents.

*"This [acquiring a high school education] did not occur to me that much; rather it was my parents who thought of it." (Kevin, 19)*

Without supportive parents, a vulnerable young person without agency cannot access adequate and necessary help. Institutions do not have a good „marketing“ of their services – they do not seem to reach the target group well if there is no parental agency to help reach the support (family related conversion factor).

Due to the support and guidance of their parents, Kevin and Artur receive practically all the services and benefits possible in their situations. Parents of Martin, Kevin and Artur have been extremely proactive in finding opportunities for them to continue their education in the learning environment suitable for them and to ensure them access to services that help them to deal with the gaps in their education as well as their mental health issues. While it is definitely a good thing for these three young men to have such protective, well-informed and active parents, their stories underline a massive shortcoming in the systems designed to support young people in vulnerable life situations – one needs quite a lot of agency to access these services. As stressed by the interviewed experts, the most of young people in vulnerable life situations do not come from particularly supportive families and it is unrealistic to expect much agency from the most vulnerable young people.

*Long-term support from parents can also become a delimiting conversion factor for young people to strive in their independent life*

None of the three young men – Martin, Kevin and Artur – have had a real job as they rely on their parents' continued support. According to Martin, there is no need to work as his parents provide him with food and housing at family home. He expects to have good job opportunities in the future, if he goes to study in the IT field but at the moment, he considers it possible to start working in the service sector if the need should arise. As he does not have any work experience and no occupation or professional skills, he does not think he could get any other job. All three also do not hurry to leave home as it is more comfortable to live at their parents' homes and have their everyday expenses covered by their parents.

*"There is simply no reason for this [living separately] at the moment... There are no disadvantages [in living with mother]. The advantages are that, well, I don't have to worry about anything at the moment." (Martin, 21)*

*"With my current income, it would be unthinkable to move out, because, well, living separately from social support benefits alone would not be possible, because I would have additional expenses multiple times higher than my current income." (Kevin, 19)*

### **5.3.2 Individual conversion factors: will, agency, capability wins over a lack of formal education (until it does not anymore)**

When analysing the stories of the formerly young people, who have also been struggling with learning difficulties and (mental) health issues, it becomes evident that, at least for some, early school leaving does not have to mean failure in the labour market. Rainer (36), Marko (37), Erik (31), Robert (41), Rasmus (42) and Henri (35) are very different men with rather different life paths but what they have in common is that they all have had rather successful career despite low education and rather unfavourable start in life.

Rainer, whose father was an alcoholic and was violent towards mother and children, dropped out from school in the 9th grade due to learning difficulties. There was no help and support from the school to solve the conflicts with teachers or to make learning environment more suitable for Rainer, who has Asperger's syndrome. Instead of helping, the school psychologist threatened to send Rainer to the school for young delinquents. That was when his mental health disorders arose. After completing the treatment, Rainer chose to go to work. Marko's learning difficulties appeared in the 6th grade. His parents were away from home a lot due to their work and there was no support at home to overcome learning difficulties; his parents lacked parenting skills. Poor academic performance, combined with the bullying by schoolmates and teachers, reduced his motivation to go to school at all.

#### *Individual level conversion factors: importance of individual agency – will, agency, capability*

Currently, Marko is continuing his education in the 9th grade of the high school for adult learners, where he is experiencing more support and guidance than during adolescence. Rainer got his basic school-leaving certificate at the age of 22 and is currently attending a high school for adult learners along with Erik, Robert and Henri. Erik considers the possibility of obtaining a master's degree in the future.

All six men have done rather well in life despite the lack of education. They have families, rather comfortable living conditions, and they have been rather successful in the labour market. Rainer, who started working as an errand-boy when he was a 16-year-old and had just dropped out of basic school, is entrepreneur and he has found his place in life despite childhood traumas, mental health disorders and Asperger's syndrome. He started his first company at

the age of 18. He has launched various enterprises and has been an employer of many people. He considers high motivation and interest in what he is doing to be his strengths.

*"I like to do the things that interest me. And I see that the things I do are important. And I'm very lucky that I can choose the things in my life what I want to do." (Rainer, 36)*

Five other men, however, have found out that the lack of education does not let them advance in the career ladder anymore. Robert, for example, has been working in a state-owned company for 12 years, starting at the lowest level and working his way up to a middle manager. Further advancement on the career ladder is possible only by obtaining secondary education, which is what he is currently doing.

