

# Problems Related to Reintegration of Young Ex-Offenders in Estonia

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**Abstract.** Based on 22 semi-structured interviews with 24 young ex-offenders in Estonia, this article looks at the effect that stigmatization has on the reintegration of young ex-offenders. The study looks at to what extent and in which domains ex-offenders experience stigma, how they manage it, and what effect it has on social participation and involvement. The results indicate that young ex-offenders experience stigma while looking for jobs and accommodation and when interacting with the criminal justice system. The strategies for managing stigma mostly include secrecy and withdrawal. These strategies are closely related to self-stigmatization, low societal participation, and a low level of trust toward state institutions.

**Keywords:** Ex-offender, stigma, labeling theory, Estonia

## Problemos, susijusios su jaunų buvusių pažeidėjų reintegracija Estijoje

**Santrauka.** Remiantis 22 pusiau struktūruotais interviu su 24 jaunais buvusiais pažeidėjais Estijoje, straipsnyje analizuojama, kokią poveikį jaunų buvusių pažeidėjų reintegracijai turi stigmatizacija. Studijoje nagrinėjama, koku mastu ir kokiose srityse buvę pažeidėjai yra stigmatizuojami, kaip jie su tuo susidoroja ir kokią poveikį tai turi jų socialiniam gyvenimui ir įtraukčiai. Rezultatai rodo, kad jauni buvę pažeidėjai jaučia stigmatizacijos poveikį ieškodami darbo ir gyvenamojo būsto, taip pat susidurdami su kriminalinės justicijos sistema. Pagrindinės strategijos, padedančios susidoroti su stigma – slaptumas ir atsitraukimas. Šios strategijos glaudžiai susijusios su savo pačių stigmatizacija, žemu socialinio dalyvavimo lygiu ir mažu pasitikėjimu valstybės institucijomis.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** buvęs pažeidėjas, stigma, etikečių teorija, Estija

**Received:** 13/11/2019. **Accepted:** 04/12/2019

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## Introduction

In the current article, our argument follows the tradition of a labelling approach in criminology that looks at how people come to be defined as deviant and then examining the implications that such definitions hold for future offending behavior (Muncie 2010, 140). The theory assumes that norms and deviance are socially defined, and deviance is an interaction between those who define the norms and a person who commits an act and those who respond to it (Becker 1963). The causes for the “primary” act may be different, but once an individual is labelled as deviant, he or she may face new problems that stem from the reactions of others to stigma that is attached to the deviant label (Lemert 1967). Patternoster and Iovanni (1989) highlight three ways that societal reaction and the labeling process may influence a person being labeled: a negative attribution of a hostile public may restrict an actor’s access to normal activities and opportunities; a supportive attitude of the non-deviant public may allow an actor to disavow the negative ascriptions and to keep open normal routines, and, finally, a supportive deviant audience may open up deviant routines and opportunities for the person.

The labeling perspective in criminology became popular in the 1960s–1970s, but then lost its popularity. In the recent years, due to increasing empirical support for the labeling perspective, the interest toward the theory has grown again. The growing popularity of developmental criminology brought attention to the fact that the stigmatization of people who have committed deviant acts can impact social and economic opportunities, ultimately influencing the trajectory of one’s course of life (Denver, Pickett ja Bushway 2017).

States react to unlawful acts committed by young people through their criminal justice system, either placing them on parole in cases of less serious offences or imprisoning in cases of serious or repeating criminal acts. Although the main idea of interventions is the rehabilitation of young people via the influence of risk factors that are associated with delinquency, the effect is often the opposite to the desired one. A study of recidivism conducted in Estonia in 2010 revealed that the highest risk of recidivism was among convicted juvenile offenders. Every third person from 14 to 18 commits their next criminal offence already within a year after their previous conviction (Ahven, Salla ja Vahtrus 2010). High recidivism rates indicate that reacting to delinquent behaviour by

punishment and isolation is rather an ineffective strategy. The reasons of such inefficiency are various, but one of them is related to stigma attached to young delinquency because of their treatment by the criminal justice system. As Muncie (2010) notes, stigmatization means creating a difference, and the latter is translated to the undesirability and inferiority of a group. The stigmatized are cast as not quite human.

