



Our Life. Our voice.

Investigation into Youth Poverty



Participating Countries

The background of the left side of the page features a collage of handwritten notes on a notebook. Visible text includes "countryside", "Money", "research", "style", "N. you", "different", "n different", "come", "is", "sa", "cou", and "HIDIN". A map of Europe is drawn in blue ink, with a green arrow pointing from the bottom left towards the center. A black triangle is also drawn near the bottom left.

Contents

- 3 Contents
- 4 Introduction
- 5 Acknowledgment
- 6 Young People and Poverty in the European Union
- 8 Poverty Through the Eyes of Young People
- 10 United Kingdom: Exposing the impact of poverty on school life
- 14 Romania: Exploring the experience of young Roma people
- 18 Italy: Uncovering the impact of the school environment on young people's life chances
- 22 Finland: Poverty's overlooked consequences: social stress and mental health
- 26 Germany: The contextual aspects of poverty
- 30 Ending Poverty and Social Exclusion
Young Peoples' Key Messages
- 34 Partners involved
- 35 List of References
- 36 Disclaimer

Acknowledgment

Many thanks to all the young people, who have worked together on this project over the past two years. We very much appreciate your contributions, your effort and your commitment to work on such a challenging topic.

Introduction

About YES Forum

Founded in 2002, the YES Forum is a European network of 34 NGOs from 18 EU member states working with and for young people with fewer opportunities. We are bound together by a commitment to improving the life chances of vulnerable young people and fostering their inclusion in society.

We create room for discussion and critical thinking concerning European youth work and policies. Furthermore, we strongly encourage the involvement of our members in transnational cooperation which engages both young people and practitioners. With our project we create opportunities for young people who, otherwise, would not have access to activities to meet young people from across Europe, to learn and to have fun together.

About the project

Research shows that young people living below the poverty line face multiple barriers in life, such as accessing education, employment and housing. Low income is a strong predictor of low educational performance, lower aspirations for the future and social exclusion. Furthermore, to be poor is a stigmatising experience, which can affect self-esteem and confidence.

There is a lack of knowledge on how young people experience poverty in the different EU member states. A better understanding is urgently needed towards achieving the Europe 2020 goal of 'at least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion'.

By listening to young people experiencing poverty, the YES Forum aims to bridge this gap between policy and

practice. Thus, we placed young people's views at the heart of our two year project Our life. Our Voice. Young People and Poverty. From 2015–2017 groups of young people in 5 different countries worked together to explore young people's experience of poverty and what it means for them to live in families struggling to make ends meet day to day.

Young people and poverty

We collaborated with partners from Finland, Germany, Italy, Romania and the UK. Each country represented has different socioeconomic contexts, welfare systems, and economic situations. All of the partner organisations have significant experience in delivering services for young people living in poverty, listening to young people and influencing policy to improve the lives of those in or at risk of living in poverty.

Our partners

In this publication we have collected the results of the young people's investigations into poverty and present their findings on the effects of poverty on young people across Europe.

YES Forum and its members will continue to support vulnerable young people to turn their lives around and work with young people to create a culture of participation to make sure their voices are heard. As you will see in this report change starts at the local level in the neighbourhood of the young people.

On behalf of the project consortium,
Annett Wiedermann

Young People and Poverty in the European Union

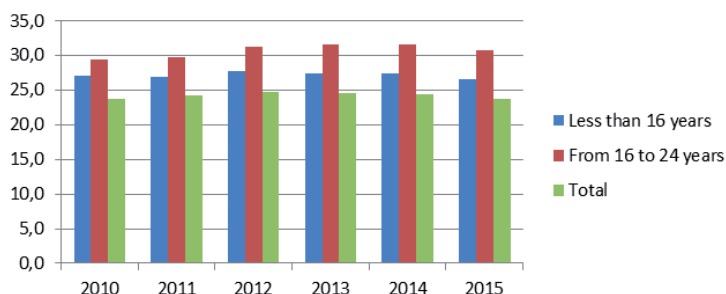
The topic of poverty and social exclusion came to the forefront of European Union policy debate in 2010, when the **Europe 2020 Strategy: creating a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy** was launched. In the strategy, poverty and social exclusion are recognised as one of the biggest challenges the European Union is facing in terms of economic growth, and a goal was set to lift 20 million people out of risk of poverty and social exclusion by 2020 (Eurostat, 2016b, pp. 138)

According to the official methodology of Eurostat, there are three main types of poverty: monetary poverty, severe material deprivation and very low work intensity. These are the three main sub-indicators used, meaning that each person counted as at risk of poverty or social exclusion belongs to at least one of the above stated categories. Additional contextual indicators are also used in order to present a broader picture and show the drivers behind changes by providing a breakdown by sex, age, labour status, household type, educational level and so forth (ibid., pp.140). The age indicator was particularly important for this project as we focus on the on the age groups 'younger than 16' and '16 – 24'.

As shown in the graph below, in 2014, every fourth person in the EU lived at risk of poverty. The number decreased slightly in 2015, but 23.7 % of the EU population still live at the risk of poverty and social exclusion. This means that despite the various measures adopted by the EU and its Member States, the situation has not improved considerably. The observation which motivated the creation of the 'Our Life, Our Voice' project was the striking statistic that, "more than 30% of young people aged 18 to 24 and 27.8 % of children aged less than 18 were at risk in 2014. At 17.8 %, the rate was considerably lower among the elderly aged 65 or over."(ibid. p.139). Showing that, children and young people remain the most vulnerable group when it comes to poverty.