Erik started working in the evenings and on weekends after school at the age of 13 in order to earn his own money. For a very long time, he has found his jobs through acquaintances in the same field he started in when he was 13 years old. However, now he has found out that he needs school leaving certificate<sup>12</sup> after all in order to go to university for further advancement in his career. Similarly to Erik, Henri thought for a long time that he would never go back to school, but without secondary education, it is not possible to continue his studies and find a job in the IT sector. He has learned computer science and programming independently.

*"I have always wanted to work in IT. And I have learned some computer things on my own... And now I've also learned programming on my own, but there's always something missing and a job... I've applied an awful lot." (Henri, 35)*

Marko has probably had the most varied work career of these five men. Currently, he works illegally in the construction sector but he has also been a transport worker, security guard, guard, porter in hotels, taxi driver, construction worker, and has had different jobs abroad in several neighbouring countries. Usually these have been rather short-term jobs. He has also been a shorter period without a job, but at the same time, he has not experienced long-term unemployment.

*"You know, you always will get some job, and in this regard, if you don't have that graduation certificate in your pocket, but you at least have driver's license, so something can still be done." (Marko, 37)*

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<sup>12</sup> At the end of basic schooling (from age 7 to age 16), successful pupils receive a basic school leaving certificate (*põhikool lõputunnistus*); general academic education completes with a secondary school completion certificate (*gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus*); completing secondary vocational education achieves a certificate on acquiring secondary vocational education based on basic education (*tunnistus põhihariduse baasil kutsekeskhariduse omandamise kohta*). One needs these certificates when continuing studies at the next level of study or when applying for a job. (For more information, see *Factsheet on Secondary Education in Estonia*, <https://harno.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2021-03/hindamiss%C3%BCsteem.pdf>).

Despite being never unemployed over a longer period, Marko has found out that the lack of basic education stops him from fulfilling his dreams to become a farmer.

*“But I can’t afford it, because I would never be able to buy a farm with tractors thanks to ... that I don’t get these subsidies, for example, because I’m not studied to be a farmer because I don’t have that diploma. In order to get anything in life, you have to get your hands on this useless piece of crap paper.” (Marko, 37)*

The importance of school leaving certificate in the labour market is not a new or surprising finding, of course. The studies of Estonian researchers from the last decades have demonstrated that candidates without higher education are usually filtered out in the selection process (Oras, 2014; Täht, Lindemann and Unt, 2015). In the labour market, where lack of higher education is a risk factor, people without secondary or basic education are in an especially precarious situation. Marko’s example is probably rather telling about the importance of school leaving certificate because unlike five other men, he did not have well-connected acquaintances to help him advance in his career. Furthermore, Marko’s example underlines that the missing school leaving certificate may not pose barriers only in the labour market but also cause problems when a person needs to take a loan to start a small business (or buy a home).

### **5.3.3 The infamous glass-sealing – less-educated women in the labour market**

It was not mentioned in the interviews but one reason why Rainer, Marko, Erik, Rasmus, Robert and Henri have done rather well in the labour market and can afford themselves a comfortable life despite their rather low education is their gender. Regarding their interrupted education paths, Margit (30), Katrin (33), Linda (39) and Krista (40) are female counterparts of the previous group (Rainer, Rasmus, Robert, Erik, Marko and Henri). They all had rather hectic school career and now they are back at school. Margit, for example, studied at a vocational school for three years, but for economic reasons she had to work at the same time and therefore did not graduate. She is currently studying in the 11th grade at a high school for adult learners. Karin, who interrupted her studies in the 10th grade to live abroad with her mother, has later obtained secondary education from the high school for adult learners with very good results and is currently studying at a university. After graduating from high school for adult learners, Krista continues her studies in vocational education and Linda just recently finished her undergraduate studies at the university.

Recently, Margit and Katrin have discovered that the lack of education is an obstacle on the labour market.

*“Now, when I want to move forward, like at work, I can’t do it anymore, because it’s like some kind of ceiling comes up, I can’t go any further. Because for that, it’s necessary to have a secondary education.” (Margit, 30)*

Unlike their male counterparts, women without higher education have yet another problem, which is well illustrated by Margit's housing situation. Margit lives with her partner in a private house near Tallinn, which was bought without a bank loan. Her partner is in business and his incomes made it possible. Buying a house with Margit's pay would have not been possible. Because of a large gender pay gap in Estonia, women without higher education are particularly in risk of wage poverty. A study by Anspal et al. (2011) demonstrated that in Estonia, women with higher education earn as much as men with upper and lower secondary education and women with upper secondary education earn much less than men with lower secondary education do. Estonia's gender pay gap has decreased considerably in recent years, but according to the Statistics Estonia, it remains remarkably high in several sectors. As a result, early school leavers among the girls may find themselves in particularly precarious situation, as it is very difficult for them to find a job with a salary that would cover the high housing costs in FUA Tallinn.