This article looks at sentenced young offenders in Estonia. Some of them have been to prison, while most of them at the time of these interviews were on probation and parole. The focus of this analysis is how and in what domains do young offenders experience stigmatization, and what impact does stigmatization have on their lives. The study also looks at the strategies employed by young people to avoid the negative impact of stigmatization, and how stigmatization affects a person when the label is internalized.

## Effects of Stigmatization

It may be useful to distinguish between public stigma that refers to discrimination by powerful groups, and self-stigma, when ex-offenders internalize these beliefs against themselves (Chui ja Cheng 2013). The first can lead to the second one and hinder reintegration. Several studies have demonstrated the frustration that ex-offenders face with locating and securing employment (Pager, Western ja Sugie 2009; Paat et al. 2017) and education opportunities (O'Reilly 2014). Ex-offenders attribute these difficulties to incarceration records, lack of a stable work history, low educational attainment, and employers' misperceptions about the character of ex-convicts. Research in life-course criminology has demonstrated that desistance from crime is associated with the successful transition to adult roles (Laub ja Sampson 1993). A strong family, completed formal education, and stable work are often mentioned as the main turning points playing the important role in desistance from a criminal career. The "enduring stigma of a felony conviction imposes restrictions on parental rights, work opportunities, housing choices and myriad other social relationships, isolating ex-felons from their communities and fellow citizens. In short, both the rights and capacities of ex-offenders to attain full citizenship are threatened" (Uggen, Manza ja Behrens 2013, 260).

Although stigmatized persons may resist the stigma, it will often result in

low self-esteem, self-exclusion, a sense of inferiority, and acceptance of the role attached by others. The internalization of the stigma results in a “why try” effect. “Why try” includes three components: self-stigma that results from stereotypes; mediators such as self-esteem and self-efficacy; and life goal achievement, or lack thereof (Corrigan, Larson, and Rüsich 2009). From previous experience while conducting research with young delinquents, participating in committees for various intervention programmes, I learned that these youth are often blamed for being inactive, difficult to reach, never grateful for the opportunities offered or delivered to them by the criminal justice authorities. Current research allows to go deeper into the problem and concentrate on the young peoples’ views and problems they face; to learn how they see their relation to society; and what are the reasons for them to avoid any contact with the state whenever it is possible.

Disillusionment and non-involvement characterizes not only the young offenders’ political and civic participation, but the fact that they also avoid participation in specific programmes and activities that are designed with the goal to help them, provide support, increase their social skills and, through these, their self-esteem as well, and to help them find education or begin a working career. These programmes are offered either by probation or by some NGOs and are seen by the state as a measure of inclusion and reducing of recidivism. However, many of these programmes do not seem to work. It may be suggested that in the eyes of the offenders’, these intervention programmes are associated with the state authorities and, therefore, not deserving of trust. Peer-to-peer programmes that are based on trust may be more effective, which increase self-esteem of those who provide the programmes as well as of those who take part in them. It may be a better solution for the integration of ex-offenders and the prevention of recidivism.

## Methods

The research reported in this article was one of 22 ethnographic case studies conducted as a part of the H2020 PROMISE (Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement: Opportunities and Challenges for Conflicted Young People across Europe) project. The PROMISE project explored the social involvement of young people who were identified as in conflict or stigmatized or marginalized through negative representations. Criteria for case selection

were young people (14–29 years) identified as in conflict (with authorities, older generations or social norms) or stigmatized or marginalized through negative associations; and the presence of a response to that conflict or stigmatization. First, all case studies were conducted and analyzed separately. Later case studies were grouped into four clusters, and a cross-case analysis was performed. While a single case study analysis was holistic and discrete, to facilitate subsequent cross-case analysis, a common set of research questions and a skeleton interview schedule and coding tree were used in all cases (Pilkington 2018).

The field research was conducted by the author and research assistant in August 2017–January 2018 using a combination of photo elicitation, interview, and peer-research techniques. First, informants were approached through the probation service. The researchers offered to potential respondents participation in a photo art course. The course lasted for two months and was aimed to create a relationship of trust between the researchers and participants. Three in-depth interviews were conducted after the course. Second, we used a peer researcher approach to complete the fieldwork. Luckily enough from the point of view of the research, one of my graduate students was also fitting to the target group of our research. Having committed several offences in the past and being punished and stigmatized by the criminal justice system, the student had a trustful relationship with many young people with a similar background.

