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## **“I have to start changing”**

How six youths who have been involved in repeated crimes perceive the help they receive from support services

Master's thesis in Special Education

Supervisor: Øyvind Kvello

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Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences  
Department of Education and Lifelong Learning



## **Abstract**

*This study is designed for a master's degree in Special Education at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and focuses on the following question: "How do six youths in Trøndelag, Norway, who have been involved in repeated crimes, perceive the help they receive from support services?"*

*In this study in-depth interviews with six youths and young adults were conducted. The participants were aged between 17 and 29 and have been involved with repeated crimes in their adolescent years. The narratives were analysed on salient themes within their subjective experiences with support services. The following themes and subthemes emerged after analyses: (1) Stigma: Condemnation (i) and Labelled Identity (ii); (2) Social Support: Emotional Support (iii), and Practical Help (iv); (3) Empowerment (v); (4) Activities: Joyful Activities (vi) and Everyday Activities (vii); and (5) Individual Turning Points (viii). The themes are then discussed by comparing findings to existing literature. The experiences, thoughts and feelings that these youths describe, help to provide a better understanding for how support services could design their services and interventions to better fit the needs of these youths.*

## Preface

Before you lies the dissertation: *“I have to start changing” How six youths who have been involved in repeated crimes perceive help they receive from support services*. It has been written to fulfil the graduation requirements of the Special Education master program at the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). The subject of this thesis is not the most obvious choice for a student in this department, but in my work as a teacher I have met a lot of pupils that risk becoming outsiders because of anti-social and oppositional behaviour. They often do not get the help they need because their behaviour excludes them from the interventions that support services offers. Since the criminal behaviour is both a symptom of what they are struggling with, but also something that disqualifies them from getting the help they need, a vicious cycle arises. As teachers, we are usually the first ones that meet these children and have a chance to help them, before any other support services. To be able to break the vicious cycle we must listen to these children and youths, since they are the only ones who can give an insight in the thoughts and feelings that arise during their collaboration with support services. By incorporating the information we get from hearing their perspectives into designing our services, we can improve our practices and better support their recovery process.

*Det kan hende  
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*Trygve Skaug*

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# 1. Introduction

Youth support service workers help youth through social services, in schools, institutions, or on the streets. Part of the youths they meet exhibit externalizing problems such as aggression, anti-social and oppositional behaviour, such as uncooperative, defiant, and hostile behaviour towards peers, parents, teachers, and other authority figures. They engage in criminal acts that bring them in contact with law-enforcement.

In Norway, a child that commits a crime will encounter different interventions depending on their age and the severity of the crime committed. Under the age of criminal responsibility, which is 15, the police can hold the child in custody for up to 4 hours, have a conversation with the child and their parents or refer the case to child-protective services. If a child is 15 or older, they can be prosecuted by the juvenile court and receive a punishment, which in most cases also includes contact with support services. Support service workers have a responsibility to provide a safety net for these children, so they do not develop into criminal adults. They must help them achieve a positive development. But what kind of approach will result in healthier choices and better lives for juvenile delinquents?

The perspective of the child plays an increasingly important role in decision-making processes that affect the child. In the OHCHR<sup>1</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12 paragraph 1. it states:

“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”

A similar message is found in the Norwegian government’s strategy for youths’ health<sup>2</sup>: “Adolescents and young adults will be heard in designing the services that affect them”. How can we include this child-perspective into choosing our approach towards helping children?

To understand better what these youths want and need from support services for making better choices in life this study focuses on the following question: *How do youths in Trøndelag, Norway, who have been involved in repeated crimes, perceive the help they receive from support services?* By means of in-depth interviews with six youths that have been involved

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

<sup>2</sup> # Ungdomshelse-regjeringens strategi for ungdomshelse 2016–2021 Strategi (2016, p. 9)

with repeated criminal activities, it tries to find out what helps these youths to choose a path leading away from criminality and what they find important.

Not many studies have been done on youths' perspective on help from support services, let alone on Norwegian juvenile offenders'. This gives quite thin foundation of knowledge. To be able to comply to the Norwegian government's strategy for youths' health we need to give these youths a chance to voice their perspectives. This study intends to ameliorate the situation by filling in the knowledge-gaps and deepening our understanding of this specific topic.

In this thesis, Chapter 2 outlines the key literature to establish the context for my research. In Chapter 3 the Qualitative build-up of the study is described which is supported by literature on methodology. Chapter 4 describes the findings in this study by discussing themes that emerged from the data. In Chapter 5 I will discuss the findings by comparing these with previous research and existing literature. Finally, in Chapter 6 the Methodological Limitations of this study are presented and follow-up possibilities are suggested.

## 2. Review of literature and research

In this chapter I will describe the theoretical background of this study. In paragraph 2.1 numbers on youth criminality in central Norway are presented. The risk factors for youth criminality are presented in paragraph 2.2. In paragraph 2.3 we will look at support services for young offenders in central Norway. Hereafter, in paragraph 2.4, theory on Positive Youth Development is reviewed. In paragraph 2.5 we will take a closer look at self-agency, efficacy beliefs and empowerment. Then in paragraph 2.6 theory about Stigma is presented. Recovery process through social support is discussed in paragraph 2.7. Finally, relevant research is presented paragraph 2.8.

### 2.1 Youth criminality in central Norway

The annual report from the police district Trøndelag; *Kriminaliteten i Trøndelag politidistrikt. Oppsummering av anmeldelser 2017* (2018) shows that in 2017, 1359 offences were reported, where the suspect/accused was under the age of 18. This was an increase of 28,4 % from the year 2016, which is a trend change from the positive development in the previous years, where the number of reported offences was declining. A total of 837 different youths were involved as suspects or accused in these cases, which is an increase of 19,2 % from the previous year.

Table 1: Number of offences with suspect/accused under the age of 18 in Trøndelag Police District

Type of criminal activity	2016	2017	% change
Other	97	153	57,7
Environment	5	8	60,0
Narcotics	128	189	47,7
Sexual offences	89	87	-2,2
Vandalism	128	170	32,8
Traffic	186	136	-26,9
Cases involving child protective services	13	20	53,8
Property crimes	236	333	41,1
Violence	153	237	54,9
Financial crimes	23	26	13,0

<b>Total</b>	<b>1058</b>	<b>1359</b>	<b>28,4</b>
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Source: Kriminaliteten i Trøndelag politidistrikt. Oppsummering av anmeldelser 2017 (2018)

The increase in crimes is seen in several types of criminality (Table 1). Within violent crimes, from 2016 to 2017, an increase in physical violence (42,9 %), threatening violence/assault (93,6 %) and aggravated battery (20,7 %) is reported. Even though youth in the whole area of Trøndelag is included, the biggest increases in violent youth-crimes are in the cities: Malvik, Steinkjer, Stjørdal, and Trondheim. Crimes involving narcotics also increased, drug trafficking, possession and manufacturing by 96,3 % and the offences involving use of narcotics increased by 28,4 %. However, the report noted that the number of registered crimes involving drugs is greatly dependent on the focus and strategies of the police forces (Trøndelag politidistrikt, 2018).

## 2.2 Risk factors for youth criminality

To gain a better understanding of these youths, it is important to look at the reasons why some children develop criminal behaviours. Kvello and Wendelborg (2009) and Kvello (2016), have made an overview of the most central risk and protective factors for developing behavioural problems and anti-social behaviour, which in turn can lead to criminality. This overview shows that there are many individual risk factors. These can be innate/genetic traits like a difficult temperament, but also low cognitive skills, difficulties in reading and/or writing, a limited vocabulary and/or difficulty with language comprehension, several types of mental disorders, attachment problems and childhood experience with sexual, emotional or physical abuse or neglect. Substance abuse and anti-social friends are also risk factors. You find risk factors within the nuclear family, such as parents with moderate or severe forms of mental problems, intellectual disabilities, substance abuse, criminal behaviour, aggressive behaviour, persistent conflicts or partner violence or child abuse, or immigration background with low integration in society. Also, parents that themselves have experienced abuse or neglect, live in poverty and/or show hostility are risk factors. Lots of sudden changes, as moving, or changing partners in the period of life when a child is in the age range of 3/4 to 16 years old is a risk factor, especially for dysfunctional families.

Interaction between parents and their children can be described by scoring two factors: Warmth and control. The factor warmth is the parents' emotional responsiveness to the child's

needs, and Control is the way that parents set limits and regulate their children's feelings and behaviours. If the interaction between parent and child is authoritarian (low score on warmth, high score on control), or uninvolved (low score on warmth, low score on control) it poses a high-risk factor for developing criminal behaviour. A permissive style (high score on warmth, low score on control) partly does so as well. A signal of these first two parenting styles is a weak emotional bonding to their child, which shows through ignoring, dismissive or hostile behaviour. Hard punishment, inconsistent rules and extremely high or low supervision are also signs of a negative parenting style.

Older siblings with behavioural problems and/or anti-social behaviour, or that are violent to their siblings, are risk factors that lie with the nuclear family. Risk factors that lie in the child's milieu are; high exposure to narcotics, high level of criminality in the milieu, neighbourhoods with low socio-economic residents, and schools with a high prevalence of problems with discipline and behaviour, and that use little effective interventions (Kvelling, 2014; Kvelling & Wendelborg, 2009). These individual-, family- and environmental factors can increase the risk for criminal behaviour.

There is evidence for a genetic foundation for how sensitive a person is to environmental influences (Belsky, Pokhvisneva, Rema, Broekman, Pluess, O'Donnell & Silveira, 2019; Belsky & Van IJzendoorn, 2017). Being sensitive to environmental influences is useful when the social environment is functioning well, but a vulnerability when growing up in harsh environments or dysfunctional families (Belsky & Pluess, 2016). Youths that are sensitive and grow up with several risk factors are far more vulnerable for developing mental disorders and establish low social adjustment than those who are less sensitive to environmental influences (Belsky, 2016; Hygen, 2018). Hygen (2018) found that children who scored high on sensitivity to environmental stimulations, combined with unsecure attachment to parents and weak parental competence (i.e., neglecting and abusive parenting style) had far poorer outcomes than siblings that scored average.

### **2.3 Support services for young offenders in central Norway**

An important goal for both police and child protection services is preventing juveniles from a long career as criminals. In Trondheim, Norway, a partnership has been established

between the local police district and the municipality (Trondheim kommune), called the SLT<sup>3</sup>. This partnership is aiming to improve cooperation between these two parties for creating mutual strategies and interventions to inhibit negative development for youths and analyse the different social groups. This research project cooperated with three partners from the SLT; Konfliktrådet, Uteseksjonen and 22B Kontaktsenter. Konfliktrådet (Conflict-council) is a state-owned service that offers mediation for conflicts. They believe that all sides of a conflict can find a solution through dialog. This applies for both concrete criminal offences and interpersonal relationships. One project that Konfliktrådet is a part of, is the implementation of an alternative to punishment (punishment includes paying fines or being institutionalized) for juvenile criminal offenders, which is inspired by Restorative Justice. Restorative justice is the process of holding youth accountable for their delinquent acts, and has a purpose of restoring not only the victim and others that are affected by the harm that has been done, but also the community that had its public safety threatened and the offender who is a part of the community and will remain a threat if not restored (Kvelling & Wendelborg, 2009; Smith, 2001). A criminal act harms both individuals and relationships, and this damage needs to be restored. Relations lay the foundations for the lives these youths are living after their punishment is finished, therefore they are very important focus points (Andrews & Eide, 2019). Restoring damage can be done through a process of mediation, victim empowerment, negotiation and reparation. Through face-to-face dialogues, victims, offenders and family members are involved to create a collaborative process with the aim of restoration and a close monitoring for the juvenile and his/her family (for approximately 1–2 years).