The odds of finding a well-paid job and afford a decent housing are even more scarce, when we add another conversion factor – Russian origin. Anastasia (30) and Larissa (32) are both young women of the Russian origins, who had to start working in a very early age.

Anastasia graduated from basic school with good grades, although, she had already started working. She continued her education at the high school as the headmaster invited her personally. However, she left school in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. There had been conflicts with teachers during her schooldays as she was acutely aware of excessive strictness and unfair treatment by teachers. Anastasia is very critical of the education system of the time of her schooldays – lack of flexibility and excessive strictness stemming from the previous era, which she finds typical for Russian schools in Estonia.

*“Well, the biggest problem I had at school ... was the imposition of the Soviet time education system on me... I got disgusted with learning.” (Anastasia, 30)*

#### Addictions as a negative conversion factor delimiting life chances

Anastasia tried to continue her education at a vocational school but failed. It may have something to do with the fact that she was using drugs at the same time. Anastasia used drugs at the age of 17–20 and did not work during this three years' period. At the moment, Anastasia is clean and continuing her education at a high school for adult learners. She wants to acquire a higher education and study law in the future. She is very self-aware and motivated about continuing her education.

Although, Anastasia and Larissa had rather unfavourable teenage years, they have overcome their addictions and other problems by now and they cope in the labour market. Anastasia has worked in a customer service and as sales manager in various companies, but at the moment, she is self-employed and works part-time. Larissa has been doing relatively well-paid simple part-time work in the same company for 14 years now. However, the promotion has been



hindered by the lack of secondary education and the resulting limitation in completing final level training.

#### Good language skills as an individual level conversion factor

One thing that has helped them a lot in the labour market is their very good command of the Estonian language. Anastasia went to a language immersion class in basic school and in her opinion; all Russian schools in Estonia should switch to language immersion, so that young Russians can learn the Estonian language properly and have more opportunities in the Estonian education system and labour market. She brings the example of her mother, who has unfinished higher education and who has done unskilled work all her life because she does not speak Estonian at all and have had very limited opportunities in the labour market. After stating that, "I basically got all my jobs [thanks to Estonian skills]," Anastasia, however, draws attention to a curious contradiction in the Estonian labour market by claiming that she has personally experienced and also seen from side such discrimination in the labour market that Russians who speak Estonian well are kept at the customer service level positions in companies precisely because of their command of two languages. Estonians who do not speak Russian, however, are promoted to higher positions where Russian skills are not so necessary.

*"My highest position in that company was customer service. If an Estonian comes who does not speak Russian, (s)he gets a higher position somewhere. That's why I stay there – it's because I can speak both languages."*  
(Anastasia, 30)

Anastasia's theory about her disadvantage in the labour market is supported by the research: Estonian speakers are generally in the better position in the Estonian labour market than the Russian speakers (Lindemann & Kogan, 2013; Lindemann, 2009). Furthermore, it has been shown that in order to get a higher salary, Estonian Russian speakers benefit more from good command of English rather than good skills of local language (Toomet, 2011). However, the good command of Estonian language significantly rises the chances of being called to job interview in service sector for Russian-speaking women in Estonia (Lõgina, 2013). The study says nothing about the prospective promotions, though, and this issue would need further research.

#### **5.3.4 Trapped in addiction**

If someone once gets into trouble (being involved in criminal activities) and/or has different kind of addictions, they can remain trapped, because the institutional setting around them does not provide enough ways to reintegrate them to society.

While the stories of Rainer, Marko, Erik, Robert, Rasmus, Henri, Margit, Linda, Krista, Katrin, Anastasia and Larissa are all examples of the formerly vulnerable youngsters who have done rather well, Andres (38), Viktor (31) and Nikita (42) illustrate the other extreme. They are all residents of a rehabilitation center for addicts. Andres has severe alcoholism, Viktor used drugs

for 10 years (he started using drugs at the age of 21) and he has a gambling addiction, Nikita has drug and gambling addiction.

