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2. Conceptual Foundations for Youth Work with Young People in Conflict with the Law

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2.1. Understanding Young People in Conflict with the Law: A Developmental Perspective

Contemporary approaches to young people in conflict with the law increasingly recognise that they should be understood not only through the offences they have committed but also through the broader context of their development (Butts et al., 2010; Piquero, 2026). Adolescence and emerging adulthood are characterised by profound biological, psychological and social changes, including identity formation, increasing autonomy, evolving relationships with family and peers, and transitions into education, vocational training and employment (Arnett, 2000; Lerner et al., 2005). While these developmental tasks are common to all young people, those in conflict with the law often encounter additional challenges that may compromise successful transitions to adulthood, including disrupted education, adverse childhood experiences, social exclusion and limited access to supportive opportunities (Butts et al., 2010; Zuniga et al., 2024).

Developmental and life-course criminology has substantially advanced our understanding of how offending develops across childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. Rather than viewing offending as a fixed individual characteristic, this perspective emphasises that developmental trajectories are shaped through continuous interactions between young people and their families, schools, peers and communities (Moffitt, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Piquero, 2026). These

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trajectories are neither uniform nor predetermined. Instead, they reflect the cumulative influence of both risk and protective factors and remain open to change throughout development (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Farrington et al., 2016). Positive relationships, meaningful participation and opportunities to develop competencies can strengthen prosocial developmental pathways and support desistance from offending (Butts et al., 2010; McNeill, 2012; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

This developmental perspective has important implications for policy and practice. If offending trajectories remain open to change, interventions should extend beyond reducing risk and preventing reoffending to strengthening protective factors and creating opportunities for young people's learning, participation and positive development (Butts et al., 2010; McNeill, 2012; Piquero, 2026). Consequently, contemporary juvenile justice has increasingly moved beyond predominantly deficit-oriented approaches towards strengths-based models that recognise young people's capacities, resources and potential for change. Rather than asking only how to reduce offending, these approaches seek to support successful transitions into adulthood by promoting educational engagement, healthy relationships, participation and social inclusion (Butts et al., 2010; Case & Haines, 2018).

One of the most influential frameworks reflecting this shift is Positive Youth Development (PYD). Instead of defining young people by their risks or problematic behaviours, PYD emphasises young people's strengths, developmental assets and capacity for growth when provided with appropriate opportunities and support (Lerner et al., 2005). Within juvenile justice, these principles have been translated into the Positive Youth Justice model, which argues that rehabilitation should extend beyond reducing recidivism to promoting positive outcomes across multiple domains of young people's lives, including education, employment, relationships and community participation (Butts et al., 2010).

Among the developmental tasks associated with the transition to adulthood, participation in education, vocational learning and work occupies a particularly important place. Beyond providing financial independence, these experiences contribute to identity formation, self-efficacy, responsibility, social connectedness and a sense of purpose (Arnett, 2000; Savickas, 2013). For young people in conflict with the law, successful engagement in these domains is often more difficult, making work engagement both a developmental challenge and an important rehabilitation goal (Oswald, 2022; ILO, 2022).

Within this context, work engagement should be understood as a developmental process through which young people acquire the personal, social and vocational

competencies necessary for meaningful participation in education, work and community life. Preparing young people for work therefore requires more than vocational instruction alone; it requires opportunities to develop broader competencies that support successful participation across multiple life domains (OECD, 2021; Savickas, 2013).

Youth work represents one developmental context through which these broader competencies can be strengthened. Grounded in voluntary participation, non-formal learning and supportive relationships, it creates opportunities for young people to develop these competencies through active participation and experiential learning rather than formal instruction alone. By fostering confidence, agency, participation and readiness for learning, youth work complements educational, vocational and juvenile justice interventions while supporting young people's preparation for meaningful engagement in education, employment and community life (Ord, 2016; Kiilakoski, 2015).

Building on these principles, the following sections examine youth work as a developmental methodology for supporting work engagement among young people in conflict with the law. Rather than positioning youth work as an alternative to existing systems, this publication explores its potential to complement education, employment and juvenile justice interventions by strengthening the personal, social and vocational competencies that underpin successful transitions to adulthood, rehabilitation and long-term social reintegration.

2.2. Youth Work as a Developmental Methodology

Building on this developmental perspective, youth work has become increasingly recognised as a methodology that complements education, social welfare and juvenile justice interventions by creating opportunities for meaningful participation, supportive relationships and non-formal learning (European Commission, 2014). Although organised differently across European countries, youth work is consistently characterised by voluntary participation, non-formal learning, relationship-based practice and young people's active involvement in decision-making and learning processes (Bukvić Branković et al., 2022; Ord, 2016; Williamson, 2017).

Unlike formal education, youth work offers flexible learning environments in which young people actively participate in planning, implementing and reflecting upon activities that are meaningful and relevant to their lives. Rather than following predetermined learning pathways, young people are encouraged to shape their own learning experiences in partnership with youth workers. This participatory approach

promotes agency, responsibility and informed decision-making while recognising young people as active contributors to their own development (Ord, 2016; Jeffs & Smith, 2021).