In these first years in Norway, this alternative to punishment was executed with the main focus on the restorative processes for the offender and less so for the victim (Kvelling & Wendelborg, 2009). The alternatives, called Youth-follow-up and Youth-punishment are being organized by a Follow-up team, which consists of police, correctional services, school, the Norwegian directorate for children, child protection services, the youths' private network and off course the mediators from Konfliktrådet. The mediators will organize a meeting where they try to restore the damages with the victim and/or society through dialogue, and afterward a plan is created in cooperation with the offender to restore the offender and prevent recidivism. The implementation has started in 2006 in four communities in Norway and has since been extended nationwide and developed further. Since this is a relatively new method in Norway, there is not a great amount of research available on this topic. The sparse amount of research on the topic

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<sup>3</sup> SLT: «Samordning av lokale kriminalitetsforebyggende tiltak».

done in both Norway and in other countries, shows that youth that has been offered a Restorative Justice program showed significant less recidivism after two years (Kvello & Wendelborg, 2009; Daly, 2016; Rodriguez, 2007). However, a recent evaluation on the implementation of Youth-Punishment and Youth-follow up in Norway showed that 34 % of the youth did not complete the restorative trajectory (Andrews & Eide, 2019). The report showed that the trajectory varied greatly from one department to another, as did the available resources. It showed that much time and effort is needed to further develop this method of alternative punishment in Norway before its full effects can be reached. Kvello and Wendelborg (2009) pointed out in 2009 that intensity and use of multiple methods/interventions had to be used in order to gain effects. Andrews and Eide (2019) shows that best results are gained by the teams that have followed the advice of intensity and variation of help (for the juvenile and his/her family).

In Trondheim, Norway, there are several organizations that work with juveniles together with Konfliktrådet. For example, Uteseksjonen (Outside-section) is an organization purely for helping youths and has two core tasks: Proactive social work and supporting individual adolescents. They offer help and support to youth that needs long-term, goal-oriented support to improve the youths' situation. Their main principles for their proactive social work are accessibility over time and being present at the places where the youth is, like the city centre, school and other places where adolescents gather. Through meeting them in the field, youth can get in touch with Uteseksjonen by contacting them directly. However, they can also get help by their parents contacting Uteseksjonen, or by referral from social services. This of course with the approval of the adolescent. 22B Kontaktsenter is a church-owned organisation with a close cooperation with Trondheim Kommune. They do preventive work with youth in the age of 15–23 through social work, work-training and housing support. Their intention is to contribute time, care and presence to the lives of the youths that they meet, and thereby reducing negative development that can result in drug abuse and criminality. They want to enable healthy changes and a better life quality for the individual adolescent.

## **2.4 Positive youth development**

All the organisations working with juveniles have a common goal: Supporting and promoting positive youth development. Several attempts have been made to articulate the core

concepts and principles in the positive youth development field. Benson and colleagues (2007, p. 896) state that synthesis of reviews suggests considerable consensus on these six principles:

1. “All youth have the inherent capacity for positive growth and development.
2. A positive developmental trajectory is enabled when youth are embedded in relationships, contexts, and ecologies that nurture their development.
3. The promotion of positive development is further enabled when youth participate in multiple, nutrient- rich relationships, contexts, and ecologies.
4. All youth benefit from these relationships, contexts, and ecologies. Support, empowerment, and engagement are, for example, important developmental assets for all youth, generalizing across race, ethnicity, gender, and family income. However, the strategies and tactics for promoting these developmental assets can vary considerably as a function of social location.
5. Community is a viable and critical “delivery system” for positive youth development.
6. Youth are major actors in their own development and are significant (and underutilized) resources for creating the kinds of relationships, contexts, ecologies, and communities that enable positive youth development.”

This sixth principle includes the perspective of the child that is referred in the OHCHR Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12, paragraph 1, and the Norwegian governments strategy for youths’ health.

The perspective of positive youth development has a strength-based orientation, and has a focus on aspects that promote thriving and prevent negative outcomes (Holsen, Geldhof, Larsen, & Aardal, 2017). Benson, P.L.; Scales, P.C.; Leffert, N.; Roehlkepartain (1999) have promoted the Framework of Developmental Assets. This is a theory-based model which links features of ecologies (external assets) with personal skills and capacities (internal assets). They hypothesize that external and internal assets are dynamically interconnected “building blocks” that, in combination, lead to positive youth development. They suggested 40 assets, of which 20 external and 20 internal assets, each sorted in four overarching categories. The external assets are: (1) Support, (2) Empowerment, (3) Boundaries and Expectations, and (4) Constructive Use of Time. The internal assets are: (5) Commitment to Learning, (6) Positive Values, (7) Social Competencies and (8) Positive Identities (Benson et al., 1999). A high score on the collection of these assets, reduces high-risk behaviour and promote thriving. One of the intentions of the model is to mobilize communities. When many settings collaborate, positive development is enhanced.



Positive youth development consists of a combination of, and a dynamic interaction between several constructs within a person and its context, as seen in Figure 1:

”The core ideas in positive youth development include (A) developmental contexts (i.e., places, settings, ecologies, and relationships with the potential to generate supports, opportunities, and resources); (B) the nature of the child with accents on inherent capacity to grow and thrive (and actively engage with supportive contexts); (C) developmental strengths (attributes of the person, including skills, competencies, values, and dispositions important for successful engagement in the world); and two complimentary conceptualizations of developmental success; (D) the reduction of high-risk behaviour; and (E) the promotion of thriving.” (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2007, p. 896).

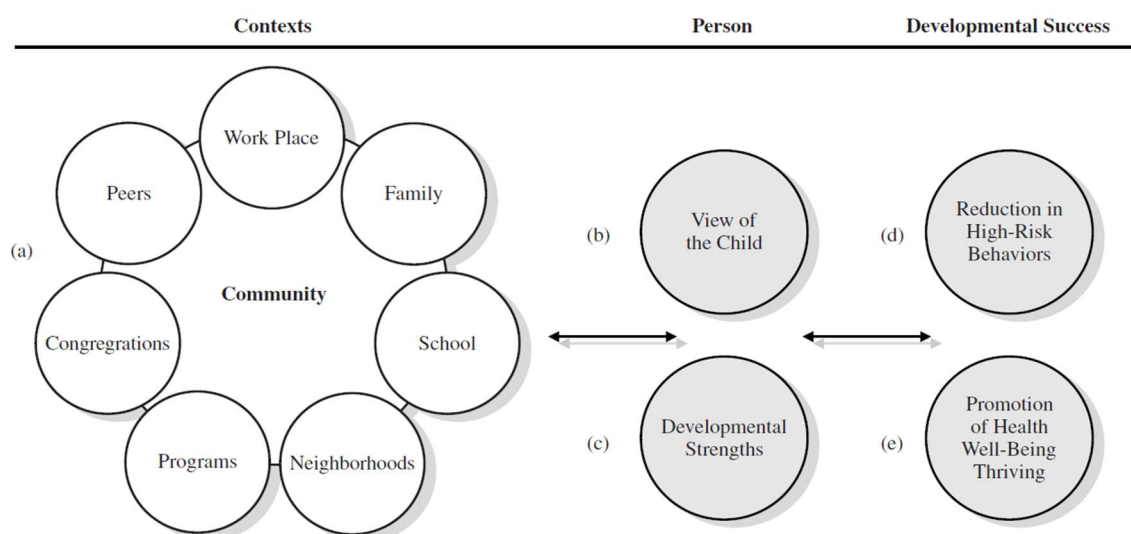


Figure 1: Core positive youth development constructs (Benson et al., 2007, p. 897).

Figure 1 shows clearly all the different contexts where support services can make an impact and between which they can promote collaboration to promote positive development and well-being whilst reducing criminal behaviour.

## 2.5 Self-agency, efficacy beliefs and empowerment

Human behaviour is determined by many interacting factors. People contribute to, but do not solely determine what happens to them. They have expectations of what will be the outcome of their behaviour. Agency is a term that refers to intentional acts to influence an outcome. The beliefs a person has in their capability to organize and execute actions to be taken to reach a certain achievement or goal, is called perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The efficacy beliefs a person has, greatly influences their behaviour in either a positive or a negative

manner (Barbaranelli, Paciello, Biagioli, Fida, & Tramontano, 2019). If a person believes they have no power to produce results, they will not attempt to make things happen and result to apathy or self-devaluation (Bandura, 1997).

When it comes to supporting youth in learning skills that promote positive self-agency, “a fundamental goal is to equip a person with self-regulatory capabilities that enable them to educate themselves” (Bandura, 1997, p. 174). In order to help an adolescent or young adult with developing themselves into individuals that function in society, they need to gain mastery over their affairs. This is a process called empowerment (Rappaport, 1987). Becker, Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Klem (2002, p. 700) state:

“the action dimension of empowerment is gaining influence and control, involving intentional, informed participation, aimed at effecting change, motivated and made possible by the awareness and capacity dimensions of empowerment”.

This matches the sixth principle of positive youth development that states that youths are major actors in their own development (Benson et al., 2007), and is a way to increase self-agency (cf. p. 13) (Boomkens, Metz, Schalk, & Van Regenmortel, 2019). In the process of increasing self-agency, it is important for support services to be available to take on the daily challenges together. Often these youths have great troubles with practical activities, like getting their finances in order. Financial problems and mental health affect each other and have a possibility to create a negative vicious cycle. Borg and Kristiansen (2004) found that being available for helping with practical issues was important for those that are in a recovery process. In these meetings it is important to follow the individuals own priorities, to be available when needed. This availability, interest and engagement from the helper contributes to a positive, collaborative relationship.

## **2.6 Stigma**

Efficacy beliefs can be influenced by several factors – stigma is one of them. A society organises their people by categorizing their members by attributes that feel ordinary and natural to them. When meeting a person, we interpret first appearances to categorise and assign attributes to them. A stigma or label is a negative attribute that makes a person different from others in a category of people, and it reduces the person to a “tainted or discounted status” (Goffman, 1963). A label can be obtained by informal reasons; it can be about outer appearances

like, clothing style, a visible disability, the colour of your skin, gender, by your behaviour, your social circle, but also by your experiences. However, labels can be obtained by formal reasons as well; being in contact with the police and support services could also label a person. A consequence of having a stigma or label is that it greatly affects the person that is being labelled. When the label involves a negative stereotype, activation of this stereotype can inhibit performance on a subsequent, related task (Ambady, Paik, Steele, Owen-Smith, & Mitchell, 2004). Thus, labelling with a negative stereotype can cause a negative self-efficacy and outcome expectancy, which in turn impact a youth's behaviour and therefore the outcome. This can be the start of a vicious circle where poor results lead to feeling of inefficacy, that in turn lead to poor results, etc. Experiencing recurrent negative results can lead to self-stigma, where a person starts agreeing with these negative stereotypes, and therefore become a part of a persons' self-concept, or beliefs about themselves. Agreeing with stereotypes can therefore make one's self-esteem decline (Pasman, 2011) and make one feel different from others. When confronted with a mixed social situation, a stigmatized individual might anticipatorily respond with defensiveness or trying to hide (Goffman, 1963). Bernburg, Krohn, and Rivera (2006) find support for the idea that official labelling increases involvement in deviant groups.

“The exclusionary processes triggered by deviant labelling may, in many cases, explain the individual's movement into a deviant group, as well as the isolation of deviant groups from mainstream social life.” (Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006, p. 82).

Being, or feeling stigmatised leads to increased association with others with similar stigma and similar (negative) experiences in life, which in turn will confirm their negative self-concept.

## **2.7 Recovery process through social support**

The impact of stigma shows how other people's behaviour has an impact on the youths' recovery process. Factors that are important in a recovery process are:

“ (...) a) participation in activities that support personal and social development, b) live as ordinary, stable and continuous lives as possible, c) decrease contact with adverse social network, d) secure access to social support, e) be met with respect and dignity, f) having faith in recovery, and g) developing coping skills.” [translation by the author of this thesis] (Kvello, 2016, pp. 266–267)

Previously a recovery process often was looked at as a highly individual process one goes through, to develop themselves and improve their life quality (Topor, Borg, Di Girolamo, & Davidson, 2011). However, in more recent research it becomes clear that the social process is also important because recovery does not happen in isolation from the world around them. The social process is the interaction between the person in recovery and their context which is for example; family and friends, support services, work, etc. (Ness et al., 2013; Topor et al., 2011). When focussing on the interaction between support services' workers and those that receive help, Topor and colleagues (2011) describe that many informants in studies on recovery point out that a reciprocal relationship is important to them; they want a professional to be emotionally involved, to really care. Indications for this can be many, like someone doing something extra for them as investing time beyond the planned meetings, or after their professional contact officially ended. The positive interaction between peers can inhibit risk behaviour and advance developmental strengths.