*Lack of inner motivation and good role models in the family as preventing conversion factors for individual success*

Andres stopped going to school in the 12th grade due to work – he was working as a transport worker and floor installer. Andres has never considered the lack of secondary education to be a limitation when it comes to managing his life. He does not consider formal education important. Viktor's motivation to learn was always very low and after finishing basic school, he went to work. However, his work career was interrupted by the criminal activities. Viktor used drugs for 10 years, engaged in theft and fraud, and therefore was in prison several times. There would have been opportunities to continue education while serving prison sentences, but there was no motivation. Nikita grew up in very difficult circumstances – parental rights were taken away from his mother due to severe alcoholism and Nikita lived in an orphanage and foster families several times during his childhood. Nikita stopped going to school before graduating a basic school. He ended up in a prison for a first time as a minor and did not continue his education. Since then, he has repeatedly served prison terms for theft, robbery and serious crimes against the person. He has never worked officially and he completely lacks motivation to work. Nikita did not continue his education or work in prison despite the fact that there were opportunities for that.

Despite many similarities between these three men, who are all residents of a rehabilitation center for addicts, they have very different attitude towards work. While Viktor and Nikita do not like working (and they do not work currently), Andres is very motivated to work. While staying in the rehabilitation center, Andres does odd jobs in the catering sector and regrets that lately there have been less work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For Andres, it brings back memories of the previous economic crises, when he was laid off from the construction company without a day notice. However, thanks to acquaintances, he found a new job after a few months back then. Throughout his work life, Andres has mainly done short-term odd jobs: he has worked as a security guard, installed floors in Finland, worked in a customer service in various companies. Andres himself associates his strong work ethic with having his father as his role model. His father had two jobs throughout his life.

*"In this regard, dad was an example all the time that if you don't want to study anymore, then you have to work and that's it, and that's how it's been all my life also that I am, I have been working all the time." (Andres, 38)*

Viktor, who also did some odd jobs during 10 years of drug use and between prison terms, wants to find a good job, but does not want to make a purposeful effort for it. That emphasises the role of the family as (unlike Andres) Viktor and Nikita lacked positive role models in their families when growing up. It makes it very difficult for social services to assist them. They are all registered at the Unemployment Insurance Fund to obtain medical insurance but they are

rather reluctant to use any labour market services. Viktor, for example, is not interested in participating in any trainings to acquire necessary skills to find a job.

*Allocation principles of social housing can also become constraining as regards future integration in society*

After leaving the rehabilitation center, Viktor can go to live in a dormitory offered by local municipality<sup>13</sup>. He hopes to find a good job and rent an apartment, but he has only a basic education and large debts – not a very promising combination. Breaking the vicious circle is even more unlikely when we consider the experience of Tamara (34) who told us that when she was released from prison, she was offered a place in social housing in the dormitory where she once started using drugs. According to her, living in the social housing units makes former addicts relapse into their old habits.

*„These social housing units were also offered in the prison... Basically, these were exactly the same units where my use started and I assume that ninety percent of the addicts are from these same units... where they seem to be thrown back.“ (Tamara, 34)*

Tamara, who grew up neglected and who was placed in an orphanage at the age of 14 because of her mother's alcoholism, has had very complicated life that include belonging to the street gang at the age of 12, alcohol, tobacco and drugs misuse, severe fentanyl addiction, and prison sentences. At the age of 34, she tries to put all that behind her and has had a steady job for a year. Her smooth transition into a work life is explained by the fact that she spent 7 months in an open prison and upon release, she could continue working for the same employer she worked for during the period of the open prison. The transition into a housing market has been less smooth. Tamara considers the housing problem to be the most serious and pervasive problem in her life, which has caused relapses even after undergoing drug rehabilitation.

*„If you don't have your own place of residence, your safe place, if you don't have that... you don't really have anything. Both relapses due to... are due to residence... which I needed... I had to come back to the father of the child; the father of the child, with whom I no longer wanted to live.“ (Tamara, 34)*

After being released from prison, she was able to rent a 20-square-meter apartment for herself, using the money withdrawn from the II pension column as a first payment (term contract for one year). She is considering buying an apartment near Tallinn with a bank loan, but payment defaults and the requirement for a deposit to obtain a bank loan make it unlikely to get a bank loan. Therefore, there is a need for solutions in social housing provision that would support former addicts to stay clean and not to relapse.

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<sup>13</sup> Local municipality must provide it to him after his time in prison.