In total, 22 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 24 young ex-offenders, and one of the interviews was done with three persons present. The youngest respondent was 15, the oldest 27; the main age of the respondents was between 21 and 25. There were 3 females and 21 males in our sample. Although males are overrepresented, the proportion reflects the gender distribution among offenders. In 2017, the proportion of females within those on probation was 8%, while only 5% among incarcerated persons (Ahven et al. 2018, 119). For all respondents, we collected written informed consent for young people; and for those under 18, parental consent was also obtained. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo 11 software. The average length of interviews was 35 min, the longest 1 hour 20 minutes, the shortest 14 min.

## Results

### *Stigmatization Experience*

Most of the respondents interviewed for the project have experienced prejudices, discrimination or an unequal sort of treatment by society in general or by institutions. Usually, such attitudes are expressed by strangers, while relatives and close persons have more tolerant feelings.

Yes, well, prejudices I've seen that. Well, not from my relatives, or the people who know me in general. They know me, who I am, not the prisoner. But for the strangers, who do not... who learn about crime from the media and who are frightened, they feel fear, they are afraid. They are afraid even to communicate with me. That's the preconception that I'm a prisoner, so I'm going to kill you or something. There is quite a lot of such attitude. That's what the older people are feeling, especially the women and then the other people who are like a mamma's boys. (JB, 24)

The stigma refers to a stereotypical image of a criminal produced by the media: a cruel, violent killer who has no human feelings or attachments. The label "criminal" or "offender" or "ex-con" is a combined image of all the sins and fears of an ordinary citizen. If the offender is a female, the image is even worse: she will be considered promiscuous and definitely a bad mother. One of the female respondents described her experience with the special commission for delinquents, where she was sent to at the age 14 because of the use of drugs:

A man in the commission said that I would never get anywhere in my life that I drink so much (which wasn't true). ... But he talked a lot about drinking. And then he used the word "whore". Which was interesting because I was sexually pretty inexperienced before that. The labels were just attached. ... He said I'd be either a prostitute or I'd end up in jail. (SE, 25)

When the girl was about to give birth to a child and registered to a hospital in Finland, she told the doctors that she had been doing drugs before, because she thought this was relevant information for the medical system and can have had an effect on her child. The reaction of the hospital staff was, however, not professional. "In the hospital, it was also the attitude that I shouldn't have kids at all. It's like they were looking at you when you were taking something, it's like you're a drug addict." (SE, 25)

This stigma may be attached not only to the offender himself but to their family as well. This is also one of the reasons young offenders do not disclose information about their conviction even to their close relatives, as it may not only upset them but also have an effect on their lives. The stigma attached to the person then becomes the prism through which all the deeds and behaviors are evaluated. As one of the respondents told, if there is a car accident, the first thing would be not to look at the circumstances of the accident but to blame the driver because of his criminal past: “Nobody’s going to look now that I did or that he ran on purpose, but looked at my profile, my past. They’re see that I am a criminal and that’s all. This is situation what happened to some people. You can’t be sure.” (BM, 27)

### *Stigmatization as a Barrier to Employment*

While looking for employment, many informants faced situations when establishments did not want to employ them because of their criminal background. And even if they are employed, ex-offenders are not trusted, and if any sort of trouble happens in the workplace, they are the first to be blamed for it. To avoid such situations and to get a job, ex-offenders usually do not reveal their conviction. When the information about their past is known, the employer may ask for explanations or, in extreme cases, fire the young person.

Because, actually, there are also those who have immediately been prejudiced that you are criminal, and living in N, I went to work at the pizza place. I told them that I had been convicted criminally before, but because nobody asked directly what it was, then I didn’t think it necessary to talk. But one or two months later then suddenly, when the bailiff of these claims began to get there on the table, I received a letter that we would end up contract with you on your criminal background or something. But, well, that’s discrimination. I was thinking that if you do it to me, I’d fight back. I went to work protection and got at least two months’ wages as a compensation... The employer was admonished, [the work protection office communicated to the employer] that while the person has conviction before, it does not mean he cannot change. That whatever person has done before, he deserves a second chance. (RLA, 26)

Ex-offenders often look for employment from their social networks. The situation on the labor market in Estonia at the moment of research is favorable, as the labor market is characterized by the lack of working hands, rather than

a high level of unemployment. While looking for employment via friends and relatives, the information about a conviction is not hidden. This knowledge, however, has no strong stigmatizing effect, as the potential employer knows the young offender as a person or receives a recommendation by someone he knows and trusts.