Social support, which is the feeling that someone takes care of you, appreciates you, and that you are part of a mutually supportive social network, is an important construct. It is both linked to physical and mental health. Peterson, Buser, and Westburg (2010) found for example that among adolescents with supportive family environments and community involvement there were lower levels of substance use. Lakey and Orehek (2011) explain the main effect between perceived support and mental health in the Relational Regulation Theory. This theory states among other that people regulate their feelings, actions and thoughts primarily through social interactions. This relational regulating occurs primarily in day-to-day social interactions, through conversation and shared activities. Through shifting conversations, interaction partners and activities people regulate their feelings, and a wider diversity of available relations increases the likelihood of effective regulation.

Support services can facilitate activities that provide these positive relationships, which can be enhanced by three factors: "Their quality, their quantity and their sustainability" (Benson et al., 2007, p. 912). Even though the type of activity can vary greatly, in designing activities there are specific features that determine the quality. The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine in Washington (2002) conducted a project during which a committee evaluated and integrated the current science of adolescent health and development with research and findings related to program design, implementation, and evaluation of community programs for youth. They found the features shown in Table 2 as essential for positive developmental settings.

Table 2 *Features of Positive Developmental Settings*

Feature	Descriptors
Physical and psychological safety	Safe and health-promoting facilities, practice that increases safe peer group interaction and decreases unsafe or confrontational peer interactions
Appropriate structure	Limit setting, clear and consistent rules and expectations, firm-enough control, continuity and predictability, clear boundaries, and age-appropriate monitoring
Supportive relationships	Warmth, closeness, connectedness, good communication, caring, support, guidance, secure attachment, and responsiveness.
Opportunities to belong	Opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disabilities; social inclusion, social engagement and integration; opportunities for sociocultural identity formation; and support for cultural and bicultural competence
Positive social norms	Rules of behaviour, expectations, injunctions, ways of doing things, values and morals, and obligations for service
Support for efficacy and mattering	Youth-based, empowerment practices that support autonomy, making a real difference in one's community, and being taken seriously; practices that include enabling, responsibility granting, and meaningful challenge; practices that focus on improvement rather than on relative current performance levels
Opportunity for skill building	Concordance; coordination and synergy among family, school and community

*Essential features for designing programs for stimulating positive youth development. Source: Institute of Medicine (2002)*

To stimulate positive youth development, there are different factors to take into account. However, these factors also show are no one-size-fits-all solutions; each individual needs a customized approach:

“[Support system users] (...) are not just a collection of symptoms, failings and shortcomings; they are individuals who have acquired a wealth of experience and knowledge about their condition and what could help to improve it or make it worse.” (Topor et al., 2011, p. 97).

## **2.8 Relevant research**

Few studies have been done on the youths' perspective on help from support services, but a Norwegian study on youths' collaborative practices with practitioners in mental health and addiction care, from Ness, Kvello, Borg, Semb, and Davidson (2017), found four themes that were important for these youths: They wanted to feel listened to, and respected (1), which they could read from the practitioners attitude towards them. They wanted receptive, responsive, and hopeful practitioners that were available when needed and did not give up on them (2). A trusting relationship with the practitioner so they can sort out issues together (3) was also an important to them. Finally, practical help to support them in finding their way in the community and creating a meaningful everyday life (4) was of great significance. Another study in the USA, by Marsh & Evans (2009), which focused on youth perspectives on their relationships with staff in juvenile correction settings and perceived likelihood of success on release, showed that relationships with high levels of trust and positive affect, effective help with problem solving (coping), and high perceived engagement, predicted the greatest likelihood of success on release. This success was seen on four domains: potential for success, social networks, substance abuse/reoffending, and conflict reduction. These studies indicate that a major part of the recovery process happens within the relationship between the youth and their support service worker. However, there is still a quite thin foundation of knowledge. This study could help fill in the gaps and deepen our understanding of this specific topic.

### **3. Research design and research method**

In this chapter the design, processes and the choices that have been made in this study will be presented with supporting theory. This study has a qualitative design and uses interviews as data-collection. The aim and objectives for this study are presented in paragraph 3.1. In paragraph 3.3 we will look at the study design and in paragraph 3.3 we will discuss reflexivity. The process is described in paragraph 3.4 and quality and ethics are discussed in paragraph 3.5

#### **3.1 Aim and objectives**

The aim of this study was to find an answer to the following research question: *How do six youths in Trøndelag, Norway, who have been involved in repeated crimes, perceive the help they receive from support services?* The study objectives were to: 1) Identify meaningful or counter-productive actions/interventions from support services and these youths experiences with, and feelings about these actions/interventions, and 2) Identify (perceived) attitudes from support workers that these youths identify as a precondition for, or counter-productive to being able to accept help from them.

#### **3.2 Study design**

This is a qualitative study wherein data was gathered through seven face-to-face in-depth interviews with youths and young adults who have repeatedly been in contact with support services because of law-breaking behaviour as adolescents. A semi-structured, narrative interview guide was developed to gather data about these youths' experiences, perceptions, knowledge and understanding about the help they have received and the interactions they have experienced with support services.

In situations one wishes to do research on attitudes, opinions and experiences, in depth interviews are most suitable (Thagaard, 2018; Tjora, 2017). In-depth interviews offer the opportunity to capture rich, descriptive data about these youths' behaviours, attitudes and perceptions, and, for unfolding complex processes. Even though this interview data focuses on individuals, it is also a source of knowledge about how structural factors can reflect in an individual's life (Tjora, 2017).

This research project aims to identify meaningful actions/interventions, and desired attitudes from workers, which shows a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology focuses on the subjective experience and seeks to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' experiences (Thagaard, 2018). Hermeneutics is a principle of interpretation. It means to interpret a person's actions through investigating the deeper meaning that lies behind the obvious (Thagaard, 2018). In this research project, it means the researcher must find the structures behind the actions that the participants describe. These structures can be recognised by using existing literature to interpret the data that has been collected (Thagaard, 2018).

When someone does qualitative research, it is difficult to find an objective truth, which makes it difficult to generalize the findings. The best this data can lead to is a moderate generalisation. That means that the researcher can describe in which situations these results can be valid (Tjora, 2017).

### **3.3 Reflexivity**

In my work as a special-needs teacher, I have experienced first-hand how challenging it can be to work with youths that have been involved in repeated criminal activities. I have also seen other teachers and professionals struggling with finding the right approach to help them. Their behavioural problems are persistent, and these youths are experienced as "hard to reach". It is hard to find interventions that are effective and there is little information about the youth's perspective on why some interventions are effective and some not. I strongly believe that all people have a right to be heard, and a right to influence the care and/or support they receive. The willingness to accept help and the motivation to change play a critical role in the successfulness of the interventions. Therefore, it is important to gain some insight into the experiences of the persons these interventions are based on.

As mentioned above, my background is special-needs teaching, even though I also studied Social Work and Psychology for a year each. I studied to be a Primary School teacher in the Netherlands, but in the last two years, I specialized in special education for adolescents with learning disabilities and behavioural problems. This specialization included a lot of practical training in this type of education. After graduating, I worked at a Dutch combined middle- and high school for adolescents with learning disabilities. It was in this school that my interest for criminal youth arose.



After moving to Norway, I started with a master's degree in special education (Spesialpedagogikk) to which this thesis is the final exam. While studying I worked as a special-needs teacher simultaneously, first at a kindergarten, and now at a primary school. Since I had lived in Norway for a relatively short time when I started this master thesis, I had little knowledge of how the support services were organised. When I started my interviews, I made clear to the participants that I was foreigner and had to learn a lot about how things worked, so I would ask for explanations on a lot of things. I also told them that I might ask for explanations on what certain words meant. I did this for two reasons: I wanted to use my vulnerability as an active speech learner as a way of closing the educational gap they might experience between us. The other reason was that it gave me a good opportunity to let them tell me what their definitions of the terms they used were, so that it would give me a better understanding of what they meant. In this method of research, it is of the utmost importance to be objective. By letting the participants explain what their words meant I reduce the chance of bias by wrong interpretation.

When I conducted my first interview, it became clear that interviewing is a skill that needs practicing. I noticed that it was hard to let go of my role as a “helper” and becoming a neutral, objective person that just gathered information. The story the youngest participant told, was filled with missed opportunities for help, and he had not yet managed to fully get away from this destructive path. I had to be aware of my reactions and focus on following my interview guide, but this became easier with every interview I conducted. I attempted to be objective in my reactions and questions. I strived to have a position of being neutral, curious and exploratory.

### **3.4 Process**

In designing this qualitative study, several choices were considered. First, a group of participants had to be gathered according the inclusion criteria, which are described in subparagraph 3.4.1. Then the interview guide had to be made. This guide will be presented in subparagraph 3.4.2. In subparagraph 3.4.3 I explain the process of data collection, and hereafter the transcription process in subparagraph 3.4.4. Finally, in subparagraph 3.4.5 the process of thematic analysis is described.

### **3.4.1 Sample/Participants**

The participants in this study were young adults that have been involved with criminal activities as adolescents. Contact was established through three different organisations that work with youths that are struggling and are involved in criminality. These organizations are: Konfliktrådet, 22b and Uteseksjonen, which I came in touch with through a meeting with the SLT-coordinator in Trondheim. Because the youth in Norway is very well protected by privacy laws it is very difficult to reach possible participants and I was entirely dependent on the gatekeepers that the SLT-coordinator referred to me. These gatekeepers, that were practitioners at the three organisations, gathered participants for this study. They were asked to select participants that met the inclusion criteria. Therefore, the strategic selection was executed by these gatekeepers which resulted in a non-randomized sample. The practitioners identified possible participants, informed them about the study and ask them if they would like to participate. They would then set up a time and date with the participants for the interview for those who agreed.

The inclusion criteria for this study were as following: the participants had to be between 16 and 30 years old; they should several times and over multiple years have been in contact with the police for breaking the law as adolescents; and had experience with support services over multiple years, but were not in any acute crisis at the time of interviewing. This because stress or anxiety can distort interpretations and give negative automatic thoughts (Wells, 2000) and thereby affect the data.

The selection process resulted in a sample of seven participants. The participants in this study were young adults between 17 and 29 years of age. The age these participants started with criminal activities varied between 11 and 15 years of age. However, one of the participants came to Norway at the age of 18, which is when his criminal behaviour in Norway started, but reported drug use and other behaviour, which is considered illegal in Norway and his country of origin from the age of seven. Four of the participants were ethnic Norwegians, one of the participants has immigrant parents and two of the participants were immigrants themselves. Six of the participants were male and one was female. One interview was discarded due to not meeting the criteria for inclusion; the participants reasons for receiving help were more related to mental health issues and family instability than criminality. This resulted in a sample of five men and one woman.

### 3.4.2 Interview guide

In this research project, semi-structured, narrative interviews were used to gather data about these youths' experiences, perceptions, knowledge and understanding. The interview guide (Attachment I) was designed in a way that let the participants tell their story from the first time they engaged in criminal activities, up till current date and ended with their hopes and wishes for the future. While going through the general outline of their stories, stops were made at different areas and experiences, to look deeper into how these were perceived. By choosing a narrative approach in the interviews, one can create a comfortable setting for the participant to tell his story, which creates engagement. Narratives can help give an understanding of the social context the person is a part of.

The interview started out by letting the participant tell about their life as it is now. This was an easy and comfortable way to get them into a storytelling mode. Then the interview moved on to their first crime, the events leading up to that crime, their motives and the consequences of these actions, including support services first interventions. Hereafter they were invited to tell their stories from that point in their lives, until the present day. While they were telling their stories, they were asked questions to help them focus and reflect on help and interventions (experienced as either positive or negative) they have received. To make sure no important experiences were missed the questions also guided them to focus on different systems: individual, nuclear family, school and friends/milieu.

In the last segment of the interview, the participants were asked to think about their future and how they are planning to get there. This was done for two reasons: To answer the question about how to get there, the participants must distil the lessons they have learned from the past and apply them onto a plan for their future. This gives a possibility to get a summary of what the participant perceives as the most important lessons learned. The other reason is that it gives the participants a chance to end their narrative on a positive and hopeful note, and with that, maybe even get something out of participating in this research project.