Moreover, the differences between countries within the EU are considerable, as it

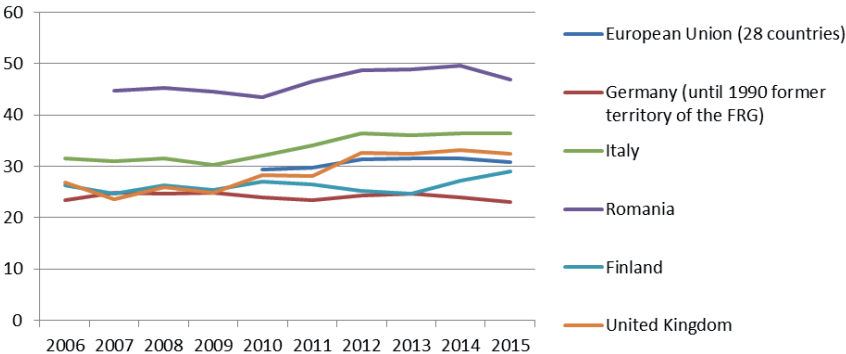
Percentage of total population (EU 28)



Source: Eurostat,
Product code: ilc_peps01

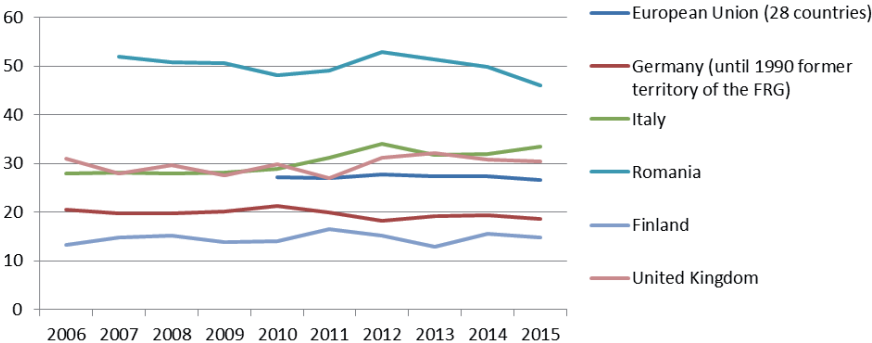
can be seen in the following two graphs. While the proportion of children and young people living at risk of poverty are lower in Finland and Germany – lower than the EU average – in Romania roughly 50% of children, as well as young people, live at risk of poverty. Following Eurostat statistics, there seem no significant decrease of youth poverty in the EU28 in the last year.

People between 16 and 24 years old



Source: Eurostat, Product code: ilc_peps01

People younger than 16 years old



Source: Eurostat, Product code: ilc_peps01

Furthermore, the circle of poverty is often difficult to break. Poverty precludes young people from attaining higher levels of education, affects their quality of life, and hinders social participation and empowerment, as highlighted by the “Our Life, Our Voice” young participants themselves. While this is recognised by EU institutions, most measures are aimed at employment and integration into the labour market. Other issues, such as limited access to services, or discrimination, for instance, are not prioritised. (European Anti-Poverty Network Report, 2014, pp.4)



Poverty

Through the Eyes of
Young People



Poverty is a complex issue that cannot be understood by numbers alone. To better reflect how young people themselves perceive and experience poverty, the 'Our Life, Our Voice' young participants investigated this crucial issue on their own. The following section presents their findings, aligning as much as possible to the young participants' focus and words.

United Kingdom

The Children's Society

Exposing the impact
of poverty on school life



Introduction to the group: Twelve young people from across England came together for this project and formed the Children's Commission on Poverty (CCP). Ranging from 15 to 21 years old these young people have led an investigation into poverty for the past three years. The CCP brought together a diverse group of young people, some at school studying for their GCSEs and A Levels, others pursuing further education at college, a few enrolled on apprenticeship schemes and the rest at university. The young people come from a range of different ethnic backgrounds, including white British, African, Middle Eastern and south Asian, and also have a variety of living arrangements, some living at home with parents, others with their partners and some in temporary accommodation. This diverse group of young people brought to the investigation a range of personal experiences and insight into issues surrounding poverty.

Focus of the investigation: The Children's Commission on Poverty was set up to enable children in the UK to speak out comprehensively about poverty for the first time. Since June 2013 the Commission has been investigating issues of child poverty and school. The young people chose to focus on the reality of school life for children living in poverty as school plays a crucial role in a child's life – what they wear to school, what they eat and whether they can join in with friends are all affected by their ability to afford these costs.

“when I gave a speech in parliament. That was, yes, genuinely one of, like one of the most, like proudest moments for me actually.”

During the initial investigation the young people led hearings in parliament, collected written evidence from experts, analysed evidence from interviews with young people living in poverty, analysed data from a survey conducted by The Children's Society, and contributed their own experiences of school life and poverty. The investigation focussed on three areas of particular concern, school uniforms, school meals and materials, and trips. The Commission released two reports which focussed on evidence and policy recommendations gathered and developed by the young people.

The CCP has developed a legacy through the creation of this Erasmus+ funded project, 'Our Life. Our Voice. Young People and Poverty' launched in June 2015. As part of this project the CCP have continued their investigation into the impact of poverty on school life and influencing on school policy change.