Some employment opportunities are restricted for young offenders by the law. For example, the law does not allow convicted persons to work as public officials or in security firms and will check their backgrounds. While for the majority of youth interviewed for this project such a restriction was not relevant, some youth considered it as a limit for their future careers.

Perhaps, what prevents me from full life is that I cannot work in public institutions or I can't do certain jobs that might be of interest to me and where I can contribute or do something even. Because, thanks to his prison experience I have seen the system from the other side, I know both faceted. But there's nothing I can do. Because I'm a convict. (JB, 24)

The financial problems young people face will be discussed in more details below. One thing, however, shall be mentioned here in relation to employment. Many informants have debts and other financial obligations that they need to fulfil. Their bank accounts are frozen, part of their income is automatically deducted to pay their obligations, leaving a person with minimum subsistence only. This does not motivate ex-offenders to look for official employment with some better income, because the part of the salary they will receive will be the minimum. Ex-offenders would rather look for non-official employment that would guarantee them a better income.

One of the opportunities to earn good money, even for a low-skilled job, is to go to work abroad, mainly Finland. A big share of the respondents have either been working abroad or would like to go abroad. In theory, this is possible for people under probation as well, but in reality, this opportunity is restricted for ex-offenders.

Not allowed and denied going anywhere from Estonia. Although I have two minor children. I have to provide for them, and then a probation officer just won't let go. What am I going to do, like shoplift for food or something? And then I will get punish for it. The probation officer simply does not authorise the work out of Estonia. (JH, 23)



### *Effect of Stigma on Other Aspects of Social Integration*

To set up a family or move to another place because of a new job or settle down after release from prison, young people are looking for housing. Many of the respondents have reported facing difficulties with that. First, it is nearly impossible for them to get a loan to buy an apartment or a house. Second, when looking for an apartment to rent, they get rejected because of their criminal past. As one of the respondents confessed:

That at the moment, for example, if there has been a wish to rent an apartment or something, then Google will draw all the chances to zero. That if you write the name [into application], it's pretty difficult. (MG, 23)

The availability of information about crime and punishment via the Internet was brought up by several young people. Not only landlords, but also employers and other relevant institutions make background checks, and the Internet allows for this to be done instantly. Even friends and potential partners will check information on the Internet.

Law enforcement also allegedly uses databases or other kinds of information available and execute more control over the convicted youth, in such a way increasing the chance for them to get caught even for minor misdeeds.

For example, police officers all times, absolutely. It happened that we drive a car. If I drive a car or someone is driving my car, the police are behind. Absolutely, immediately there is control, meaning they look for it, they see immediately that's my car. Then come all these paragraphs and then there is no like routine check but is so to say greater control [because I was convicted for drugs], they check the eyes, they order people to get out of the car--not like blowing up a blow check, for example. (EE, 23)

Although not directly related to the labeling and stigmatization paradigm, financial problems that young offenders are facing appeared to be an important topic that shapes their choices in life, relations with the state and opportunities available. Criminal policy in Estonia is changing in the direction that any kind of punishment that takes freedom from a young person shall be used as a last resort. There are some rehabilitation and social programmes in place, but their availability is scarce (especially outside Tallinn) and the effect rather questionable. Therefore, when young people, especially minors, are caught for

committing an offence, they are either punished by a fine or, if the offence is a minor one, the case will be closed, but a person should pay the costs of the criminal procedure to the state. Depending on the number of convictions and the character of crime, by the age of 18, young people will have big sums of money in the forms of financial obligation that they must pay. Even when they are punished by a prison sentence, these obligations will still be in place.

A: In two years, when I'm done with the penalty, I'll be very happy, I guess. Then I don't have that kind of financial commitment anymore. It's actually going to be over in a year. Q: How big was that fine anyway?

A: EUR 2000.

Q: Pretty tough. What about the costs of the proceedings?