This study utilises both induction and deduction. The research question '*How do youths in Trøndelag, Norway, who have been involved in repeated crimes, perceive the help they receive from support services?*' opens for new findings and generating new theories based on data. However, in designing the interview existing theory and previous research on similar phenomena have been used as a background to shape the interview guide, which is a form of deduction.

### **3.4.3 Collecting data**

Between August 2018 and February 2019, six semi-structured interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting at the location of the organization that provided the participant in a private room. The interviews lasted between 59 and 86 minutes, with a total interviewing time of eight hours and 20 minutes, which gives an average of 71 minutes per interview.

There can be a strain on the relation between the researcher and the participant, depending on what the participant thinks about the researchers' position and whom they represent. This is worth reflecting upon in situations where people might be critical about higher education, which in turn can affect the data retrieved from the source. The interview must be built on respect for informants and their background, and an understanding of the situation. As a researcher, it is important to remember that they have planned the interview themselves and therefore are known with the content of the interview, while the participant is not. It is of the utmost importance that the researcher creates a safe situation, where the informant can feel relaxed, and the interview does not get disturbed. This is essential, since in-depth interviews depend on the feeling of trust between researcher and participant, especially when talking about sensitive subjects (Tjora, 2017).

### **3.4.4 Transcription**

The interviews were transcribed by listening to the sound recordings and writing down what was being said, which resulted in 127 pages of text. Transcription was done true verbatim, but the quotes that are being presented in the results are clean verbatim and translated from Norwegian to English. The reason for initial true verbatim transcription is that for understanding the message, it is important not to lose the way it was said. The participants told their life stories and sometimes got into quite sensitive subjects. A lot of important information can get lost when one is just focussing on what was said. People can use lots of different strategies to defuse a sensitive message, like sarcasm, laughing, joking etc. This does not show in verbatim transcriptions. Emphasis, volume, pauses, false starts and redirects etc., tell something about the message that is being conveyed. This information can be useful for analysing, to help create a better interpretation and understanding. In the transcriptions of this research, I chose to include pauses and describe non-verbal cues that were important for the message by noting them in parentheses. However, in presenting the themes in the final article individual quotes that support

the presented theme are used, and then a clean verbatim makes the quotes easier to read and understand.

### **3.4.5 Thematic analysis**

After the data had been processed, they were analysed. The analysis drew from principles of hermeneutic phenomenology. While transcribing the interviews themes that emerged and thoughts that came up were noted, to give direction to the next step. The themes were chosen by selecting the most frequent cited information that described a phenomenon that several, or most of the participants experienced. With the research question as a guideline, the text was then analysed and coded. Different themes were labelled and selected. Descriptions and quotes that were meaningful to these themes were selected and sorted into categories that were held against a theoretical framework. Each of the themes' quotes that were collected under each theme to properly label these. After this first round, 5 themes appeared: Labelling/judging, relation, alternative activities, practical help and one other theme that was hard to label and was about autonomy and motivation for change. The primary analysis was discussed with supervisor Øyvind Kvælo and together the material was reviewed. After organising and re-analysing the following final themes and sub-themes emerged:

- (1) Stigma, divided in the sub-themes: Condemnation (i) and Labelled Identity (ii).
- (2) Social Support, divided in the sub-themes: Emotional Support (iii), and Practical Help (iv).
- (3) Empowerment (v).
- (4) Activities, divided in the sub-themes: Joyful Activities (vi) and Everyday Activities (vii).
- (5) Individual Turning Points (viii)

The data was then analysed once more, with focus on the themes to not miss any data. After the last analysis it became clear that at the quotes under each theme tell a story which is being presented in the results. A story of quotes is a potent way to show the uniqueness of their stories, and it shows that this research project is about people, not just impersonal data. The themes can be directly connected to theory. The last theme, which is labelled Turning Points, makes a statement of the individuality of the participants.

In qualitative research it is the researcher that chooses and justifies what is selected as data, so the researcher must decide what is important in their empiricism. When a researcher is interpreting data, they can link these to theoretical frameworks. While doing this they must consider if the problem definition still suits and if it still is relevant. It is possible to develop new theories from the data itself (Thagaard, 2018). If new phenomena arise, the researcher must consider if they should be included in the analysis (Tjora, 2017).

### **3.5 Quality and ethics**

In the process of research, one must make decisions on how to safeguard ethics and address reliability, validity and generalizability. In subparagraph 3.5.1 I will describe and justify the choices made on ethical aspects, and in subparagraph 3.5.2 how I addressed and enhanced reliability, validity and generalizability.

#### **3.5.1 Ethical approval**

In designing research, it is important to look at the ethical aspects of the project. One must always evaluate if the project in any way damages the participants or compromises the privacy of the participants. When designing a project in Norway, the researcher has a duty to apply to Personvernombudet for forskning and/or Norsk senter for forskningsdata (PVO/NSD) for approval. These organisations exist to help researchers and students to make sure their project is in accordance with the Norwegian law.

This study was designed and conducted in accordance with the Norwegian National Committees for Research Ethics. The Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) granted ethical approval to conduct the study (Attachment II). The interviewed adolescents and young adults were informed about the content and purpose of the study both oral and in writing before giving their written consent (Attachment III). Anonymity is obtained by deletion of names, locations and parts of stories that could compromise anonymity. Participants in this study are identified by sex: M = male, F = female, and age. Also, the raw data of this study is destroyed after the thesis is evaluated since they contain complete life stories that, viewed as a whole, could result in loss of anonymity through recognition of events.

### **3.5.2 Reliability, validity and generalizability**

In qualitative research the collected data will not only be described, but also translated into patterns and phenomena to build up a meaningful picture that can either create new theory or can strengthen or refute an existing theory. When evaluating the quality of a study, it is important to reflect on its validity, reliability and generalizability.

Validity means measuring what you intend to measure. In qualitative research construct validity must be evaluated. Construct validity refers to the degree to which inferences can legitimately be made from the operationalizations in a study to the theoretical constructs on which those operationalizations were based (Kleven, Hjardemaal, & Tveit, 2016). This study is affected by the subjectivity of both the research participant (interviewee) and the researcher (interviewer). In designing this study, I chose a combined top-down and bottom-up approach to create a higher construct validity. In writing the questions for the interview, I used my knowledge about support services to facilitate for the participants to tell me about their experiences with them on different areas where these services are active; direct/individual help, in the core-family, at school and in their social environment. The questions were formulated objectively and invited the participants to tell their story as personal narratives. The gathered data was analysed for recurrent themes over all or most participants, so instead of looking for proof for theoretical constructs in the data, I let the data speak for itself (bottom-up). First, when these themes emerged, they were linked to theoretical constructs and re-evaluated (top-down). The themes that naturally emerged fit existing theory on these subjects. This study is data-driven, not theoretical driven.

It is important to be aware of how the raw data is translated into themes, because the subjectivity of a researcher can influence the results. In this research project, all participants were offered to read through the transcripts to give them an opportunity to check if their quotes were being portrayed the right way. None of them expressed that they wanted that at the time of interviewing, nor did they contact me afterwards. A way of strengthening the construct validity of this project would have been to invite these youths for a follow-up interview where the themes are presented and collect their input on these themes. Unfortunately, I had no possibility of doing this.

It is also important to discuss content validity, which means that the measurement tool taps into the various aspects of the specific construct in question (Kleven et al., 2016). In this case one could ask if the narratives in this study really portray the important aspects of the

support these services offer, or are there other important factors that influence the participants' responses? A rational evaluation on how existing theory corresponds with the themes that emerged from the data such as has been done to strengthen construct validity will also strengthen the content validity. This will show if there are areas in either theory or data that have not been covered.

The patterns and phenomena that are translated in this study are grounded in existing theory and will be used to build on and strengthen these theories. These theories are also gathered for a specific purpose; to be able to give better help to youth that is showing criminal behaviour. A good reliability means that the data is (almost) not influenced by random measurement errors; repeated research will give similar results (Kleven et al., 2016). Because of the small sample of six participants, the risk of errors is substantial. The fact that the participants were not randomly selected plays a role. However, by comparing this study with similar studies, the reliability of the findings can be strengthened, because this shows that other participants in similar situations have provided similar data, and other researchers have translated the data in similar ways.

The final aspect that must be evaluated is how the results of this study can be applied for other youths that have not been participants in this study. The participants in this study were not randomly selected and are few in numbers, so we cannot generalize the findings. Generalizability is not an expected attribute or endpoint of qualitative research; rather, the qualitative design is suitable for studying a specific issue/phenomenon in depth in a certain population/group and particular context. Instead of generalizability, in qualitative research the term transferability is more suited. Transferability means using the results of this study in other situations than the one the research project studied (Kleven et al., 2016). The qualitative researcher can enhance transferability by outlining the research context and population thoroughly and describing the assumptions that were central to the research, which is something I did in this study. With this information, the person who wishes to "transfer" the results to another situation is then responsible for making the judgment of how sensible the transfer is.

In the final transcription I used the following symbols:

- (...) - Indicates a long silence
- [...] - Indicates a cut in the text
- [words] - Indicates removal of names to protect anonymity or comments to clarify



## 4. Findings

The following themes emerged from the analysis as the most salient for the participants in this study: (1) Stigma: Condemnation (i) and Labelled Identity (ii); (2) Social support: Emotional Support (iii), and Practical Help (iv); (3) Empowerment (v); (4) Activities: Joyful Activities (vi) and Everyday Activities (vii); and (5) Individual Turning Points (viii). The participants' contemplations on these themes that are presented here, provide insight into the participants' perceptions on the help they received from support services.

### 4.1 Stigma

There were 41 answers that involved the subject of Stigma. 23 of these revolved around Condemnation (i), and 18 around Labelled Identity (ii).

#### 4.1.1 Condemnation (i)

The participants in this study all reported that they felt condemned or labelled in a negative manner, also by the people that are supposed to be helping them. School support services were reported to condemn and negatively label participants in this study. One participant said he was being looked upon as a problem child when he showed aggression after years of intense bullying:

- (1) *"Nowadays, there is more focus on integration and bullying and all that. And, I think that is really good, but it was not like that when I was a teen. Back then it were like the police and the principal that were the solution for problem children. Right? We were labelled as problem children, that is what we were called, because I started doing things as well. So, I was a problem child back then, that was what you were being labelled as. So that (...) you got a label. I do not feel like they did anything to help me. There was not a good enough system in the schools back then."* (M29, 12.12.2018, p. 18).

Another participant reported being called a criminal to his face by a school counsellor, and being treated accordingly:

- (2) *"He lies, and he said in a meeting that there is no point for me to go to school anymore, because I would not pass anyway. I would have to repeat the year (...) but he lied. Because I did pass, I did finish. He said I would not get a grade, but I did. He [also] sent some of us for urine tests and stuff. Just because he thinks we look like criminals. He does not say that in front of other people. Because when we had a meeting with my mom, he was an angel, he was all nice and gave me compliments. But when we are*

*alone, he says we look like criminals, and that he will be watching us.” (M17, 28.08.2018, p. 23).*

In contact with the police, the participants felt stigmatized as well. They reported being stopped and questioned by them regularly, even when they had not done anything:

- (3) *“When it mattered, you were judged, and it was (...) If you went to town at night then they always stopped you, you know? ‘Ah, what are you guys doing out then?’ Like, they were judging a little right away. I do not like the police!” (M29, 12.12.2018, p. 15).*

A fourth participant tells a similar story:

- (4) *“We were being harassed by the police daily, here in town. They just see us, they stop us, and they search us.” (M21, 10.12.2018, p. 17).*

Getting out of the criminal life was difficult. Looking for work is hard enough in itself, since one has to sell themselves in with their positive sides to get the job. Participants reported feeling burdened by stigma in this process. Being referred by social services was something that brought a negative label with it:

- (5) *“I do drugs and I'm a criminal [sighing], as they say. Yeah. If you do drugs you are the son of the devil or something like that, you know? (...) And it was the same thing when I tried to look for certain jobs; NAV would send me to certain places, and they would think the same thing.” (M21, 10.12.2018, p. 17–18).*

The opposite from quote 1-5, being labelled positive, because of his work-skills, was also reported. For one participant this was an important motivator for working towards a better future when he had to spend almost a year in jail for a case that was postponed for two years. In these two years the participant made big steps in his recovery process, but he felt his life was put on hold by the sentence. Knowing he was appreciated by his employer who was willing to wait for him made him want to stay on course of recovery:

- (6) *“My old job, they waited for me for almost a year. I was allowed to come back to my job. So, everything was facilitated for me. And therefore, I did not want to disappoint neither myself nor my girlfriend, my family or the firm, my boss. I did not want to disappoint anyone.” (M29, 12.12.2018, p. 13).*

In summary, the participants described many negative experiences where they were labelled negative by workers from support services. These negative labels affected them in a way that made them want to avoid these people and their services. On the other hand, one participant

reported how a positive label made him more motivated to change, a motivation that lasted over a long period of time.