Investigation Findings: The investigation found that too many children are missing out on the opportunity to make the most of their education, because they struggle to afford the costs of school life. For many families, the idea of a free education is far from reality. School-related costs make up a large portion of family budgets and parents

told us that, on average, they spend £800 a year on school costs. More than two-thirds (70%) of parents say they have struggled with the cost of school, and more than half (52%) said they had to cut back on either clothing, food or heating to afford the cost of school.

“Like there’s only you who can speak about your experiences and maybe if you speak about your experiences it’ll prompt other people to speak about their experiences and then it gets out there into the public.”

Children told the inquiry that not being able to afford the right uniform, or having a uniform that is worn out, can make children stand out. Guidance published by the government tells schools that value for money should be a key priority for when they set uniform policy. Yet many schools insist on a school uniform which requires parents to buy expensive items of clothing. More than two-thirds of parents said they had to buy either some or all items of school uniform from a specific supplier.

School meals play an important role in ensuring that children receive a healthy, nutritious meal at least once a day. This has a significant impact on concentration, behaviour and children’s ability to learn. However, more than half of parents said they struggled with the cost of school meals, and one in five children said they have missed out on a school meal because they didn’t have enough money. Furthermore, some schools continue to deliver free school meals in a way that singles out children in poverty, leading to stigma and embarrassment.

The law states that schools cannot charge for any materials related to the delivery of the national curriculum, but it is clear many children are expected to pay for key materials, restricting children’s ability to participate fully in education. A third of children who said their family is ‘not well off at all’ have fallen behind in class because their family could not afford the necessary books or materials. The cost of school trips also causes problems for many children. Two in five children who live in families that are ‘not well off at all’ have missed a term time school trip because of the cost.

Investigation Activities: Since the launch of the Our Life. Our Voice. Young People and Poverty project the young people have met several times to further explore issues of poverty and school, and have attended a number of events to promote their recommendations with key stakeholders.

During CCP meetings the young people were updated by members of staff on the impact of their investigation into poverty on both the local and national level. The young people learnt about changes being made in schools as a direct result of Fair Schools

poverty proofing. Fair Schools is a model of assessment which was developed in response to the CCP's recommendation that schools should poverty proof their policies and procedures. The changes included examples of schools providing free breakfasts and giving up plans to change school uniform.

The young people were also updated on the impact of their recommendations on national policy. In November 2015 the Chancellor of the Exchequer made school uniform guidance statutory, meaning that families are now able to opt for competitively priced uniforms rather than a more expensive single supplier. The young people also discussed upcoming parliamentary business, including the Life Chances Strategy and the latest child poverty statistics and how they could get involved. The young people were also updated on the Understanding Childhoods project, a qualitative longitudinal study into low-income children's lives in the UK. This national research programme followed the launch of the CCP and presents an opportunity to explore further the issues raised by the Commission.

“ the thing that stood out for me was how poverty isn't just a physical problem because of the mental effect it has on children. ”

The CCP also attended a number of events to promote their findings with key decision makers. Some of the young people attended Bristol Headteacher's Conference, where they ran a workshop highlighting the impact of poverty on school life. They also gave a seminar to social work students and ran a workshop at a conference about poverty at the University of Central Lancashire, where they facilitated discussion around child poverty with key stakeholders.

The CCP were also involved in 'Over the Rainbow', an annual event which brings together young people from The Children's Society's services to celebrate each other's achievements. At the event funding is allocated to groups of children and young people which they use to make a difference to things that are important to them in their local area. This year the CCP were on the panel of judges who decided which groups were awarded the funding.



Romania

Fundatia Ruhama

Exploring the experience of
young Roma people



Ca partener al proiectului, Fundația Ruhama a implicat tinerii romi și neromi din România în activități practice pentru a experimenta realitățile tinerilor Romi și pentru a găsi soluții practice pentru problemele descoperite. Tinerii au participat la diverse evenimente unde s-au întâlnit cu oameni politici și cu furnizori de servicii sociale din țară și străinătate. De asemenea, tinerii și-au prezentat ideile, au dezbătut problema excluziunii sociale și au contribuit la publicarea unui raport care cuprinde soluții de politici sociale.

Introduction to the group: Seventeen young people were involved in this project. They were all Romanian citizens but of varying ethnicities, including eight young people of Romanian ethnicity, four of Hungarian and five of Roma ethnicity. The youngest member of the group was 15 years old, and the oldest was 22. All of the young people are in education, some at school, others at university, and one in graduate school. Nine were female and eight male. Most of the young people live at home with their parents, and others with roommates at University.

Focus of Investigation: Since November 2015 the young people involved in this project have come together to investigate youth poverty in Romania. After conducting some initial research into youth poverty, the young people chose to focus their investigation on how poverty affects young people of Roma ethnicity. They chose this as the initial research indicated that young people of Roma ethnicity are disproportionately affected by issues of poverty.

Investigation Activities: The young people's investigation consisted of a variety of exploratory exercises. Including group discussions about the young people's personal experiences of poverty in Romania, where they considered the differences between those shared by the young people of Roma ethnicity. The group also discussed the hidden costs of 'free' education in Romania and the impact that these costs have on Roma communities.

As part of their investigation the young people visited a segregated Roma community to find out more about what life is like for young people living there, and they watched a documentary about young Roma people and their experiences of poverty and discrimination.