### 5.3.5 Unrecognised vulnerabilities – the problems of ‘unproblematic’ good girls

When listing the problems of Estonian education system, there is a tendency to focus on the issues what make school system particularly unsuitable for boys and lead to lower academic performance and higher rate of early school leaving compared to girls.

#### *The early detection and timely treatment of mental health issues of high achieving girls at school is paramount to prevent to severe consequences*

Kristina (23), Laura (23), Annika (27), Monika (28), Lea (30) and Eve (37) are all young women who seem rather unlikely candidates to be considered vulnerable youth. Back in their schooldays, they could have been described as good girls who never caused any trouble for their parents or teachers. All of them used to do very good at school in terms of their academic achievements and good behaviour. However, with the exception of Lea, who has higher education (BA), they have not acquired higher education – Kristina and Monika have high school diploma, whereas Laura, Eve and Annika have only basic school education. This is a result of the problems at school or at home, which were overlooked until the day they collapsed due to their mental health problems. Today, Kristina suffers from mood and eating disorders, Laura from mood disorders, Monika from chronic mental health disorders (she has moderate disability and partial work capacity). Furthermore, Monika has made several suicide attempts as an adult, and has been repeatedly treated in a psychiatric hospital.

Kristina experienced long term bullying in basic school. She had a conflict with a classmate and as a result, she experienced long-term (1.5 years) rejection by her classmates. There was no intervention from the school and it damaged her mental and emotional health. Laura graduated from a small basic school and continued her studies in a large high school, which caused adaptation difficulties. She received no help and as she could not adapt to an unfamiliar environment, she did not attend school and interrupted her studies several times. When she finally turned to a psychologist, she was diagnosed with depression and anxiety disorder. After graduating from the basic school with excellent results, Annika continued her education in high school. However, due to a prolonged illness, she fell behind in the 11th grade. After the period of illness, she experienced reluctance from teachers to give her some extra time to catch up with her studies despite her excused absence.

Monika did very well at school and got along very well with the teachers but it was mainly because she “wanted attention, recognition, what I didn’t get at home” (Monika, 28). She continued her studies in higher education but her studies were interrupted due to long-term accumulated mental health problems. Her mental health issues were caused by the very difficult circumstances at home that her teachers could not see. As Monika’s stepfather invested the most of his earnings into drinking, family lived in very poor conditions.

*“My room there too ... I remember that as the wind blew through, I played with Legos wearing gloves.” (Monika, 28)*

However, the poor living conditions was not as bad as the other aspects of growing up with a stepfather, who was overly fond of alcohol – Monika was mentally, physically and sexually abused by her stepfather.

As academically successful pupils, these young women were not seen as vulnerable or problematic by teachers, trainers, or youth workers. Their problems were overlooked because they had always 'managed', and they were expected to continue to manage. However, recent studies show that the civically active and high achieving girls may be particularly prone to burn out and resulting mental health issues (Beilmann, 2020).

*Appropriate services later in life together with individual conversion factors can overcome the difficult home conditions in the childhood and lack of support at school*

Despite many difficulties, this group has positive attitude towards studying and they are particularly determined to improve their education. Laura, Kristina, Annika and Eve, who are currently studying at a high school for adult learners, want to continue their studies at a university. However, most of them need special study conditions. Kristina, for example, is determined to get a higher education in IT in the coming years but she needs help and support with her mental health (depression and anorexia). Kristina is very aware of her mental health problems, which impair her ability to cope in difficult and stressful situations.

Several of these young women have worked hard to deal with their mental health issues. Laura believes that she has learned to cope with her anxiety by now. Kristina, too, has sought help. Currently, she sees a psychologist and therapist (provided by state financed health care) in order to learn the necessary coping techniques and self-care skills.

*"I deal with this and I have developed a lot in this area in the last years and made great progress in order to increase perhaps such stability in myself and in my life. Which I feel that I never knew how to do when I was young."  
(Kristina, 23)*

After receiving help to deal with her traumas, Monika feels ready to help other people with similar experiences. She has taken courses to help other people with mental health problems and become a support person/community counsellor. Then talking about their future career plans, several other women mention the desire to help others with their work.

*"I would like to find something ... that really interests me and, whether it's a job or a profession, one part of it should definitely be that it is useful to someone else, too; that it creates some value. Helping someone or somehow makes the world a better place..." (Kristina, 23)*

All five young women have experienced difficulties in the labour market. Eve wants to find a job but her opportunities are limited because of movement restrictions and low education. Until recently, Kristina worked as a low-paid waiter in a catering service but she gave up this

job due to reduced income during the Covid-19 restrictions. This work experience was very positive for her – she felt appreciated and accepted despite a very little pay. Currently, she works part time as a babysitter. Annika, who started her working career at the age of 7 by selling newspapers and has been working as a personnel manager of a catering company for last 2.5 years, says that the lack of secondary education has so far not been a significant obstacle to finding jobs. She considers it important that she herself has been courageous.