#### 4.1.2 Labelled Identity (ii)

The recurring experience of being labelled in a negative way became a part of the identity of several participants. It triggered a process of exclusion as the following participant describes about being stigmatized because of his ‘foreign’ appearance:

- (7) *"We are born and raised here, but it will always be a bit like: 'You will never belong here, because we belong an entirely different [culture]'. I think it is different for you for example, because you are a European. But, I have had only Norwegian friend my whole life, but still, I notice something is missing. You always have to work a bit harder, I feel, to fit in."* (M28, 16.01.2019, p. 20).

The same participant also says:

- (8) *"Remember that I have a little different skin-colour. And, even though I am born in Norway, I noticed – one notices in many, many, many settings, not always directly, but one can notice it indirectly a lot. Today it is not something I care about, but you do when you are a little younger."* (M28, 16.01.2019, p. 9).

Another participant reported the negative labelling made him want to embrace it instead of rejecting it, and showed defensiveness towards those he felt stigmatized by:

- (9) *"A lot of people looked at me very different. When I walk here, a lot of people stare at me, and honestly, I do not like it (...) So, I feel very different here, and that kind of made me want to be different. And like, even the parents to my girlfriend do not like me."* (M21, 10.12.2018, p. 17).

It made him set course deeper into the criminal milieu. The youngest participant reported this criminal milieu was important to him. He seemed to understand the reason behind the negative stigma he and his friends had, however, he was not prepared to give up his friendships to change:

- (10) *"My mother does not like them [my friends], neither does my stepfather. They have often said I have to change my social environment. My teacher said the same thing, and Konfliktrådet, and the police. So how would they describe your friends? The same as they would me (...) assholes, all of them. All of you are assholes? [laughs] Yes, because when you look at that [points at a list of committed crimes he had with him] I can understand why."* (M17, 28.08.2018, p. 37-38).

After being exposed to these negative labels for a long time, it became a part of the following participants' identity. He believed the stigma were true. He first had to make steps toward recovery by getting clean, to get experiences that contradicted his beliefs about himself, which in turn made him realize these labels weren't true:

- (11) *"At first it was like ok [removed participants' name], you cannot really do anything, you cannot go to work on a daily basis, you cannot be a normal person you know, as they say, you know. In the drug community they call people who are like, go to work and do stuff normal people do, you know. At that time, I would be like, I cannot be normal, I'm not normal, you know. I am very different from other people, but when I stopped doing drugs, I noticed I'm not really different. I can still wake up at seven o'clock, and go to work, and still come back in the evening. Yeah, it was more like, I had to accept the change for it to happen."* (M21, 10.12.2018, p. 26).

In summary, skin-colour was reported as an important trigger for negative stigma that hindered the participants from identifying as fully being a part of society. Their criminal behaviour triggered labelling which made them feel excluded. They felt they needed to work harder to reach their goals, or they responded by becoming even more oppositional in their behaviour. These beliefs became a part of their identity, their self-image, which made it hard for them to believe that change was possible. However, when support services give these youths a chance to experience mastery, these negative beliefs can be changed.

## **4.2 Social Support**

There were 39 answers that involved the subject of Social support. 22 of these revolved around Emotional Support (iii), and 17 around Practical Help (iv).

### **4.2.1 Emotional Support (iii)**

The participants were asked to tell about who has tried to help them. When telling me about the professionals from support systems that made a positive impact on the participants' life, it was always a person they felt they had a good relationship with. Many different professionals in different branches of the support system were being mentioned.

- (12) *"I talked to a lady in prison, she was a counsellor. And she was so good and kind, and she understood. But a prison guard does not understand, a policeman does not understand, I feel. You people, who are pedagogues, you might understand. But you must have experienced hard times or have seen what experiences have done to people before you maybe understand fully. She fought for my case, in a way. And she showed*

*that she cared about the things that I found hard. And she understood how I was feeling, and she wished, I saw that, she wished intensely to help me with everything. And she did, you know? She took me seriously and understood the situation I was in.” (M29, 12.12.2018, p. 13).*

School was another place where some have had positive experiences:

- (13) *“My math-teacher was very kind. She was understanding and helped me. She was an older lady. I got a good grade there. She wanted to help me and let me experience the feeling of mastering. I think she understood a bit that I was in a difficult situation. So, I was more interested when she understood me and showed interest and cared. I gave more of myself. So that is the key to a lot; care. Show that you care. If you do people will change 110 %. If you show like, almost like love for someone, that you care about them, that they get the feeling that you do. Then something happens with a person, I am quite sure about that. It happened to me, when people showed that they cared.” (M29, 12.12.2018, p. 17).*

The length of the relation was also reported as important, especially when the relationship continued after their initial professional contact had ended:

- (14) *“And that is why I liked them [22B], because he [Professional at 22B] always asked me, took care of me (...) helped me, no matter what it was. I met him and hadn’t seen him for many years and he, the first thing he asked about was: “what are you going to do?” Right? They care, and that feels good. And you don’t want to be bad either, when a person is very nice with you. So, you get a bad conscience, you think I have to do this, I have to restrain myself.” (M28, 16.01.2019, p. 9).*

A woman that did not report many positive experiences with professionals in support services, told that persistence had been an important factor for her to be able to trust them. Even though she did everything she could to push them away, they kept investing time and effort, until finally she was able to let them in:

- (15) *“Well it was because they were ‘on it’ the whole time. They never gave up, no matter what. Because I really tried to push them away, I did all I could. So then, I don’t know, I don’t really remember what happened, but suddenly it just became like I would [open up] more and more (...) They weren’t going to tell me about how They weren’t like the others. So, I could just be myself with them in the end. I could talk to them in a different way. I felt like they were there to help me instead of control me and decide over me.” (F27, 23.01.2019, pp. 7-8).*

In summary, emotional support is defined by the participants as someone who cares, who respects them, who understands their struggles, who takes them seriously, who is available, who is persistent, who stands by them over time and sometimes even when the professional relationship has ended. Having a positive relationship with their support worker made them

more motivated to change, more stamina to keep going when it was hard and more willing to be open about their thoughts and feelings.

#### 4.2.2 Practical Help (iv)

Most of the participants reported having problems with contact with the government, whom they needed so dearly to get the help they needed with basic human needs, as housing, financial aid, work, education, etc. These problems were weighing heavily on them but contact with them had become an impossible hurdle after so many negative experiences. Getting practical help from someone that can support them, and little by little learns them to do it themselves, was experienced as a vital part of being able to accept help from support services:

- (16) *“Basically, it was Uteseksjonen that helped me with everything you know. They helped me learn about all the bills I had to pay, from the various apartments (...) In my life I have the people on the streets, and I have the government ... Those two do not combine at all, so I used to just be on the streets, and I did not know what is going on with my financial problems, with things I never really cared about. I was more like; ok let me go have fun. But then, I went a bit more, how do I say this, I had to change my way of living, totally. So Uteseksjonen really helped me with it. Fixing my problems at NAV, fixing problems with the police, and they helped me out a lot.”* (M21, 10.12.2018, p. 20).

By relieving some of the burdens these youths had, they could focus on the task instead of the preconditions:

- (17) *“We got help for things that were hard for us. For example, when it came to school, they were there and helped us. They had contact with the school, they helped us with books, facilitated things for us so we could make it work. It was not necessarily buying things to make us happy but it was facilitating for us. Like: okay, you are going to study Building and Construction, we are helping you with clothes then, work clothes. And that felt good. Then you at least don't have to think about those things, so it made it easier.”* (M28, 16.01.2019, p. 10).

Another type of practical help that was being appreciated was teaching about how society functions, how you can improve your chances for success:

- (18) *“What did they do that made you succeed this time? Well, they talked with me. They gave me a lot of counselling about how it is not good what you are doing here and here and there. And I am a foreigner you can say, and they are Norwegian. So, they of course tried to teach me the Norwegian culture; how to do things in a way that people are looking at you like you are a good person, and not a little gangster. You have to follow the rules, like they are here. You are not allowed to do this and that. You can do it, but be careful, it has its consequences. And I got that of course.”* (M27, 11.12.2018, p. 10).

In summary, receiving practical help for the problems these youths experienced in daily life was important to them. Especially communication with public services was mentioned as a problematic whilst they were fully dependent on them for getting their affairs in order. By taking on these tasks together the youth got a chance to learn what they had to do, but also how to do it. Being counselled on how society functions and how your actions come across on others will help increase successful outcomes in the future. Receiving help with practical problems also gave them capacity to focus on other aspects of their lives that needed attention, like schooling, work or personal development.

### 4.3 Empowerment (v)

There were 28 answers that involved the subject of Empowerment. Autonomy was an important subject for these participants:

- (19) “What did it mean to have contact with them? What were you afraid of? *No, it was just, I did not like it when people told me I had to do this and that, and decide over me, and telling me what I was like.*” (F27, 23.01.2019, p. 7).

Most of them reported bad experiences where they did not feel heard, did not feel like they were informed and included in the process. The following experience happened in a meeting with support-services:

- (20) “*There were like 7 people there, all representatives from different groups. And they just spoke and spoke and spoke, for an hour and a half, and then later they turned around to me and they asked me; what do you think about it? I got pissed, I was like: ‘You all are stupid’ You know? ‘You know that I don’t speak Norwegian, but now you finally decided that my life is going left or right and then you ask me if I agree or not?!’*” (M21, 10.12.2018, p. 19).

Another participant had a similar experience in school:

- (21) “When you think about school, was there something you needed help with, but haven’t gotten help with? *Counselling actually ... [they should have] listened a bit more when I was making a big transition to upper secondary school. They should really care about it and take time to really listen to a person. Because it will either be good, or destroy a big part of your life, and that was what it was like for me: ‘Ok, you [should] study Building and Construction!’ [I] felt stupid, do not care, do not care at all, [I] rather go partying and continue like that. So, I think it is important that you encourage people, and try to find out what they want. And even if they do not make it, he should be allowed to choose himself.*” (M28, 16.01.2019, p. 21).

For the female participant an essential condition to be able to feel safe and accept help was

feeling in charge of her own recovery process, with support services supporting her, and not pulling or pushing.

- (22) *"They were not like telling me what I was like. Yes, they were not like the others. So, I could be myself around them after a while, I could talk with them in a different way. I felt they were there to help me instead of controlling me and deciding over me."* (F27, 23.01.2019, p. 8).

One participant was aware of how his own choice influenced the success or failure of interventions support services could offer. He said:

- (23) *"They have everything, yes, all this help to give to a person to change his ways of living. But It is up to the person that is being offered help to agree and accept or not. It is like, if you are not agreeing to accept help, it is like they are not helping you. While it actually is you who do not want to receive. But if you are willing to accept the help you will see what they are helping you with."* (M27, 11.12.2018, p. 20).

In summary, the participants had experienced many situations in contact with support services where they did not feel that they were able to influence what happened to them. They did not have the skills to do something about this situation, and instead responded with adverse and hostile behaviour. Empowering these youths made them trust support services and willing to accept the help they have to offer.

## 4.4 Activities

There were 24 answers that involved the subject of Activities. 10 of these revolved around joyful activities (v), and 14 around everyday activities (vi).

### 4.4.1 Joyful Activities (vi)

Joyful activities had several functions in the contact between support services and these youths. It was a way to build a relationship between youth and professional, and it helped build trust:

- (24) *"We used to just meet them on the streets, that was basically their job. They would come meet us in the streets, have a chat with us, you know. And then [support service worker 1] and then [support service worker 2] became really good people to me and my best friend. So, they got to know us first, so we would go eat lunch with them maybe at some times, and they would like, meet us in the streets and they were like: oh you guys want to joins us paintballing or something like that? They found a way to gain our trust at*



*first.*” (M21, 10.12.2018, p. 21).