The young people also spoke with a number of professionals, including human rights experts and professionals working with Roma communities to gain an understanding of the work being done by individuals and organisations to advocate for and support Roma communities. They also read official government documents about Roma po-

verty to in order to explore the extent and impact of poverty in the community and the impact this has on young people.

Investigation Findings: The investigation found that young people of Roma ethnicity experience significant levels of discrimination in their day to day lives, including in schools, hospitals and other public institutions. They also found that young people of Roma ethnicity find it difficult to secure jobs due to discriminatory recruitment practices. As a result of this discrimination, young people of Roma ethnicity are disproportionately affected by issues of poverty.

“ Just the cost of the school uniform, school shoes, sport clothes and sport shoes for one child is 550 RON (122€) which is 63% of a minimum monthly income. ”

Two areas of particular concern that the investigation highlighted were substandard infrastructure and education. Many young people of Roma ethnicity live in segregated Roma communities. In these communities there is substandard infrastructure, including unpaved roads which make it difficult for Roma children to go to school in bad weather. Most houses don't have electricity which makes it impossible for young people to study in the evenings. There are no street lights in the communities making it difficult for young people to travel in the early morning or late evening. There is also a



lack of green spaces for recreational activity. Public institutions can only be reached by public transport, which is too expensive for many young ethnic Romas, excluding them from these services.

“ This project has offered me an opportunity to express my opinions and share my ideas without judgement. It also gave me an opportunity to interact and become friends with young people of different ethnicities, religions and nationality, people who were happy and proud of who they are. ”

The young people also found that there are hidden costs to the ‘free’ education in Romania. They found that majority of Roma people who are either living on minimum wage or are unemployed find it almost impossible to afford education for their children. The school system in Romania is state funded and in theory is free for the first 10 compulsory grades. However, things like transportation, school supplies, extra books, school trips, uniforms, sport clothes, and money for class funds are a significant cost for families living on low-income. In Romania the minimum wage in 2016 was 875 RON (approx. 194 euro) after tax. It is estimated that a parent living on minimum wage with two school children would need to put aside between 24%-30% of their monthly salary for their children's education. Furthermore, considering that the majority of school costs are due upfront at the beginning of the school year many Roma families find it difficult to send their children to school.



Finland

After Eight

Poverty's overlooked consequences:
social stress and mental health



Ungdomarna har definierat fattigdom samt gett rekommendationer till beslutsfattare. Genom forskningen har termen fattigdom delats i tre breda kategorier, sociala (hur ens omgivning påverkar ens välmående), fysiska (brist på pengar, beroende) och psykiska (hur psykisk ohälsa begränsar livskvaliteten). Trots att kategorierna går hand i hand, har vi valt att fokusera på den psykiska delen av fattigdom. Fattigdomen fungerar som en ond cirkel, när man väl är där och mår dåligt, är det svårt att kliva upp igen. En femtedel av unga vuxna i Finland mår psykiskt dåligt. Medan man köar till terapeuten, tar man medicin. Lösningen ligger inte alltid i piller utan hjälp som leder till långvarig lösning bör erbjudas. Det finns ett glapp man förväntar sig att psykoterapeuten ska lappa, när det egentligen borde finnas andra organ som kan hjälpa, organ som stödgrupper, aktiviteter och stöd för att komma tillbaka till arbetslivet. Projektet utförs dels genom ett magasin som är fullständigt planerat och gjort av ungdomarna.

Introduction to the group: Twenty young people were involved in this project ranging from 17 to 27 years old. All of the young people were Swedish speaking Finnish citizens and had diverse ethnic backgrounds, including young people with Arabic, Colombian and Brazilian heritage. All of the young people are involved with Musikcafé After Eight; either through the education programme or the training programmes.

“ We have ... concluded that in Finland the biggest problem is young people's mental health. This and other reasons make young people poor and feel alone. ”

Focus of Investigation: The young people first gathered together to identify and discuss different definitions of poverty. Over the course of these initial meetings the young people defined poverty into three broad categories depending on its impact: social, physical and mental.

Social - how society and your surroundings affect your personal well-being.

Physical - not having enough material resources, including money, and having an addiction of any kind.

Mental - living with mental ill health and how this affects your quality of life, limiting your opportunities through a lack of energy to study, work, and contain a social life.

Although these categories are closely connected to each other, however the group ultimately decided to focus their investigation of the impact of poverty on the mental health of young people in Finland.

Investigation Activities: As part of their investigation the young people attended a number of guest lectures from different agencies which support young people living in poverty. These included lectures from an emergency food shelter in Jakobstad, a local mental health clinic and a lecture from a charity who help refugees in Lesbos, Greece.

As a final product of their investigation into poverty the young people created a magazine called Broke(n) which does not only showcase their work on this project. It is also a tool to influence decision-makers, and to show the need for an overall responsibility in the society. The creation of this magazine not only deepened their understanding of mental poverty, but also their interviewing, research and creative skills.

Self-development and team building were also integral elements of the investigation process. The young people took part in a range of activities, such as writing letters about their personal and professional goals, and creative sessions where the young people represented themselves out of Lego and presented the personal qualities they had captured back to the rest of the group, for example working in a team.

“We need more initiative.”