*"I quickly realized that simply handing over your CV is not useful. That ... it helps if you write a letter of motivation." (Annika, 27)*

Annika found her first permanent job in a catering company as a counter attendant (17 years old) and quickly rose from the service position to a service manager (18 years old). She took professional training courses in the catering sector. She found new acquaintances at the first jobs, through whom to advance in the field. Similarly to Annika, Monika started working already as a pupil during the summer holidays; during her university studies, she had various jobs in service sector. However, the heavy workload in addition to studies did her no good and her mental health got worse.

#### Starting labour market career is tough and needs strength and motivation – an individual conversion factors

The careers of Annika and Laura underline the importance of having acquaintances in order to find a job without proper qualification. One could think that finding a job is easier when having a higher education. Story of Lea proves otherwise. After obtaining a bachelor's degree, Lea was looking for a job in Tallinn.

*"I was in complete despair, while after university I really tried dozens, dozens... many places and then most of them didn't even answer at all and, and then all the time there was this negative reply and then, well, it's completely like leading to despair when you know you need a job..." (Lea, 30)*

She was forced to start a professional career with a minimum wage on a job, which required a higher education. She had several parallel jobs in the first years of entering the labour market in order to make ends meet.

*"But then I remember that at that time I was also cleaning. Just to earn some extra, to... like this in the evenings... a few times a week; so, in this respect I had two jobs. Well, at that time I actually even had three jobs, because I also went on weekends..." (Lea, 30)*

Lea also have had project-based jobs in non-profit organizations. Eventually, she worked for a period with a decent salary in a very demanding position, 10-12 hours a day, including weekends. She gave up this job because of too high workload. After that, she worked part-

time for half a year in very precarious conditions. At the moment, Lea is on maternity leave and works part-time.

*Services of Unemployment Insurance Fund support young people in their labour market career but benefitting from the services is up to the agency of individuals*

Lea and Laura have never applied to the Unemployment Insurance Fund, although Lea has considered it. Kristina has contacted the Unemployment Insurance Fund after the end of the fixed-term employment contract, and received unemployment insurance benefits. She is aware of the many different opportunities that the Unemployment Insurance Fund offers. She has not used the training opportunities yet but has a very positive impression of this institution.

*"It's completely because of me that at the moment, I haven't taken any training there. But I understand that there is a lot of support from the Unemployment Insurance Fund, that if I want, I can take the training; they are like supportive in every way." (Kristina, 23)*

Annika, who was laid off and received unemployment benefits for 2.5 months at the beginning of the Covid-19 period, has a far more critical view. She asked for further training from the Unemployment Insurance Fund, but it turned out to be difficult. She considers the service too byrocratic and complicated to apply and in her opinion, the Unemployment Insurance Fund needs to raise the level of services in order to fulfil its functions.

*"The Unemployment Insurance Fund in the sense that you get your [aid] money from there. But to really help and direct people to the new [work] places – I think there is a lot of work to be done." (Annika, 27)*

Laura and Monika have both received benefits from the Social Insurance Board. Laura received a benefit meant for children/young people whose one or both parents are dead. It is possible to receive this benefit until the age of 24 if the young person is studying.

*Traumatised young people need an individual support in finding appropriate services and following the byrocratic rules*

Monika considers filling out the paperwork to apply for benefits as traumatic for low-achieving people.

*"You're outline there all these worst things. And that's something that I don't think anyone should do on their own, because it's really mentally depressing when you do it and you look at your weakest points, and everything you have difficulties with." (Monika, 28)*

According to Monika, it is very difficult to find appropriate help even after having fulfilled all the documents and having a rehabilitation plan. Monika's experiences demonstrate that

people in dire need of mental health services need quite a lot of agency in order to reach the specialists they need.

*"My problem was that I first wanted to know what services they [health institutions] offer that could be part of my rehabilitation plan. Do they even have a psychologist with whom I could talk about my trauma experience? /.../And then most of these centers don't respond to emails... call to them or go there, which is basically impossible for a lot of people. You just can't do it, you have such a block. In one place I was told directly that I was too difficult a client for them." (Monika, 28)*

Therefore, the persons in need of a help is left on their own when looking for help. Considering the state of the many young people with mental health issues, they will never get the help they need if they do not have a family member or some other support person who help them with finding the adequate service for them.