Another function of these activities is to give them challenges they can experience mastery over:

(25) *“They took us on weekend trips, to [place], alcohol free. We were cross country skiing. I never expected in my wildest imaginations that I would ski cross-country in Trollheimen for three days. Right? And ski tens of kilometres per day. But we did that with them, because we did not want to disappoint [professionals in 22B] either(...) They said we were not allowed to drink and smoke hashish and stuff like that when we were on trips with Salem [22B], because it is alcohol free, right? And we were on golf-trips and things like that. I remember those trips, you know, because they meant so much.”* (M29, 12.12.2018, p. 15).

And giving them an alternative, healthy way of spending your free time:

(26) *“They taught me a lot, a lot of games, they taught me cross-country skiing (...) That was fun. We went on a lot of trips. They took us to the mountains, they took us on cabin-trips, all of that to change our way of thinking. And then we almost stopped with everything we did before. We stopped to come and hang around here instead (...) We were using our time here, without doing anything wrong. But we did something sensible instead. We started to change our way of living.”* (M27, 11.12.2018, p. 10).

In summary, participating in joyful activities had several positive effects on these youths. Firstly, it helped build relationships between service workers and youth. Secondly it gave the youths an opportunity to experience mastery. It also gave them a chance to spend their time on healthy activities, which reduced the time spent on criminal activities.

#### **4.4.2 Everyday Activities (vii)**

Some of these youths had almost lost their faith in themselves being able to function like an average member of society. Providing a safe situation where these youths can build up their working-skills and slowly adjust to a normal working life was important to them:

(27)[About 22b] *“And I worked here voluntarily [...] Arbeidsgruppe [work-group] it is called. Because I started to think, okay, now it is about time to change my everyday life. Standing up early in the morning, not being awake all night. So, then I started to come here and meet up at nine o’clock every day. I received a lot of help here. Thanks to them I am like this today actually, that I quitted all criminal activities.”* (M27, 11.12.2018, p. 10).

By participating in work training, the participants could resume regular life again, they had an alternative way of spending their day which helped them to stay away from narcotics for example:

- (28) *“So that’s when I came here and I got just like an internship here and I started keeping myself busy on a daily basis and that has helped quite a lot (...) It is more like; if you keep yourself busy you don’t actually have time to go do drugs, and then, by time and time you actually do forget that you supposed to be doing drugs. And things change, and then you have places to be, stuff to do, you have to be at job, after job you have to go to work, so you do not really have time to go do the drugs. I tell you this, at the time you say; ok I want to have the time to go do drugs, then you stop going to work and you start doing this. Because, if I were to do amphetamine yesterday, I would be awake until now. So that means today I’m not going to work, and that means tomorrow I will not go to work, and then on Wednesday I decide to go to work, but waking up would be a problem because then I would wake up, and the next minute I was like; oh no you have to go to work. I’m like; hell no. That is how it changes. It is all about what you do, how you do it, and always be occupied to not do drugs, trust me”* (M21, 10.12.2018, pp. 7–8).

Also getting to experience normal activities that most people experience was important to the participants, it made the participant feel equal to other people:

- (29) *“We did not have any money and things like that, but that did not matter at all for them. They helped us, took us out, we got to go to a restaurant with them. Got to experience the normal things. And it felt good that we could do those things. And they helped us with that, they took us on activities and things like that. So, we felt that we were important as well. Because I don’t come from a family with a lot of money, so those things helped us.”* (M28, 16.01.2019, p. 9).

These meetings and activities contributed to the feeling of having a ‘normal’ life, which is important for these participants:

- (30) *“When would you contact them?... For lots of different reasons actually. For example, when they would drive me to a meeting, or if we would just meet for dinner, or do something. Or if I just wanted to talk. So, I have really developed warm feelings for them ... So that is the only thing I am really pleased with in this support system.”* (F27, 23.01.2019, p. 9).

In summary, getting a chance to experience everyday activities like any other person gave these youths a chance to be more like a regular member of society and feel less like a deviant. It shows them what they are working for and that their goals are achievable. Work training is

perceived as a good transition, because there is room to learn by failing and trying again; they receive understanding for their challenges. It helped them adjust to a “normal” daily rhythm and routine.

#### 4.5 Individual Turning Points (viii)

In the interview the participants were asked about situations/events that made a big change in their lives, that changed the direction in which they were going. These are called turning points. The 17-year-old participant did not mention any turning point, but the older participants had all experienced turning points. The nature of these turning points were very different for each individual. Here you will read a short compilation of the turning points each of the participants described: A 21-year-old participant was staying at a friends' house alone, while they were on vacation:

- (31) *“I was in the house all alone with like two cats and a dog and I started rethinking things. And I was - I just thought I was not going anywhere. [...] I had fucked up a lot of shit here, my relationships with my girlfriend and my friends, I just had to stop. [...] It used to be very cool, that was like the main point of it; to be very, very, cool. And then I came to see, the people I was being cool at are not going anywhere. [...] It has had its adrenaline, it was fun but, at that time you are young. And I feel sorry for people that do not realize that because you know, it is easy, you just start with a friend, you know, and it becomes your life and then you just get stuck inside there [...] And I started fixing shit slowly, like I went and go fix my problems with Nav because Nav was not going to help me anymore[...] So that is when I came here and I got an internship here and I started keeping myself busy on a daily basis and that has helped quite a lot [...] For me it is more like; I just have to stop. Like I have been smoking for like 15 years now, and I have been doing drugs for about 12 to 13 years. And it became very boring and exhausting, all this sniffing and the hangovers, and it is very expensive. Unless you go stealing, or you get the jackpot, you are in a lot of trouble [...] So even though you make less money with a regular job, if you are without drugs you will maybe have a better and more stable life then all the money from the dealing whist also using drugs? It would not be stable; it would always be an up and down thing. And in this case, I have always told myself I want to be there for my kids. And if you do drugs, you are never going to be there for your kids, ever. Either you are going to end up in jail for eight to seven years. That is, your baby has become seven years old. And that is mostly my life when I was a kid. So, that is really something that I don't want, and that pushed me away from the drugs.”* (M21, 10.12.2018, pp. 5-8 & 23).

This participant felt that he had outgrown the lifestyle he had for the last decade. He started very early with drugs to be able to juggle different simultaneous jobs in his country of origin that he needed to be able to make enough money to take care of his younger siblings. Back then it was what he felt he needed to do to survive, but in the present day, where he lives in Norway,

his circumstances are totally different. He feels that it is time to change. He wants a stable life, he wants to feel safe, he is thinking about having a family and wants to work to keep busy and stay away from the temptations of narcotics.

A 27-year-old participant had a turning point when he was placed in an institution and thereafter foster care by child protective services:

- (32) “And then you were placed in an institution? *Institution, yes. How long have you been there? Well I was there for three months, and I was not so, how can I say this, so criminal that I had to be in an institution ... or rude ... Because there are a lot of youths that are rude to their parents, so they get placed in an institution like that. But I was not like that. No, I actually was a calm type. So, they noticed that, that it is just your gang, and the environment you are in that makes that you did those things. But you are not like that. So, they took me away from the institution after three months and put me in foster care. I lived there for a year. [...] So you didn't have contact with your friends here? No, no, no... [...] Just with family. [...] And then I moved back to my mother, after being there. How was that? Well I was different, much calmer. And I didn't go out as much as I did before. Did you get into contact with your old ...[friends] With my group of friends? Yes, yes, I still had contact with them. But I cut down on the activities we did. It got less of course. Like in a way that I would not be taken again and sent away of course. [...] Because we knew the consequences, what can happen if you continue with it and get caught again. It was like, no, we cannot do this no more. But we did it a little bit, but not so much, and we did not get caught of course [...]. And then we got older and started to change things. [...] We started to set boundaries yes, because I learned a lesson from being in the institution and foster care for a year.*

How did you make it? To get to where you are now, while others could not make it? What is the difference? [...] *Well, firstly; the help I got. The help you got? At first when I started, I did not want to be helped, but after a while I just started to accept it, and that has made me able to do well today. And secondly; I myself was willing to change the way I do things... And third; there has to be someone to push you: Come on! Stop with all that! Who has been there for you? Well, 22b has been there, my mother and all, and more. Go to school, get a job! They pushed me. My girlfriend was like; 'you and your things, can't you stop with that?' And I got a lot in my head, and, ah, people want me to start doing things differently. OK, I have no choice. And then I see myself that people are doing well when they do it like that, so I said I want to have it like that. I cannot just do like this, because that is just bad, I just get a bad reputation. I have to start changing.*” (M27, 11.12.2018, pp. 5–7, 20 & 22).

This participant was separated from his milieu, and it became clear how his group of friends affected his behaviour. Being away for over a year did not break the bonds with him and his friends completely, but it did give him enough distance from them to be able to make better decisions after moving back home. He also mentions how support from 22b and his girlfriend pushed him to strive for a better future. He becomes more aware of other people who are doing well, and they become an example for him.

A 29-year-old participant experienced a series of events that became a turning point:

- (33) *"When did it change? Well, I was about 24 years old [...] when I stopped sniffing in weekends and that kind of things. And I was about 26 [...] when I had my last criminal incident that I got a [amount of time] prison penalty for. I got [amount of time] in prison and had to pay criminal injury compensation. So that was the last time I did anything, when I was 26. And what made it the last time you did anything? Because I, from when I was 18 until I was 26, build up a lot of debt. Lots of fines and unpaid bills [...] because I in a way had not learned how these things actually work. [...] So, I kind of went down a bad path, and I did not have anyone that helped me with that, because I was alone in [city]. [...] So, it became [amount of debt], which is quite a lot of money. But one year ago, my mother took over this debt and paid it off. So now I am paying her a certain amount each month. [...] and I have to pay criminal injury compensation, so that is still hanging over me, old things. But there is a bright future now. How did, you are telling me about your debt and that you are paying it off now, how did it affect you so this last time you were convicted, actually was the last time? It is because I might have realized that... I had like a constant burden on my shoulders with the debt, and I had all this pending case, [...] I was out of jail for about one and a half year before it came [the trial] and then I had to go in again. So, I kind of had to put my life on hold, for about one and a half year. And that feeling, it was so painful and horrible. And I got a girlfriend as well, so I was like. I was struggling, I had debt, and that was hard, you know. And that made me mad, but then my mother took over my debt, and I was debt free, and that was so ... I just felt at once...and I had like a stomach ulcer, but when my debt was gone, and I was done with my sentences, I had nothing ... So, I was like a whole new person, I was smiling, it showed, I went with my head high, because there wasn't a debt and prison sentences pulling me down. And that felt good. [...] And I got a partner, a partner that was very determined that we were going to have a good life together. And then things just took off [...] I had payment plans and was not ruined by them, and I started to feel a sense of achievement for paying my bills. [...] And I got a son as well, and I do not want to miss a thing of that, I do not want to be away from them. [...] So, I found a meaning in life that was worth keeping it all together for."* (M29, 12.12.2018, pp. 11–12).

Having built up a debt and waiting for a pending prison sentence was weighing heavy on this participants shoulders. When he met his girlfriend, he wanted to build a life with her and the disparity between his current life and the life he wanted became even bigger. When he finally got to finish his sentence and got help with his debt, he felt relieved and empowered. The birth of his son became an extra reason not to divert back to his previous lifestyle.