Investigation Findings: Through these activities the group discovered that if you haven't struggled with mental illness personally, you will know at least 5 people that have done so in the past or who are currently struggling with mental ill health. In Fin-



land, one in five young people suffer from mental ill health. Every year 2.000 people attempt to commit suicide. Mental ill health is the most common reason for young people to seek medical help and up to 700.000 of Finland's 5.5 million population take psychiatric medication. Furthermore, half of Finland's population will struggle of mental ill health at some point.

“ The result I'm hoping for: that someone with power will notice what we are doing and how important it is. ”

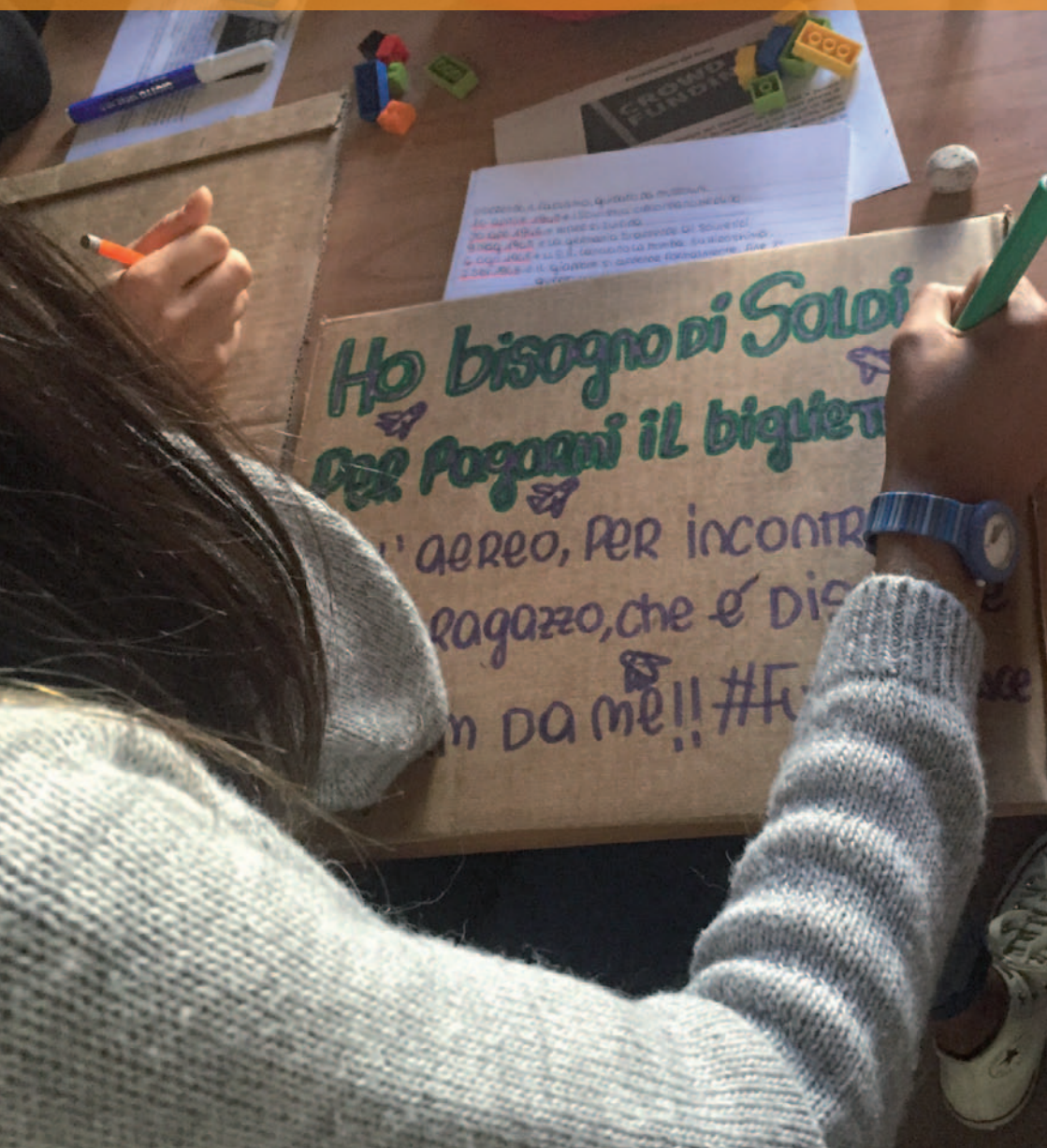
Through their investigations the young people highlighted the negative cycle that many people with mental ill health experience, and its interaction with poverty as a whole. They discussed how suffering from mental ill health can prevent individuals from living a healthy, fulfilled life and reaching their potential, and that this in turn can affect their independence and financial situation. For example, mental ill health can make you feel lethargic, preventing you from maintaining a social life, career or academic study, which in turn has a significant impact on a person's ability to be economically secure, which impacts your sense of overall well-being. Many young people in Finland also report that they do not feel part of society and that their local communities lack recreational activities, both of which impact young people's ability to engage with their surroundings and in turn lowers their overall well-being.



Italy

Zefiro Societa Coopertiva Sociale

Uncovering the impact of the school environment on young people's life chances



La povertà educativa è l'aspetto che più impatta sul futuro dei giovani e la scuola è l'ambito privilegiato di intervento per prevenire l'abbandono scolastico e l'esclusione sociale.

Queste le conclusioni dei 12 giovani lucchesi che hanno preso parte al progetto "Our life, Our voice. Young people and poverty" dove in un processo partecipativo dal basso, hanno declinato il tema della povertà giovanile a partire da come questa condizioni la loro vita.