A: It is – the legal costs and the total. I'm still calling that fine.

Q: When you got caught, you were 18?

A: Yes. It really saved me a lot. I had just become an 18-year-old young person. I was still on the school list. Maybe I'd go to prison if I hadn't been on the school list. But with the fact that I was captured, nothing would change here in Estonia. They came and picked me up, and I have to pay the state now. It gives the impression that the war on drugs is a good income source for the state. (KEN, 19)

To ensure the money will be paid back, the accounts of young people are frozen, and bailiffs execute the orders of the courts. If an offender earns some money, a big share of it will be collected by the bailiffs to pay the debts, leaving a person with a minimal sum of money to survive. This puts young people in a very financially difficult situation. Also, if ex-offenders would rather not disclose their previous conviction to an employer, letters sent to the employer regarding court orders will make this information public.

The constant need for money and inability to earn it legally may turn young people to crime. The criminal way is what they know; what they have already tried. What they get from that is money that the state cannot and will not reach for. Young people often have insufficient skills on how to manage financially. A few years spent in prison make the situation even worse. As young offenders told in the interviews, they are desperately in need for guidance and support after they are released from prison.

Well, I used to have big debts and stuff on me, and then I wanted to get rid of them. And then I found a solution that should bring [money]. But since I was put down [for dealing drugs], I didn't get too far. (TT, 19)

*Conflict with the Authorities and Alienation from the State*

Young ex-offenders have many encounters with different kinds of authorities: police, prosecutors, judges, prison staff, probation officers, social workers etc. The main function of these institutions is to control. It is pretty clear that offenders are in opposition to the criminal justice system and have negative attitudes toward it, but this is not always true. A negative attitude is related to the feeling of injustice, when young people feel they have been treated with disrespect or disproportionately harsh or differently compared to other people in similar situations.

I have been exposed to those who abuse this position to some extent. Just their attitude. Not that they're beating, or I don't know, it's just a degrading attitude. (JB, 24)

Young people appreciate when authorities are trying to help them. It came as a surprise that for many ex-offenders, although not all of them, the relationship with their probation officer was a really good one. This appears to be a very promising finding of the research. What is appreciated by young ex-offenders most is a "human-like" attitude, the flexibility of demands when it comes to matching control obligations with study and work, and any kind of support and advice and just "regular talk" between the young person and probation officer.

Q: What was the relationship with the probation officer?

A: Basically good. Very good, actually.

Q What was her attitude?

A: She was supportive. She talked to me, guided me. (AK, 26)

Personal encounters with the authorities, experiences of discrimination, stigmatization and unjust treatment have an effect on how young people perceive the state and society in general, their place in it, and whether they feel themselves as belonging to it or being alienated. Based on the interviews, it could be concluded that for young ex-offenders, the dominant feeling is alienation. Alienation from the state means non-participation and self-exclusion from all spheres of life: political, social, and even economical.

One should refrain from Estonia. ... I don't have anything against the state. The economy's all turned down in here anyway, prices only rise. But it's just that they

could have little better attitude. That if you went to the prosecutor's office and then you got a lawyer to come over there and he looks at you and your face and says, "We are going to lock you up." Well, that's not normal. Are you a lawyer? You have to protect me, not tell me we're locking you up. (IT, 28)

But as there is a punishing prison in Estonia, not a rehabilitative prison, then it has just brought the grudge more up, the way I see Estonia now is that if I ever had a hat that has "Estonia" on it, then I'm not wearing it anymore. (EE, 23)

### *Managing Stigma*

What the interviews have demonstrated is that often, the reaction of a young person who was convicted for a crime was to withdraw from relationships and contact with other people. Very few respondents reflected on this:

I pushed out my best friend too, because everyone else was negatively reacting and I thought it [ending a relationship with a good friend] would be a punishment for me, etc., and then I didn't trust anyone anymore. (SE, 25)

The majority, though, just reported loneliness, lack of trust, and withdrawal from close contacts as their personality trait: "I am a reserved person" usually meaning that they do not share their troubles with anyone and that they always face their problems alone.

Q: Was there anyone at the time who listened to your worries or someone you shared your thoughts with?