A 28-year-old participant tells me about the dissonance he felt between his actions and his true self and how time in prison made him reflect on that:

- (34) *"Back in the period when I was getting to know them, the people that were well known in the criminal circles in Norway, it felt like fun. We went to the clubs that we wanted to go to, lots of money, ladies, etc. But I have to admit that during this whole period, from when I was young, I always had a bad feeling about it as well, but I did not really let that bother me. So, what changed me was that I had to go to jail for the first time, I*

*got three years. And when I went in there I was without narcotics, without people, without shit for a long time. So, I had a lot of time to think, and then I started thinking about that feeling that I had inside me, so that is when I found out that 'this here' has never been ME. And I did not want to try anymore, it was not the life for me, it has never been. So, when I came out, I slowly tried... yes, tried, there were a lot... a lot of battles I had to fight when I got out. People were calling me to ask me out, offering me narcotics and stuff like that, but I actually managed to stay away from all that. [...] I started to pray a little bit when I was in jail, so I got a very bad conscience when I drank and stuff like that. And I had a girl, before I went to jail. [...] it was her some made it hard for me to quit entirely. [...] was she in the same milieu? No, but it was because of her I felt I had high status, you know? [...] But when she disappeared from my life it got better. Even though it was hard, but it became good. Yes, and you said you started to pray a little bit. Did you do that alone or did you get more active in the [religious building]? No, I grew up in a [religion] family, but I have not been taught anything of it. When I was in jail for the first time, I asked if I could read a... borrow a [religious book]. I did not really care about it at that time either, but I remember, when I got out of prison and was feeling really bad one day – it was when I broke up with her – I went home and looked things up, and tried to read. And then I began to pray, and it was then I was struggling with these two lives, because I did not know which one to choose. Because every time I went out to drink, I did not like it. I have actually never liked alcohol, I have never liked narcotics, so that helped me. So finally, it became less and less, until I quit everything.” (M28, 16.01.2019, pp. 6-7).*

When this participant got a three-year prison sentence, he had a lot of time to reflect and think about the internal conflict he experienced about how his behaviour did not match his perception of who he is; his true self. This triggered a process of adjusting his behaviour and choosing to leave his criminal life behind him. It was not an easy process to leave his old milieu behind him, but he found strength and comfort in religion.

A 27-year-old participant reported having experienced one major turning point in her life that forced her to change her life completely:

(35) *” It is not so long ago that I became sober, you know, because I did not find out... I did not know I was pregnant, I did not. So, when I found out ... I ended up at [a rehabilitation centre]. So, I had been using until then, so it is just a little under 2 years that I have been sober. So, it is still quite new. It is because I got a son [that I ended up where I am now], if not for that, I would not have managed to ... I would still have been using [narcotics].*

*I had been locking out all feelings [...] now I do not do that anymore, or at least I try to be aware of it. That is something I had to work with when I got the child. I could not, I did not have a choice [But to stop using narcotics]. If I did not [stop], I was risking losing my child. So in a way I have been forced to start working on myself [...] They [The staff at the rehabilitation centre] saw that there was nothing to get from me, they could not read me, so they did not know what I was like, they did not know anything and I did not want to say anything, or talk to them about anything. And then it is impossible [for them to help] ... then I understood that they were thinking; she cannot be alone with*

*a child, if we don't know what she is like, so... I do not know [how they helped me]. I cannot say I got a lot of help when I just got there, because then it got so bad that I was being threatened with: 'if I do not change after this weekend another family will come and take my child'. So, I got like two days in the end. [...] it was only then that I took it seriously, that I had to do something. But in the start it was just that I was playing along, that I was not honest and talking about my feelings and myself, I just sat there and talked and went along with it, so they would think that I [had] started to [change]... But in the end, I actually did it, and I just, became a habit... [...] I feel like I still do not know what they have helped me with, but I am still... I am glad for getting to live there, because now I have come to where I am now at least, for I would not have managed that without them, I would not."* (F 27, 23.01.2019, pp. 5, 10-11).

The discovery that she was pregnant and the birth of her child that followed soon after, forced this participant to make sudden, major changes in her life. Firstly, it forced her to become sober, and after the child was born, she had to change her behaviour to be allowed to take care of her child. One of the changes she had to make was opening up about her thoughts and feeling. Even though she was not motivated to open up, she was motivated to keep her child and pretended to give the support services' workers what they wanted. However, while faking this behaviour, the habit of pretending to talk about feelings made her actually starting to open up and thereby developing her competence in regulating her emotions.

In summary, the reasons why these youths changed their lives are very diverse, as are the reasons why and how they were able to benefit from formal support services. There are, however, patterns in the unique constellation of reasons that compelled each individual to change, and for each participant these factors weighed differently. Service organisations might benefit from knowledge of how the participants in this study weighed the external factors differently, which is a topic that will be addressed in the discussion.

## 5. Discussion

“It could be wise for you to start searching for me, before I actually disappear” is a short poem written by the Norwegian poet Trygve Skaug (2017). This poem is descriptive of the youths in this study that had many negative experiences with support services where they did not feel seen, heard and/or respected, and therefore disappeared from the support workers “grasp” as soon as they could. Searching for these youths means listening to their perspective, to be able to give them better help. Therefore, this study focuses on the following research question: *How do six youths in Trøndelag, Norway, who have been involved in repeated crimes, perceive the help they receive from support services?*

To ‘find’ and understand these youths, it is important to listen to their stories. Throughout these youth’s narratives we can identify several possible indications of risk factors for the development of behavioural problems and anti-social behaviour (Kvelling, 2016; Kvelling & Wendelborg, 2009). Some examples of possible indications of risk factors are a difficult temperament and/or attachment problems (quote: 15), high exposure to narcotics (quote: 5, 11, 28, 31, 33, 34, 35) and high criminality in the milieu (quote: 10, 32, 34). Many more can be found in the remainder of data. Understanding what risk factors these children have been exposed to helps understand in which areas the youths’ development might have been affected and where support is needed.

In the youths’ narratives reported that they feel they were being labelled negatively, e.g. problem children or criminals. They report feeling condemned by several workers from support services, which made them want to avoid these workers and thereby the help they had to offer. The participants tell about how they were labelled as a problem child or a criminal by school counsellors and the police (quotes: 1, 2, 3 & 4). Activation of a negative stereotype can inhibit performance on a subsequent, related task (Ambady et al., 2004), which in this case means that it negatively influences their performance as positive members of society, and make them more likely to engage in criminal behaviour. The negative self-efficacy beliefs that these support service workers activate by labelling, work in the opposite direction of the goals support services are aiming for. These processes also work in the opposite direction; positive labelling leads to increased motivation and activation (quote: 6). Thus, for a good recovery process, it is important to be met with respect and dignity (Kvelling, 2016).

When meeting recurrent labelling, stigmas can become a part of one’s identity. One participant expresses his thoughts; “I can’t be normal, I’m not normal” (quote: 11). This



negative self-efficacy affected his self-agency; the recurrent stigmatization he encountered made him believe he had no power to produce results, which for a long time made him resort to apathy about changing his situation and self-devaluation (Bandura, 1997). The behaviour the participant showed instead was confirming this negative self-image. Previous findings that negative labelling makes one defensive (Goffman, 1963) are supported by the findings in this study (quote: 9), and puts youths at a greater risk for movement into a deviant group (Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006). The statement from the participant that chose to ignore advice from his family to change milieu (quote: 10) is another example of this. Findings from Kvello (2016), who states that reduced contact with adverse social network is important for the recovery process, indicate that the advice, though hard, actually is a good advice.

From the perspective of positive youth development we can see that support services failed to help these youths with establishing and recognising developmental assets under categories such as Support from their environment and Positive Identities (Benson et al., 1999). In contrary, the negative labelling by some support service workers (quotes: 1, 2, 3, & 4) probably inhibited positive development. It would be interesting to examine labelling by support service workers more closely, to find out how their (unconscious) labelling affects the outcome of their support work and how this could be improved.

Benson and colleagues (2007) state that a positive developmental trajectory is enabled when youth are embedded in relationships, contexts, and ecologies that nurture their development. Support is one of the dynamically interconnected ‘building blocks’ that can lead to positive youth development (Benson et al., 1999). Emotional support is defined by the participants of this study as someone who cares, who respects them, who understands their struggles, who takes them seriously, who is available, who is persistent, who stands by them over time and even when the professional relationship has ended (quotes: 12, 13, 14 & 15). This matches several aspects of the feature ‘Supportive relationships’ (cf. 18 ), from the Features of Positive Developmental Settings (Institute of Medicine, 2002) which stimulate positive youth development. They state that a supportive relationship consists of warmth, closeness, connectedness, good communication, caring, support, guidance, secure attachment, and responsiveness. Investing time beyond the planned meetings, or after their professional contact officially ended (Topor et al., 2011), is one way of establishing this reciprocal relationship with emotional support (quote: 14).

Practical support can give these youths an opportunity for skill building and concordance, coordination and synergy among family, school and community (Institute of

Medicine, 2002). Availability, interest and engagement from the helper (quotes: 16, 17, & 18) contribute to collaborative relationship between the support services and youths, which in turn contributed to positive development (Borg & Kristiansen, 2004). It helped these youths overcome the obstacles on their path, as for example assistance with contact with the government or school (quotes: 16 & 17) or helping to understand about how society functions (quote: 18).

These findings show that social support, which is the feeling that someone takes care of you, appreciates you, and that you are part of a mutually supportive social network, is an essential element in support services' work. Strong social support is linked to good physical and mental health (Peterson et al., 2010). Through day-to-day shared activities and social interactions, these youths can regulate their feelings, actions and thoughts (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). The stories of the participants provide clear examples of how constructs within context and person interact (Benson et al., 2007). The work-training and social activities that some support services like 22B and Uteseksjonen offer to these youths are a good example of situations where social support takes place.

The participants had experienced many situations with support services where they did not feel that they were able to influence what happened to them (quotes: 19, 20, & 21). This provokes adverse and hostile behaviour. We also see the positive effect when a participant described a situation where did not feel decided over, nor felt controlled, which made it possible for her to accept help (quote: 22). The efficacy beliefs these youths have, greatly influences their behaviour in either a positive or a negative manner. If they believe they have no power to produce results, they will not attempt to make things happen and resort to apathy or self-devaluation (Bandura, 1997). These youths express a wish for empowerment, for gaining mastery over their affairs (Rappaport, 1987; Boomkens et al., 2019). Becker and colleagues (2002) state that gaining influence and control is the action dimension of empowerment. To promote positive youth development, e.g., reduction of criminal behaviour and promotion of thriving, support services must help youths increase self-agency and become major actors in their own development (Benson et al., 2007). This in turn will give these youths self-regulatory capabilities that enable them to educate themselves (Bandura, 1997) so the development continues as well after support services help ends. One participant expressed how he was aware of his own choice in accepting the support (quote: 23). However, the responsibility for establishing a collaborative relationship lies with the professional support worker, who has the task of facilitating situations where the youths can accept the help they offer.

The participants told about how regular joyful activities that sustained over time made them change their way of living; they were spending their time on these activities instead of criminality (quote: 26). Developmental contexts (i.e., places, settings, ecologies, and relationships with the potential to generate supports, opportunities, and resources) are very important for positive youth development (Benson et al., 2007). Organizing joyful activities (quotes: 24, 25, & 26), can give youths an arena where they can experience positive interaction between peers. This positive interaction can inhibit high-risk behaviour, promote thriving and advance developmental strengths (Benson et al., 2007). The three factors; 'quality, quantity and sustainability' (Benson et al., 2007) are important for enhancing joyful activities that provide positive relationships. Because what good will activities do if they are of low quality, or cannot be sustained over time which makes that youth cannot continue their positive developmental process? Findings support that the positive effect of joyful activities not only counts for the relationships between peers, but also for the relationship between the worker and the youth; through organising and participating in these joyful activities they strengthened their bond and built trust (quote: 24). Within these activities the support service workers have to focus on creating physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering and opportunity for skill building (Institute of Medicine, 2002). The youths in this study were able to accept boundaries and adjust to these settings because of the reward of participating (quote: 25). The norms create physical and psychological safety which makes safe peer group interaction possible and decreases unsafe or confrontational peer interactions (Institute of Medicine, 2002).

Getting to experience everyday activities like any other person gave these youths a chance to be more like a regular member of society and feel less like a deviant. Everyday activities (quotes: 29 & 30) can be an important developmental setting that give an opportunity to belong by meaningful inclusion, social inclusion, social engagement and integration (Institute of Medicine, 2002). Also, positive development is promoted when youth participate in multiple, nutrient- rich relationships, contexts, and ecologies (Benson et al., 2007). Work training (quotes: 27 & 28) is one of these contexts that also helps support empowerment and strengthen youth's self-efficacy. Through practices that focus on improvement rather than on current performance levels they gain mastery over their lives. Examples of these practices are enabling, responsibility granting, and meaningful challenges. It is a setting that makes skill

building possible, that will help these youths learn to cooperate with and coordinate family, school and community, and hereby create harmony.

