

## AFTERCARE SYSTEM FOR CHILDREN WITH HIGH RISK BEHAVIOR

Delinquent children and youth who get in conflict with the law or who practice self-harm, sometimes need to be secured in care institutions or juvenile prisons, in order to protect their own or other people's well-being. In Estonia, there was no aftercare support system for the time phase when they were released – the only thing they had, was a stigma for life. Aftercare system was developed with the input from the young people themselves.

Prior to 2020, there were no well functioning aftercare systems in Estonia for children and young people in secure care institutions or juvenile prisons. This led to setbacks and struggles after they returned to their communities, new criminal offenses, self-harm, conflicts within family. Also, we lacked understanding of what are the specific needs of children returning home and to their communities nor what are the exact roles and duties of all parties. One was clear – stigma from the society and community towards delinquent youth was a big obstacle in every step of the way. This project participated in the Public Sector Innovation Programme in 2020, and a series of innovations and developments were implemented based on the insights of that design process.

### Key insights from interviews and fieldwork

In the initial phase of the project, we conducted a number of interviews with children and young people in secure care institutions and prisons, as well as with those who had recently returned to their community. This is worth emphasizing because the voice of children and young people is often not heard nor valued and in many other cases would be have been limited only to the input from parents, teachers, therapists, probation officers or social workers. Since many people in the project team had the appropriate training, it was possible, and incredibly insightful to interview such a vulnerable group. The most important conclusions we reached during the design process:

#### Family and community:

- For children and youth, their family was at the center of everything, regardless of how dysfunctional it was. At the same time, they were critical of their parenting skills: *"I would raise my child differently."* Usually, relationships during being in an institution improved (e.g. with the support of MDFT therapy), but often quickly worsened after returning home.
- In the community, children have a stigma due to their previous actions. *"Even if I have changed, in their eyes I can never change."*

#### Dreams and setbacks:

- Young people have ambitious dreams, but lack the ability to translate them into small achievable steps. The setbacks have a severe effect, dreams collapse and the external image of "I'm bad/stupid/hopeless" takes hold. The other extreme is where the young person has no dreams or vision of the future at all.
- It is easiest to end up in the same circle of friends with whom the problems started. Young people may have debts from the past, which push them back into a criminal path selling drugs, stealing, etc.
- The educational institutions to which the children return, are not prepared for their arrival and do not know how to take their background into account; they are often prejudiced and dismissive or expect good academic results immediately.

#### Distrust, protest, defiances

- These young people are full of defiance and often express it through protest, aggression or self-harm. They are not used to asking for help: *"I have to do it myself, I have never received help from anyone."* They have a bad experience with systems and institutions: *"I don't trust adults. An adult equals punishment."*
- However, in almost all of the stories, there was an adult who had managed to gain the trust of the young person, *"the support person was always there for me"*. We realized that at different stages of life they need different types of support, including role models with similar experiences.

### “Snap”

Many talked of a moment when they came to an understanding that they cannot and do not want to continue the same way – this sort of openness to change is also confirmed by the theories of desistance from crime. The question is, how could we evoke these moments, notice them and make them work for the benefit of the young person?

## Changes in the system as a result of design thinking

We came to the conclusion that aftercare is not a separate service that the child receives when returning home, but something that begins immediately with the application for the secure care service. Aftercare must be systematic, realistic and consider the child's needs, risks and strengths.

- There is too much focus on the misdeeds of the child/youth, rather than the wider context (often, their prior trauma). While children are in the care, their family needs attention, because if the family's skills remain the same, the relapse and setbacks are sure to come.
- Children without parental care need special attention and approach.
- The planning of aftercare must start as an effort of the network (municipal child protection worker, police, family, community, school, etc.) already before the child/youth is sent to an institution, continue throughout their stay and continue upon leaving. Each party has an important role, the network needs both leadership, consistency and a solution-based attitude.
- Research indicates that the child/youth should have a central role in planning their life course.

## Solutions, pilots and results

### Intensive networking model “Ringist välja” (“Out of the circle”)

In 2020-2021 ten children of different ages, backgrounds and from different regions participated in the pilot of aftercare. We introduced a structured network cooperation model (keywords: protocol, co-ordinated activities and deadlines, agreements for SOS situations, etc.), which covered all aspects of the child's well-being: place of residence, coping in the community, continuation of education, free time activities and work with the family.

We started with trainings in these regions, where we explained the needs of the children and the principles of the model. **The user journeys** developed during the project, were of much use helping to point out both risks and opportunities.

- We involved the child in the entire process of planning the follow-up support. Each child chose their own **adult trustee** in the network, who was the main link between him/her and the members of the network. The concept of a trustee is significantly different from a support person who is appointed by the municipality.
- The child prepared his/her own aftercare plan, the so-called **"My Plan"**, based on dreams and skills. The prototype created in the pilot phase, has become a common tool today.
- We ensured **mentoring for alternative care providers**.

- We tried to start regional **family experience groups**, but failed due to the lack of interest and realized that systematic work with families must start during care, not when the child returns.
- We resolved conflicts in communities, families, schools with the help of **restorative discussion circles**.

The pilot "Out of the Circle" lasted 6-12 months, depending on the child's needs; network members regularly communicated with each on regular basis, by getting together or communicating online. Out of these 10 children, only one young person returned to a secure care institution. Many got on with their lives, an [interview](#) with one girl was published just last spring.

## What's next?

The insights and results obtained from the design process influenced fundamentally the development of the secure care system in Estonia – including training of the specialist to practical working methods with children.

Up to date, 30 children have been involved in the model "Out of the Circle". These days the Social Insurance Board applies it predominantly as a preventative measure in the communities – trying to avoid children ending up in secure care centers.

However, the core principles of this model have become the basis for our general secure care aftercare system. In the fall of 2022, we are launching a **national aftercare system model** that heavily relies on the insights and learnings of the service design process and a series of **co-creation seminars** with different professionals we held in spring 2021.

We want to ensure that aftercare starts immediately and that the foundations for a strong network are already established during the child's stay in secure care. For this, we have changed the **eligibility criteria for access to the service** to clarify the role and responsibility of the municipality – to avoid attitudes: "Just come and take him away!". We are requiring for a deeper analysis to describe the risks of the child's behaviour – an assessment tool based on scientific research. As a result of the pilot, the development of a follow-up support model became one of the priorities of the Government of the Republic.

We are continuing to struggle with both the capacity of local child protection officers and the willingness of the community to engage with high risk youth. To improve that we:

- developed a **6-day training module for child protection officers** to give a better understanding of children with trauma experiences, due to start in the fall of 2022;
- in cooperation with universities, we have developed a **training module for staff of secure care providers**, which includes aftercare planning.

In spring 2022, with the support of the Ministry of Justice, Estonia's first [Home for Youth](#) was opened for people aged 16 to 26 who have been released from secure care or prisons and do not have a place to live. The principles of this concept were also developed in the same innovation programme.

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