A: Well, I've been a very closed person my whole life. I would have had just a handful of those people who would have listened. But I'm just the type of person that I'd rather leave my worries for myself and not going to get others to hatch with them.

Q: Is it a conscious choice or do you feel that you actually would like to share or do you some reason not to do it?

A: Yes. That is exactly what the feeling was very often, that I would like to share. But for some reason, I did not do it. I don't know if this came from the shame that you don't want to tell anyone, or is it pride that you just can't express yourself and go with self-pride. (RS, 24)

Conviction, punishment, offender status, and stigmatization have influence on a young persons' self-confidence. This lack of self-confidence and fear to fail if they try new things restricts young people from even trying,

participating in social life, or moving on with their careers. “The old” scenarios that are already tried either by the person themselves or by other people in similar situations seem to be the safest way to proceed. Such scenarios may also include returning to a criminal life as a way to make life work in general.

One thing is that nobody wants to fail. This will affect many of the new things to try, etc. A lot of people see they’re not worth anything. Second, you’re afraid what [will happen] if you can’t do it. I see a lot that people go the way that is already taken by many and looks safe (e.g., going to Finland to work). Or crime, because you know you can do it. And new things, particularly related to volunteering and education, I see it comes through such personal motivation, if something happens in your life e.g. parenthood, someone has supported you and you want to give back to the community, etc. People learn to see their worth, then this is what makes them want to contribute and give back. For people who don’t feel their own value, they have a very hard time seeing that it matters. (SE, 25)

For some persons, the new role that they get by accepting a new label may have some benefits. Peers with similar backgrounds may respect you, while enemies will be afraid.

Some people, I’m sure, but if everyone was scared, I wouldn’t like it. I still want to get along with people. Those who are my hated enemies, I will be happy if they fear me (laughs). (JK, 21)

From the point of view of social and political participation, the majority of young people interviewed for this case analysis could be considered as rather apathic. This apathy is expressed in many ways. Some of the youth do not work or study. They do not have any clear goal in their life. They, as it was previously described, feel alienated from the state and verbally express their desire to leave Estonia.

The things that I have been through, places I’ve been through. The way it affects my life right now. Just because it changed me as a person when it comes to my way of thinking and desires. For example, if one has nothing to do, he’s going to see what’s in the theatre or he’s going to watch a movie. I’m not going to go to the movies, it’s so pointless. To these leisure and everyday activities, they have become boring. You go outside and you have nothing to do. You have a choice that you’re going to sit in a bar with your buddies and drink two beers, but you’re not bothered. It feels like this. (EE, 23)

The stigmatization, low self-esteem, and lack of trust toward state institutions results in a withdrawal from the social and political life. For young offenders, even routine activities and everyday life, like going to work, school, university, a movie theater, or gym are already a big step toward participation in life. Accepting stigma, feeling worthless, powerless – all have a big impact on participation. Those young people who resist stigma, however, reported different kinds of participation. They overcome obstacles and go to study, they find jobs, or dream about their own business. Some of them are involved in traditional forms of active participation – some do volunteer work, participate in youth exchange programmes, or work as tutors for the youth. TT, for example, is 19, has a job, and as a volunteer is building a gym at the local youth center. He also has participated in an international youth exchange. SE supports and advises youth who are in trouble with the law, and has worked as a volunteer at a support center for victims of domestic violence. SAM is interested in politics, has his own political views, and is ready to express them. KEN, on the contrary, defines himself in opposition with society. He has a strong position and expresses it through music and art.

I've been doing a lot of music from the point of view of what is wrong in my eyes in this country or wrong in society in general. I've done a lot of music on that... Some of the songs are on YouTube, too. We have a video single with seven of us singing. [...] The last, the seventh verse is mine. And this whole verse is about how I've been on parole for 2 years and for what, basically. (KEN, 19)

Relatives usually do not reject their convicted sons or daughters. A similar situation is with friends or other people who know the offender as a person. The stigma of a “cruel violent killer” or “a dirty junky” cannot be easily attached to a person you know. This familiarity or opportunity to perceive an ex-offender as a person, not as someone belonging to a criminal caste, is also used as a strategy to resist stigmatization. As described, while looking for a job, ex-offenders may not immediately reveal their status but rather hope that the employer will have learned this information already and then the young person will have a chance to demonstrate his or her abilities and personal qualities. If a young ex-offender is not given time and information about their conviction being made public, he or she may try to explain in detail what had happened and what he or she has learned from it. Additional information increases familiarity and separates the label from the person.