In un percorso di due anni hanno parlato di povertà, dei suoi cliché e della povertà educativa come processo di privazione di opportunità per il futuro. La dispersione scolastica, la sua prevenzione e come supportare i "drop out", sono gli ambiti in cui verranno presentate proposte nelle sedi istituzionali.

Introduction to the group: Fourteen young people from across Lucca province were involved in this project. Ranging from 16 to 25 years old these young people had diverse educational backgrounds. Some did not finish formal education, whereas others had graduated from university. Only a few of the young people were employed, and many of them were involved in NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) training courses. The majority of the young people lived with their parents, and for many of them being independent and self-sufficient through finding employment was their main goal.

“ A young person is poor when he or she has none to talk with and he or she doesn't have money to cultivate his or her passions. ”

Focus of Investigation: Since the launch of the project 14 young people have come together to investigate youth poverty in various locations across Italy. At the beginning of the investigation the young people participated in a series of workshops which aimed to give them space to express themselves, their understandings of poverty and its impact on young people. The group discussed how youth poverty is hidden in Italian society, with mainstream understandings mostly focussing on extreme examples of poverty such as homelessness and developing countries affected by war and famine. The group decided it was important to highlight the existence of youth poverty in Italy and the different ways it can affect young people.

Many of the group had a negative experience of school and the majority had not finished formal education, limiting their employment options and ability to earn an adequate income. After their initial investigation the group unanimously voted to focus

their investigation on school. The aim of their investigation was how to make school a safer and more inclusive learning environment, which enables all young people to reach their potential and enter the labour market.

“ It is the first time that someone is asking my opinion about educational poverty. ”

Investigation Activities: To explore youth poverty the young people participated in interactive activities which aimed to stimulate reflection and discussion. Activities included creating videos, making collages with stereotypical images of poverty, creating storyboards and making handicrafts. The purpose of these activities was to give the young people the opportunity to discuss and identify common barriers to learning at school, and their impact on young people's opportunities or lack thereof.

For example, the young people were asked to build two mini replica schools out of craft materials, one representing their personal experiences of school and another their ideal school. The schools built to reflect the young people's personal experiences looked oppressive, like prisons, whereas the ideal schools had more space, recreational areas, rooms for one to one support from teachers and disability access. The young people also used drama skills to re-enact events and situations related to exclusion and poverty.



Investigation Findings: The group's investigation identified multiple barriers to young people's learning within schools. A lack of supportive teachers was found to be a common reason for young people not reaching their potential, the group found that many teachers are overly punitive and not supportive of young people's vulnerabilities. Furthermore, they found that many teachers are even less supportive to young people from different cultures.

In terms of curriculum, the young people found that schools do not focus enough on vocational studies which will prepare young people for the labour market, and do not offer enough support to young people who struggle with academia.

“ It was strange to interview teachers and put them in trouble ”

The young people found that there is also not enough support in place for young people with learning difficulties. The physical infrastructure was also found to be inadequate in many schools, including old buildings, lack of green space and recreational activities, and a lack of learning resources such as books.

Ultimately, all of these different barriers to learning inhibit young people's ability to reach their educational potential and consequently enter the labour market, resulting in increased levels of youth poverty.



Germany

Internationaler Bund

The contextual aspects of poverty



Jugendliche aus Einrichtungen der Jugendhilfe und der außerbetrieblichen Berufsausbildung gestalteten gemeinsam mit Sozialarbeitern Workshops und Aktivitäten, um sich mit konkreten Aspekten von Jugendarmut auseinanderzusetzen und zu reflektieren, was geschehen muss, um die Situation von Jugendlichen, die von Armut betroffen sind, zu verbessern. In ihren Empfehlungen sprechen sich die Jugendlichen gegen jegliche Art von Stigmatisierung aus. Außerdem betonen sie die Notwendigkeit, die Bemühungen, die von Armut betroffene Jugendliche jeden Tag erbringen, anzuerkennen und echte Chancen zu schaffen, der Armut zu entkommen.