## 6 Discussion points for (a potential) Reflexive Policy Agenda in Tallinn

In this chapter, we attempt to bring together the views of the vulnerable young people, practitioners working with young people and policymakers in order to outline some of the issues in young people's lives in Tallinn that need to be addressed by youth, other sectoral or cross-sectoral policies. First of all, it is important to emphasise that there were no major contradiction between the young people's and expert's views on what the most important problems in school and work life as well as on the housing market are that increase vulnerability among the youngsters and that would need systemic solutions at the organisational, local or national level.

Lack of early detection of young people's problems seems to be one of the major shortcomings in Tallinn schools that leads to early school leaving. Currently and formerly vulnerable young people spoke in our interviews and workshops about schools insufficiently addressing (or even ignoring) their learning difficulties, mental and physical, school bullying cases and other serious issues that do not allow young people to thrive in school. The practitioners working with young people, as well as policy makers, were equally concerned that the schools do not have enough personnel to treat each student as an individual and detect students' problems early enough to prevent the growth of chronic mental health issues, different addictions, maltreatment, bullying and early school leaving as a result (see also Beilmann *et al.*, 2022). The lack of support specialists in schools (psychologists, social pedagogues, social workers, etc.) is a problem well recognised by practitioners working with young people as well as by youth policy makers. Unfortunately, there can be no quick solutions as this problem needs systemic solutions at the national level (incl., increasing the number of school psychologists and other specialists being trained by the universities and providing motivating salaries for specialists). A bit faster solution is to provide easily accessible training/study materials, programs, and trainings to teachers and other specialists in schools on students' special needs and on school bullying (e.g., How to recognise that some student has special needs? How to intervene? To whom to turn for help?). That could lead to provision of more individualised learning programs and more flexible learning paths. However, it is also important to recognise that teachers need a support for providing such flexibility and it is most likely to create a need to decrease the number of students in the classroom (or to hire more assistant teachers) because it is not fair to expect one teacher to provide individualised program for 35 students in the classroom.

Smaller classrooms would benefit all students as overcrowded classrooms may also be one of the reasons why the problems of „good students“ (mostly girls) are often unnoticed or ignored in schools. Indeed, the vulnerability of „unproblematic good girls“, who are usually considered unlikely candidates to be particularly vulnerable or potential NEETs, was probably the most unexpected finding of our interviews with young people. The possibility that academically high

achieving girls may have serious problems and they may not feel particularly good at school, have been largely ignored by specialists and policy makers. However, it is not only about not feeling well in school as ignoring these problems may lead to difficulties later in the labour market or leaving the school earlier than based on capabilities one would expect it.

Another problem, what was prevalent in interviews with young people as well as in workshops targeted to vulnerable young people, was the lack of awareness of different career choices and inability to choose the school and speciality after graduating from the basic school. Many of the young people we interviewed continued their education taking a selection year at a vocational school or an adaptation year at the vocational rehabilitation center. Therefore, they practically participate in a yearlong program, which provides them information about the different specialities and career choices and, furthermore, through short term practice placements, they can also find out how a certain speciality and work environment suits them. However, only a small number of vocational education centres in Estonia offer young people, who have failed to continue their studies in regular vocational education programs, an opportunity to partake such a yearlong program. Many more young people in Tallinn FUA would need such an opportunity to figure out their possibilities for education and work career. Therefore, there is a need for more programs that would support vulnerable young people in tackling the gaps in their previous education and figure out what kind of vocation would be suitable for them. Of course, such a solution is rather expensive and it probably cannot be offered to very large groups of young people. Somewhat cheaper solution may be to enhance career counselling in schools (particularly in basic schools). Our expert interviews revealed that the career counselling is of the rather unstable quality in Tallinn FUA schools (see also Beilmann *et al.*, 2022). According to interviewed specialists, it depends on school administration how much and whether at all career counselling is provided to students. They were concerned that it may often lead to situations, where young people, who would need the counselling the most (e.g., young people from families, who are unwilling or unable to discuss their career choices or teach them how to write a proper CV, for example), are the ones, who miss the professional career counselling. Specialists stressed that usually it is not enough to have one classroom meeting with the career counsellor as particularly the more vulnerable young, who have no idea, where to continue their studies or what kind of opportunities they have, would need one-to-one counselling sessions. Young people confirmed it in workshops by telling us that a career counselor visited their school only once and the students, who were not at school that day, missed the chance for any career counselling at school. Career counselling should be made much more available at schools and if it is not provided by schools, it should be made easily accessible for young people through youth work sector. Youth work specialists suggest gathering different services for young people (incl. career counseling) under one roof into so-called youth houses, where young person can get a professional and friendly advice (s)he needs without a fear of stigmatisation (see also Beilmann *et al.*, 2022).