Young people develop strategies to resist the stigma. These strategies are intuitive ones and used by everyone spoken to. The basic strategy to avoid being labeled is not to let anyone know about a conviction. However, as previously described, information availability on the Internet makes things more complicated. Interesting to note is that this strategy to avoid disclosure of information is also taught in prisons as a recommendation to be more successful on the labor market.

Well, that's how you find a job... well, that stuff like: go and do a CV and upload it to CV-center [*on-line job market*], this stuff is not going to help a person who came out of prison. When needed they gave some tips how to conceal that 5 years gap in the CV and how to cheat in your CV, just like any practical tips. [Tips] to fill that gap, so you have a real chance of getting somewhere. (JB, 24)

To avoid stigma, some young people decide to leave the place where they leave, to change their social network, and to start their lives from scratch. For many of ex-convicts, Finland is such a place, where they can start a new life.

I've decided that this circle [of friends] is not exactly what it's most suitable for me. And since I had settled my life here in Finland already, I had some kind of base down here, so when I got out from prison, the very next day I had a ferry ticket, and I was back here. ... I decided that Finland is a new life base for me. That there I can start off from scratch. I'm going to put my life back together block after block. (RS, 24)

## Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis demonstrated that the young ex-offenders are often excluded from society. Stigmatization and its effect of a young person play an important role here. Young people who have been convicted for committing an offence have experienced problems integrating back to the society. The main areas where labeling has had most effect on young ex-offenders are employment and prospective accommodation. Employment, as the main domain where convicted persons experience stigmatization, was confirmed by various studies all over the world (Schneider ja McKim 2003; Chui ja Cheng 2013; Pettit ja Lyons 2007).

Three main strategies to manage stigma have been identified in the literature (Link et al. 1989): stigmatized persons keep their status a secret,

reveal it, or withdraw from social contacts that they perceive as potentially rejecting. Our research proved that secrecy and withdrawal are the strategies used by young ex-offenders in Estonia. To avoid stereotypical reaction to the “offender” status, young people are trying to hide information about their criminal past. However, due to the spread of information in the internet, it is difficult to do. The prospective employers and landlords are looking for the information in social networks or news media to make their decision. Also, interventions by the criminal justice system might make the offenders’ statuses known to other people and in such way contribute to the stigma.

Withdrawal and secrecy as the strategies to avoid stigma can have negative effect on social networks, participation in education, jobs, and self-esteem (ibid.). Stereotypes about criminal offenders may be integrated into a self-concept, a phenomenon known as self-stigma (Moore, Tangeny ja Stuewig 2016). As interviews with young ex-offenders in Estonia demonstrate, internalized stigma lowers self-esteem and makes participation in the social life and resocialization of a young convict even more difficult.

From the methodological point of view, a peer-research approach allowed to use relationships of trust already there and, therefore, this approach was more productive for our case study. This issue of trust is of tremendous importance not only from the methodological point of view but as a conclusion of the whole analysis. For the group of young people who had participated in the current study, trust is the key issue in participation. All dimensions of trust are important: trust toward other people in the community encourages to make new contacts and through contacts be more involved in social life. Trust toward a state makes young people contribute and give back to the society. Trust toward the criminal justice system makes decisions and laws legitimate and encourages law abiding behavior not because of the fear of punishment but because it is morally right (Jackson et al. 2012).

The qualitative analysis of interviews with ex-offenders helps to better understand what is behind the high rates of reoffending among young convicts. Youth is a period when people are looking for their path in life, when they attempt to establish a connection to others and to society, create relationships and careers. For many of the young people, the reasons for their criminal behavior lie in the circumstances they have been through during their childhood. Troubles create troublesome youth, and the state reacts to



these troubles with different sorts of measures. These measures are often stigmatizing ones, and, as was demonstrated in the analysis, may make the situation even worse. Young offenders might feel that to stay on the criminal path is the easiest way to live their lives.

### *Funding*

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 693221. This publication reflects only the views of the authors; the European Commission and Research Executive Agency are not responsible for any information it contains.

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