The final theme in this study focuses on individual turning points. Topor and colleagues (2011, p. 97) states that support system users “are not just a collection of symptoms, failings and shortcomings; they are individuals who have acquired a wealth of experience and knowledge about their condition and what could help to improve it or make it worse”. All the individual stories about turning points (quotes: 31–35) show how each had a different combination of internal and external factors such as events, interventions, choices, feelings and thoughts, that lead to positive development. It also showed how each of the participants in this study weighed the external factors differently. To support these youths in the best way possible, it is of the utmost importance to collaborate in finding the best approach and interventions.

The findings in this study are consistent with, and therefore strengthen, much of the educational, clinical, and youth development literature. The approach of restorative justice (Kvelling & Wendelborg, 2009) and positive youth development (Benson et al., 2007) appears to be a good fit for practicing what we learned from the findings in this study. More investigation is necessary to understand the complexities of youth–support worker relationships and other process dynamics in support services and their association with outcomes for youth. Results presented here, however, support the idea that including youth’s perspective on the help they receive from support services can help increase both quality and effectiveness of interventions and promote better developmental outcomes.

## **6. Strengths and limitations of this study**

This project has limitations that can affect the validity of this study. One of the limitations was that the participants in this research project were selected by a gatekeeper from each one of the three organisations. As researcher I had no control over their selection process other than giving them the criteria for inclusion and expressing my wishes for a diversity in clients in age, sex and background. Several of the participants were not active users of their services anymore, so they were young adults these organizations still kept in touch with after the official professional relationship had ended. One could argue that this group might differ from their other clients. Maybe their approach worked better on this group, and they were more positive over their approach? Especially in this group where youths can evade support services when conflicts arise, one risks not getting the service users that are unsatisfied with the help they received from any of these organisations. Since the sample is very small, these risks are even higher. It is therefore not possible to generalize findings in this study. Generalizability is not an expected attribute or endpoint of qualitative research; rather, the qualitative design is suitable for studying a specific issue/phenomenon in depth in a certain population/group and particular context. However, the findings are recognisable compared to findings in similar studies, which make them trustworthy and transmissible.

The interviewing-skills of the interviewer present a limitation that must be mentioned. Helping the participants to express their inner thoughts and feelings is a difficult task. One challenge in the interviewing-process was that the participants had lots of negative experiences which they described with focus on what the support service workers should *not* do. When asked to describe what they should have done instead, they would often answer with: “Not that!” and struggled with defining the wanted behaviour in a positive manner. This leaves the job of finding alternative approaches to the researcher, and even though there are many clues on what not to do, there is a risk that the positive opposite action a researcher chooses is not approved by the participant because of reasons that hadn’t come up in the interview. A follow up interview where the findings were presented would give the participants a chance to reflect on these alternative approaches and express their views on them. This would have strengthened the findings. However, the participants in this study opened up about their experiences, thoughts and feelings, and provided a lot of data. Especially for this target group this can be challenging since they are a group that often keeps their more private thoughts and feeling to themselves. The amount of data they provided is a strength of this study.

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## **Attachments**

- I. Interview guide
- II. Consent form

## I. Intervjuguide

Jeg vil høre med deg hvilken hjelp du har fått eller ikke fått. Jeg vil også vite hva du synes om den. I dette intervjuet snakker jeg om hjelpeapparatet. Med hjelpeapparatet mener jeg alle personer og organisasjoner som har som mål å hjelpe deg, det kan for eksempel være de som jobber i konfliktrådet og barnevernet, men også helsesøster, politi, spesialpedagogene og rådgivere på skole etc. Hvis du tviler på om noen er en del av hjelpeapparatet så må du bare fortelle om det, så finner vi ut av det sammen.

Generelt:

- Kjønn M/K
- Alder: ....

Intro

- Kan du fortelle om hvordan din hverdag ser ut nå?
- Kan du fortelle om den første gangen du gjorde noe som var ulovlig?
- Hvor gammel var du/hvor mange år siden var det?
- Hva var grunnen til at du gjorde det du gjorde? Hva fikk du ut av det?
- Hvem visste om det?
- Hva skjedde etter det?
- Kan du fortelle meg om hvordan veien hit har gått for deg? Hvordan havnet du her?
- Hva synes du har påvirket deg i dine valg i livet som ledet deg til at du endte opp til hvor du er i dag? (årsaken)
- Var det noen viktige hendelser som førte til forandringer i livet ditt? Hvordan?

Hjelpesystemet

Generelt:

- Hvem har hjulpet deg eller prøvd å hjelpe deg?
- Hva ble gjort?
- Hva synes du om denne hjelpen?

Individ:

- Hvordan vil noen som kjenner deg godt beskrive deg?

- Kjenner du deg igjen i det? Hvordan ville du beskrive deg selv?
- Har du noen ganger fått hjelp med noe du strevde med?
- Hvis ja, hvilken hjelp var det?
- Hvis ja, hvor fornøyd eller misfornøyd er du med den hjelpen?
- Var det noe du ikke fikk hjelp med, men som du burde ha fått?

#### Kjernefamilien:

Innledning: Jeg vil stille deg noen spørsmål som angår deg som del av familien din. Jeg vil gjerne at du svarer på disse spørsmålene uten å gå inn på detaljer av enkeltpersoner. Jeg er nemlig interessert i deg, i hvordan du har blitt påvirket.

- Når du tenker på hjemmet, hvordan har familien din påvirket deg?
- Har dere som familie fått hjelp fra hjelpeapparatet? J/N
- Har det hjulpet deg? Forandret det noe for deg? Hvordan?
- Hvordan snakker dere hjemme om hjelpeapparatet? Hva synes dere om det?
- Hva tror du familien din synes om at du har gjort noe som er ulovlig?
- Hva skulle du ønske at dere som familie hadde fått hjelp med, og hvordan ville det ha hjulpet deg?

#### Skole:

- Hvordan har det vært for deg på skolen?
- Hvordan opplevde du kontakten med lærere og andre personer i skolen?
- Hadde du utfordringer (problemer/vansker) på skolen?
- Hvilken hjelp har du fått på skole?
- Hvor langt har du nå kommet i din utdanning?
- Var det noe hjelp du behøvde på skolen, men ikke fikk?
- Hva kunne skole ha gjort bedre, og hvordan?

#### Venner/nærmiljø:

Innledning: Også her gjelder at jeg vil stille deg noen spørsmål som angår deg som del av din vennegruppe. Jeg vil gjerne at du svarer på disse spørsmålene uten å gå inn på detaljer av enkeltpersoner. Jeg er interessert i deg, i hvordan du har blitt påvirket.

- Hva gjør du på fritiden?
- Uten å gå inn på enkeltpersoner, kan du fortelle meg litt om din vennegruppe?
- Hvor lenge har denne gruppen hengt sammen?
- Hva tror du at de du henger med synes om at du har vært i kontakt med politi og/eller hjelpeapparatet?
- Hva tror du at de du henger med synes om bruk av rusmidler og/eller kriminalitet?
- Hvordan vil familien din beskrive din vennegruppe ifølge deg?
- Hvordan føler du at hjelpeapparatet støtter deg og dine venner?
- Hva kan de gjøre bedre?

#### Framtid

- Hvor vil du være om 10 år? Hvordan vil du at livet ditt ser ut da?
- Hvordan skal du nå det målet?
- Kan noen støtte deg med det?
- Hvilke personer kan støtte deg – og hva er det som gjør at de blir gode for deg?
- Hvilken råd ville du nå gi til deg selv hvis du møtte deg selv som .....(\*)-åring?

\* fyll inn alder av første lovbrudd

## **II. A. Norsk: Forespørsel om deltakelse i forskningsprosjekt**

Mitt navn er Jildau Sierksma og jeg studerer master i spesialpedagogikk på NTNU. Jeg jobber med en masteroppgave som handler om ungdom sine tanker og meninger om hjelp de har fått (fra for eksempel politi eller barnevernet). Jeg er interessert i ungdommer som har begått lovbrudd. Dette fordi det har blitt skrevet mye om disse ungdommene, men det har blitt snakket lite med dem. Det finnes lite forskning hvor ungdommene selv får fortelle om hva de mener.

### **Hvorfor?**

I denne studien vil jeg la flere ungdommer fortelle om sine erfaringer med hjelp de har fått, sånn at de som jobber med ungdom kan få bedre innsikt i hvordan de kan hjelpe best mulig.

### **Hva innebærer det?**

Når du deltar i studien, skal vi møtes et sted hvor jeg skal intervju deg. Jeg stiller deg noen spørsmål og du får fortelle din historie. Intervjuet varer i ca. 45 minutter.

Jeg vil bruke båndopptaker for å ta opp intervjuet, sånn at jeg kan skrive det ned etterpå. Hvis du vil, kan du få lese gjennom det jeg har skrevet når jeg har skrevet ned alt. Ingen andre enn meg og min veileder vil ha tilgang til opptaket, og opptaket vil bli slettet når prosjektet er ferdig. Opplysninger du gir vil bli anonymisert. Dette betyr at jeg sørger for at ingen vet hvem har deltatt i prosjektet når de leser rapporten min. Så f.eks. navn på personer og steder som gjør at andre kan kjenne igjen deg blir tatt vekk.

### **Hva skjer med informasjonen om deg?**

Kun jeg og min veileder vil ha tilgang til informasjonen du har gitt som vi kan identifisere deg med. Når prosjektet er ferdig, vil all denne informasjonen bli slettet. Prosjektet skal etter planen avsluttes 01.05.2019

### **Frivillig deltakelse**

Det er frivillig å delta i studien, og du kan når som helst trekke ditt samtykke uten å oppgi noen grunn. Det vil ikke ha konsekvenser for deg hvis du velger å avslutte din deltagelse. Hvis du trekker deg, vil alt du har fortalt meg bli slettet.

Dersom du ønsker å delta eller har spørsmål til studien, ta kontakt med Jildau Sierksma, tel. [REDACTED], jildaus@ntnu.no eller min veileder Øyvind Kvello, tel. [REDACTED] oyvind.kvello@ntnu.no

Studien er meldt til Personvernombudet for forskning, NSD - Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS.

### **Samtykke til deltakelse i studien**

Jeg har mottatt informasjon om studien, er 16 år eller eldre, og er villig til å delta

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(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

## **B. English: Request for joining in research project**

My name is Jildau Sierksma and I am doing my masters in spesialpedagogikk at NTNU. I am working on a research project about youths' thoughts and opinions about the help they have received (from the police or childcare for example). I am interested in the opinion of youth that have carried out criminal acts, because there has been written a lot about them, but not many have asked them what they think and feel. There is not a lot of research in which the youth themselves get to give their opinions

### **Why?**

In this study I want to let youth tell about their experience with the help they have received, so the people that work with youth can learn about how they can help in the best way possible.

### **What happens?**

When you join this research project we are going to meet somewhere, and I will interview you. I am going to ask you some questions and you can tell me your story. The interview will take about 45 minutes. I will use a sound recorder to record the interview, so that I can write it all down afterwards. If you want to, you can read what I have written down when I have finished. No one other than me and my mentor will have access to the recordings and they will be deleted as soon as the project has finished. All the information you give me will be made anonymous. That means that no one will know who has participated in this project when they read my final report. Names of places and people that might make it possible to identify you will be removed.

### **What happens with your information?**

Only me and my mentor can have access to the information you give that identify you. When the project is finished all this information will be deleted. The project will be finished in 01.05.2019

### **Voluntary participation**

It is voluntary to join this study and you can decide to quit at any time without telling me the reason why. It won't have any consequences for you if you decide to quit. If you quit, I will delete all your information right away. If you want to join the study or if you have any questions you can contact me, Jildau Sierksma, tel. [REDACTED], jildaus@ntnu.no or my mentor; Øyvind Kvello, tel. [REDACTED] oyvind.kvello@ntnu.no

The study is registered at Personvernombudet for forskning, NSD - Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS.

### **Consent to joining the study**

I have received information about the study, am 16 years or older and give my consent to join this study.

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(signed by participant, date)