The concern that the vulnerable young people may be rather poorly informed about their opportunities in formal and informal education (but also in the labour market) is well illustrated by the fact that young people who were participants of this study as well as those who took

part of the workshops were unaware of the services targeted exactly to people like them. Estonian youth work sector provides very varied services, activities, projects and programs to young people (many of those are specially focused on vulnerable young people and NEETs in particular; see section 5.2.4 in this report), but the young people hardly mentioned any such youth work activities or programs. Therefore, it is crucial to provide young people in vulnerable life situation information about the different opportunities offered to them by the youth work sector because these services may somewhat compensate the support and attention that they have not received in school and/or at home.

The vulnerability of Russian-speaking young people is a well-known problem in the Estonian education system that was also raised in our interviews with Russian-speaking young people. As this issue needs systemic state-level solutions, we only remark here that the transition to the Estonian language in Russian-language schools was hotly debated in Estonia in the autumn 2022 and there is a clear political will to make an end to the situation, where young people leave the school without being able to express themselves in the official language of the country.

Concerning the functioning of the housing market and the issues related to young people's difficulties to afford independent housing in Tallinn FUA, accessibility issues and allocation criteria of social housing would need to be reconsidered. Many young people referred to the unaffordability issues concerning renting or buying an independent home and starting their housing career. Rental housing below the market rent (i.e., social housing) offered by local governments is very limited in Estonia (and no NGO-s are active in providing such services). Social housing could, however, be made more accessible to young people in accumulated vulnerability situations, for example, young people with low incomes and low education and young people for whom renting or owning on a private market is inaccessible. Today, by national legislation, social housing should be targeted to orphans, disabled people or those with special needs (young people among other groups), but local governments rarely allocate social housing based on socio-economic or age criteria alone (Kährik and Kõre, 2013). New municipal housing development programs, initiated by the city government of Tallinn and partly financed from the state budget, also considered young specialists as target groups but not those without specialization (*ibid.*). Young people without higher education do not also benefit from the state support programs that help to grant the housing loans to young people – these grants are targeted to specialists with higher education only.

Local governments should also be more aware of the consequences of allocating tenants of social housing to social housing residential complexes with high concentration of residents with accumulated vulnerabilities (Kährik and Kõre, 2013). Tenants could be better screened prior to their allocation in order to make sure that young people are not sent to live in an environment that damages their opportunities for accomplishment and development (for example, when a former drug addict is sent back to the social housing apartment-building where (s)he became an addict in the first place, (s)he may be unable to escape the vicious cycle of segregation). This issue relates to the policy objectives of developing and distributing social

housing – although it is good and recommended that local governments provide housing below the market rent for certain groups, it is, however, recommended to review the current strategies when implementing the new programs and selling off social housing units which are located in mixed ownership buildings. Social housing is recommended to provide the space for step-by-step integration to the society for its customers, who are often in vulnerable situations, without putting more stigma on them or further adding factors leading to the accumulation of disadvantage.

## 7 Appendix

Table 1: List of participants

Currently youngsters			Formerly youngsters		
Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Martin	21	M	Rainer	36	M
Kevin	19	M	Marko	37	M
Artur	20	M	Larissa*	32	F
Kristina	23	F	Monika	28	F
Laura	23	F	Andres	38	M
Diana	17	F	Viktor*	31	M
Sandra	18	F	Nikita*	42	M
Karl	17	M	Lea	30	F
Karina	16	F	Erik	31	M
Elena	16	F	Eve	37	F
Oliver	17	M	Robert	41	M
Markus	18	M	Margit	30	F
Alina	18	F	Henri	35	M
Maria	23	F	Katrin	33	F
Ingrid	17	F	Tamara	34	F
Helen	16	F	Anastasia	30	F
Anna	17	F	Krista	40	F
Julia	17	F	Rasmus	42	M
Annika	27	F	Linda	39	F
Margarita	17	F	Jana	42	F

\*Interviewed in Russian.

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