These characteristics make youth work particularly relevant for young people in conflict with the law, who often have limited opportunities for meaningful participation and positive engagement. By building relationships based on trust, dialogue and voluntary participation, youth work creates supportive environments that encourage learning, personal growth and positive developmental pathways (McNeill, 2012).

Consistent with developmental and strengths-based approaches, youth work focuses on young people's strengths, interests and developmental potential rather than defining them by their offending behaviour. Through non-formal learning and active participation, young people are encouraged to explore their abilities, build confidence, strengthen positive identities and gradually assume greater responsibility for their own development. From this perspective, youth work is not simply a collection of activities but a developmental methodology that supports young people's capacity to navigate transitions and participate actively in their communities (Ord, 2016; Council of Europe, 2017).

A defining feature of this developmental methodology is non-formal learning. Learning occurs through experience, participation, collaboration and critical reflection rather than formal instruction alone. These experiences provide opportunities for young people to develop a broad range of personal, social and vocational competencies that support participation in education, vocational training, employment and community life (Council of Europe, 2017; Kiilakoski, 2015).

Equally important are the supportive relationships established through youth work. Research consistently highlights that relationships with trusted adults constitute one of the strongest protective factors associated with positive developmental outcomes among vulnerable young people. Within youth work, these relationships are not merely a means of delivering programmes but an essential mechanism through which learning, motivation, participation and positive change are fostered. Trust, dialogue, mutual respect and shared decision-making strengthen young people's engagement while supporting their social inclusion and long-term development (Bukvić Branković et al., 2022; Ord, 2016; McNeill, 2012).

Taken together, these characteristics position youth work as a developmental methodology that creates meaningful opportunities for participation, learning and personal growth. Rather than replacing existing education, employment or juvenile

justice interventions, youth work complements them by providing supportive environments in which young people can strengthen personal, social and vocational capacities and prepare for successful transitions into adulthood. The following section therefore examines how these developmental principles can be translated into competencies that support young people's engagement in education, vocational training and employment.

2.3. Supporting Work Engagement Through Youth Work

Work engagement extends beyond access to employment. From a developmental perspective, it encompasses young people's active participation in education, vocational learning, apprenticeships, volunteering, internships, community work and other structured experiences through which vocational identities, work habits and future aspirations gradually develop (Savickas, 2013). Rather than representing a single employment outcome, work engagement reflects an ongoing developmental process that prepares young people for meaningful participation in adult social and economic life.

Successful work engagement depends not only on vocational qualifications but also on a broad range of transferable personal, social and vocational competencies. Communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative, adaptability and self-management are consistently recognised as essential for educational progression, labour market participation and long-term career development (OECD, 2021; ILO, 2022; Savickas, 2013). Strengthening these competencies is therefore an important developmental objective rather than simply preparation for employment.

Youth work provides one important context in which these competencies can be developed through participation, experience and reflection. Structured participatory activities, mentoring, experiential learning tasks, collaborative problem-solving, guided reflection and other forms of non-formal learning, grounded in youth work principles, provide authentic opportunities for young people to cooperate with others, assume responsibility, develop practical skills and reflect on their experiences. Supported by constructive feedback and trusting relationships, these experiences strengthen young people's confidence, motivation and readiness to transfer what they have learned into education, vocational training and employment (Ord, 2016; Kiilakoski, 2015).

For young people in conflict with the law, these opportunities may be particularly important, as youth work complements formal education, vocational training and employment services by providing supportive contexts in which young people can

gradually develop the capacities needed to navigate successful transitions into adulthood. Evidence from desistance research further suggests that meaningful engagement in education and work contributes to positive behavioural change not only by improving employment opportunities but also by strengthening informal social bonds, supporting identity transformation and reinforcing conventional adult roles within the community (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2012; Sampson & Laub, 2003; Oswald, 2022). Stable employment and sustained engagement in socially valued adult roles have long been recognised as important turning points that support desistance from crime by fostering responsibility, commitment and social integration (Sampson & Laub, 2003). From this perspective, work engagement should be understood not merely as an employment outcome but as a developmental mechanism that supports rehabilitation and long-term social inclusion.

Viewed in this way, the contribution of youth work extends beyond preparing young people for employment. By strengthening the competencies, confidence and relationships that support engagement in education, vocational learning and work, youth work creates developmental conditions that facilitate successful transitions into adulthood and positive reintegration. These principles provide the conceptual foundation for selecting and applying youth work methodologies aimed at strengthening work engagement among young people in conflict with the law.

The theoretical perspectives presented in this chapter provide the conceptual framework for the analyses that follows. Building upon the developmental criminology perspective, Positive Youth Development and contemporary youth work theory, the publication examines how juvenile justice systems in Serbia, Portugal and Greece support young people's educational, vocational and employment pathways. Beyond analysing legal and institutional arrangements, particular attention is paid to opportunities for developing the personal, social and vocational competencies that underpin meaningful work engagement and successful reintegration. Identifying both strengths and existing gaps within these systems provides the foundation for the subsequent development of a youth work programme aimed at strengthening work engagement among young people in conflict with the law.

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