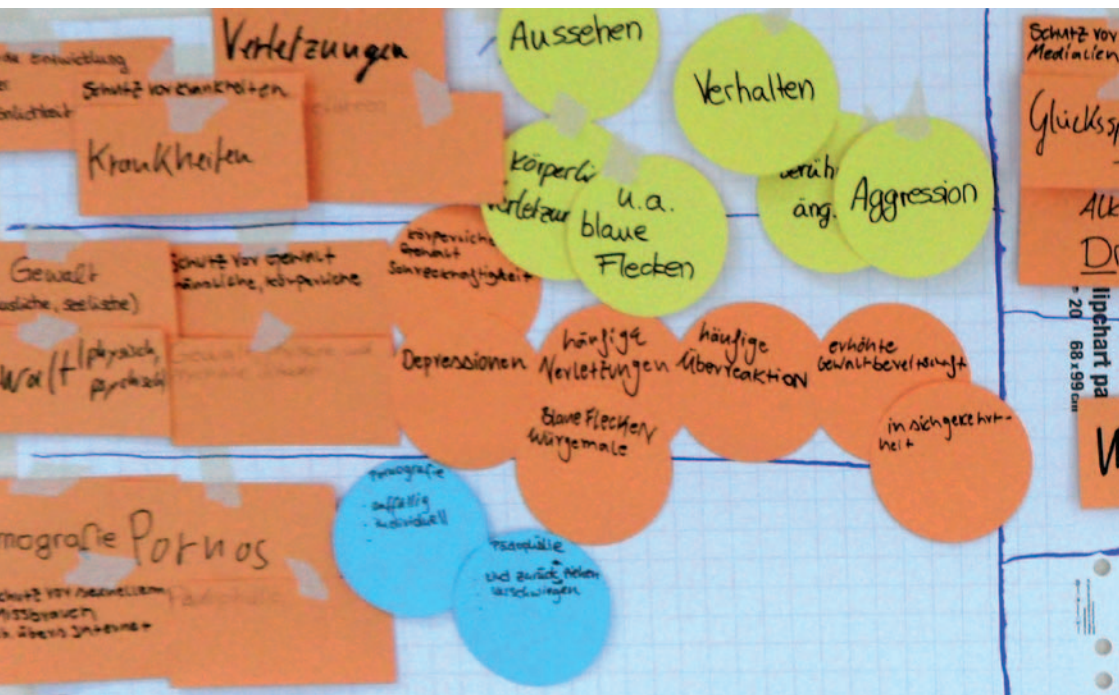
Introduction to the group: In three different cities of Germany (Dresden, Frankfurt (Oder) and Stuttgart) groups of up to 12 young people came together to explore poverty. The participants of this project were young women and men from 18 to 25 from different educational and social backgrounds. The young people come from a range of different ethnic backgrounds including, German, Polish, Turkish, Croatian, Bengladeshi and Pakistani. Most of them lived with their parents. They all had a link to the IB, through attending training courses, school or receiving individual support. Through several workshops the young people identified diverse factors related to youth poverty and held group discussions to exchange to exchange their personal experiences and to work together on certain poverty related topics.

“It doesn't matter if you're poor or rich – everyone is worth the same.”

Focus of Investigation: Although Germany is a rich country, 25.5 % of young people between 18 to 25 live at risk of poverty. Like in other European countries, young people are at much higher risk of poverty than any other age group. The young people involved in this project came together to discuss different aspects of poverty. Their focus was how a shortage of money can impact young peoples' individual life in relation to living conditions, clothes, leisure activities, participation in school activities, aspirations and life planning. Initially, they found it difficult to enter discussions on this topic due to the stigma attached to poverty, as it is a subject related to taboos, shame and secrecy.

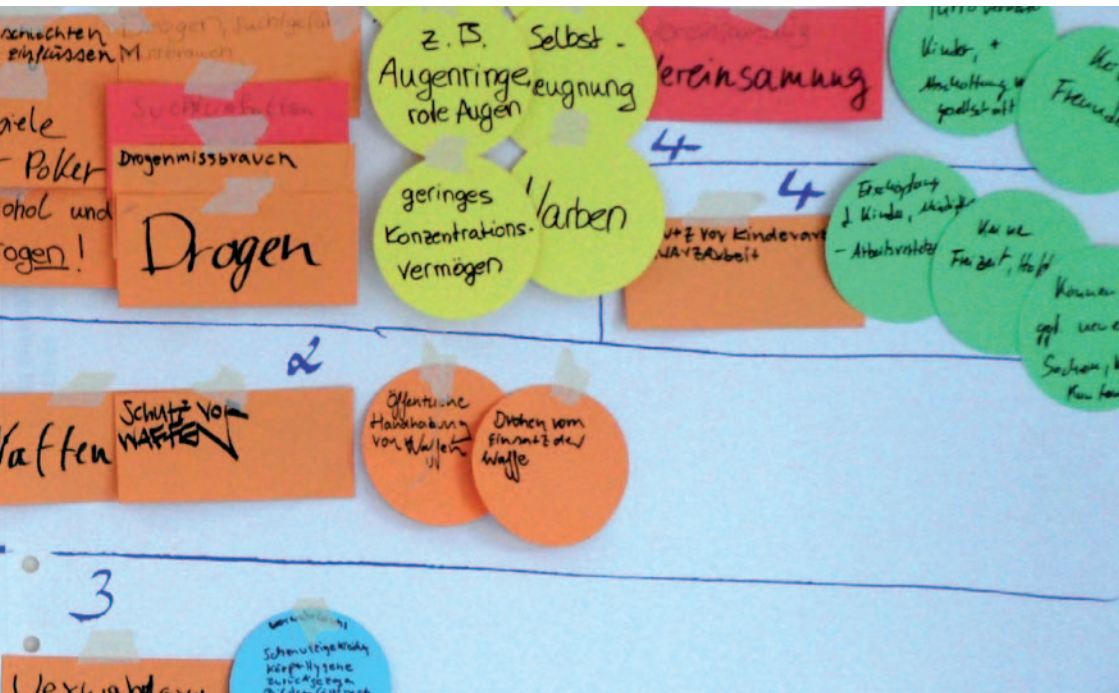
Investigation Activities: The activities focused on three study visits to different cities in Germany - Dresden, Stuttgart and Frankfurt/Oder. Each visit was dedicated to a different theme. In Dresden the young people discussed concepts of poverty, in Stuttgart they considered the importance of young people's role models, and in Frankfurt the group discussed and reflected on employment prospects and regional inequalities.

Investigation Findings: One of the young people's main findings was that low family income creates stress. From the meetings the young people found that living in poverty is a complex topic and can be very stigmatising for young people. Not being able to afford school trips, trips to the cinema with your friends or having lunch at a café can negatively impact young people's well-being. The young people agreed that for young people to feel accepted society needs to respect others and stand in solidarity with them.



The young people also found that role models for young people must be taken into account in order to reduce poverty and inequality. Thus, the young people discussed the importance of role models and their ability to encourage young people to take advantage of the opportunities that do exist, to be aspirational and to reach their potential. Rather than heroes, the young people identified people in the neighbourhood who have done the best they can with limited resources.

Finally, the young people discussed relative versus absolute poverty and what these terms mean and how they relate to each other. It became a key topic at the meeting in Frankfurt/Oder, which is a city divided by the German-Polish border. The young people compared life in this 'divided city in a common market', in relation to salaries, housing, economic infrastructure, transnational consumption and cross-border movements. They concluded that a German person, who lives in Frankfurt/Oder may have a higher income than a Polish citizen in the Polish part of the town. But this German can still be living in relative poverty compared to the median income in the rest of Germany.





Ending Poverty and Social Exclusion
Young Peoples' Key Messages

Young People on ending poverty and social exclusion

To support the development and implementation of policies to end youth poverty, European countries need to create open, inclusive environments in which young people can be meaningfully involved and their views are listened to and acted upon. Historically, young people - to a large extent - have been excluded from decision making processes.

The Our Life. Our Voice project listened to young people's own experiences and perceptions of poverty, in order to contribute qualitative data to the wider debate on youth poverty – going beyond the numbers.

The following recommendations on how to tackle youth poverty at the EU-level stem from our young participants' work. They are not exhaustive, but reflect the focus chosen by the young people while aligning as much as possible to their own words.

A holistic approach addressing the roots of poverty, not just the symptoms

The Our Life. Our Voice young participants specifically called for **a holistic, multi-level approach to tackle the origins of poverty**, and not just alleviate its consequences.

In their own words, 'Europe must take action to fight against poverty in all of its member states and to create equal living conditions'.

» **Example 1:** Fighting geographical isolation by making public transportation more affordable for the most disadvantaged.

Voiced by the Finnish young participants, this recommendation urges policy leaders to develop policies to make public transportation affordable for all in order to reduce geographical isolation of disadvantaged groups. In their words, "there should also be a discount card for the unemployed, and a fair price for car license."

» **Example 2:** Access to electricity for everyone.

Inadequate public infrastructure is a significant problem to whole categories of populations in certain Member states. Raised by the Romanian group, this issue affects Roma communities in Romania and prevents them from benefiting from basic infrastructure, which in turn makes it harder to get out of poverty. The Romanian example can be transposed to other Member states, where roads, public transportation and even basic public services are lacking in remote areas.

Free education should actually be free, and inclusive

Education, and the role of school in creating equal opportunities for all and thus preventing young people from falling into poverty, was an important focus for the majority of Our Live. Our Voice groups.

Many young participants raised the issue of the **hidden costs of education** in many European Member states even though education – up to a certain age – is supposed to be free. These hidden costs make it harder for children and young people s from low-income families to get the most from their education, which in turn can disadvantages them in finding a job later on. To make education really free, the *Our Life.Our Voice* participants suggest:

- » **Example 1:** Schools should choose a simple, coloured uniform available with sew-on logos to make them more affordable.

A practical example comes from the English group who argue that in the UK, too often, families are expected to pay large amounts of money for uniforms which are only available from specialist suppliers. They also highlighted that buying school materials can also be a financial burden for the most deprived families.

- » **Example 2:** 'Poverty proofing' should be promoted as a model of good practice.

A first step to tackling the impact of poverty on school life is to make sure schools are aware of these barriers by checking, or 'poverty proofing', their ways of working, to make sure they don't impact children in low-income families.

The young participants also raised the issue of the lack of inclusiveness in education systems, an issue that can further disadvantage children and young people from low-income families. To **create a learning environment equally inclusive for all children and young people**, our participants suggest:

- » **Example 1:** Creating a national educational tax for children between the ages of 7 and 14 not enrolled in school.

The Romanian participants developed this innovative idea - to place accountability on governments to ensure the full enrolment of children and young people in mandatory education. Governments should be fined if the percentage of children and young people enrolled in schools does not reach the expected level in local areas.

- » **Example 2:** All schools are staffed by caring teachers and are safe, inclusive and welcoming environments.

As expressed by the Italian group especially, in certain Member states school do not provide a caring and inclusive environment, due to the lack of inclusive practice which supports students who need extra support or who may have learning difficulties.

Fighting against stigma and discrimination

Finally, the Our Life. Our Voice young participants stressed another issue that should, according to them, be addressed as a priority: the **link between discrimination and poverty, as well as the stigma of poverty itself**. To fight against these issues, they propose:

» **Example 1:** Tackling poverty-related well-being issues without creating a new stigma on young people

Due to the specific situation in Finland, the young people focused on the relation between poverty and mental health. In order to tackle this issue, they suggest avoiding relying only on medication and therapy, branding people as “mentally ill”, but also increasing their access to positive activities. They call for greater financial support of youth centres and community based activities that are an important preventive work.

» **Example 2:** Young people need role models

To find ways out of poverty and to tackle stigmatisation the German group highlighted the importance of role models. Having good role models enables young people to take advantage of the opportunities that do exist, to be aspirational and to reach their potential. It is not about heroes, rather people in the neighbourhood who have done the best they can with limited resources.



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