

**Choose
life**



T2.1. Gathering Community Insights: Transnational Report



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T2.1. Gathering Community Insights – Transnational Report

CHOOSE LIFE

Implementing a drug-(ab)use prevention program & shaping youth policies with disadvantaged young people for psychosocial well-being promotion

T2.1. Gathering Community Insights: Transnational Report

Lead Beneficiary	RightChallenge
Deliverable Version	V0.1
Due Date	30/04/2025
Delivery Date	20/06/2025
Dissemination Level	PU (Public)



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Project Information

Project Acronym	CHOOSE LIFE
Project Name	CHOOSE LIFE Implementing a drug-(ab)use prevention program & shaping youth policies with disadvantaged young people for psychosocial well-being promotion
Call	ERASMUS-YOUTH-2024-YOUTH-TOG
Reference	101187341
Type	ERASMUS-LS
Project Starting Date	01/11/2025
Project Duration	31/10/2026
Coordinator	CESIE
Project Acronym	Choose-Life

Deliverable Information

Activity	T2.1: Gathering Community Insights
Deliverable Name	T2.1. Gathering Community Insights – Transnational Report
Due Date	30/04/2025
Delivery Date	20/06/2025
Type	R – Document, report
Dissemination Level	PU (Public)



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Introduction

The “Gathering Community Insights” Transnational Report outlines the data collection process carried out at the beginning of the Choose Life project, between February and April 2025. This process aimed to guide the creation of WP2 outputs, ensuring they are grounded in the realities of young people’s lives and incorporate evidence-based prevention strategies rooted in the BPSSM model.

The goal of this data collection effort was to gather both qualitative and quantitative insights to inform the development of youth psychosocial support initiatives, focusing on drug-use prevention and health promotion. Data was collected through surveys and expert consultations, including focus groups and individual interviews conducted in Portugal, Italy, Cyprus, Greece, Serbia, and Poland.

Partner: RightChallenge (coord.) (Portugal), CESIE/LIBERA (Italy), ZHP (Poland), KMOP (Greece), CARDET (Chipre), WEBIN (Serbia)

Data Collection Period: February-April 2025

	Surveys	Focus groups	Individual interviews
Portugal	55	7	—
Italy	69	6	—
Greece	69	2	3
Cyprus	51	5	—
Serbia	51	—	5
Poland	62	—	11
Total	357	20	19



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1. Survey Data Collection (T2.1.1)

Objective of Data Collection: The survey aimed to analyse the perspectives of young people (aged 13-21) on the risks of drug use, their awareness of these risks, and their experiences with drug use. The data also sought to understand factors influencing drug use, as well as youths’ quality of life and suggestions for improving support systems.

1.1 Survey Data Analysis

Demographics

The data was disaggregated by age, gender, and place of residence to allow for a more nuanced analysis of the findings.

Age	Portugal	Italy	Greece	Cyprus	Serbia	Poland	%	Total
13-15	7	11	0	4	35	18	21	75
16-17	8	29	28	22	8	16	31	111
18-21	40	29	41	25	3	28	46	166
>21	—	—	—	—	5	—	2	5
Total	55	69	69	51	51	62	100	357

Gender	Portugal	Italy	Greece	Cyprus	Serbia	Poland	%	Total
Male	7	20	22	17	9	12	24	87
Female	46	48	45	34	40	45	72	258
Non-Binary	2	—	—	—	—	4	2	6
Other	—	—	2	—	2	—	1	4
Prefer not to say	—	1	—	—	—	1	1	2
Total	55	69	69	51	51	62	100	357



Place of residence	Portugal	Italy	Greece	Cyprus	Serbia	Poland	%	Total
City	42	48	49	21	38	30	64	228
Town-suburbs	4	21	7	16	10	16	21	74
Rural area	9	—	13	14	3	16	15	55
Total	55	64	69	51	51	62	100	357

Awareness of Drugs and Risks

The analysis of this section focused on two main aspects: Exposure to Drug Risk Information and Self-Reported Knowledge about Drugs. These two dimensions were chosen because they help assess not only whether young people are being reached by drug prevention messaging, but also how that information is internalised and translated into perceived understanding.

Exposure to Drug Risk Information

Source of information	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
School	27	98	153	79
Community	37	120	134	66
Media	19	91	145	102

Self-Reported Knowledge about drugs

Knowledge Level	Portugal	Italy	Greece	Cyprus	Serbia	Poland
1 (Very Low)	4	4	1	3	0	1
2 (Low)	4	14	5	9	10	10
3 (Moderate)	28	31	16	19	19	31
4 (Very High)	19	20	47	20	22	20
Total	55	69	69	51	51	62



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Perceived Reasons for Drug Use Among Youth

This section explores the factors that young people identify as motivating drug use among their peers. Commonly cited reasons include socializing and enjoyment, coping with stress or personal difficulties, peer influence, and curiosity or experimentation. Recognizing these underlying motivations is essential for developing prevention strategies that go beyond simple information provision and address the social and emotional dimensions of substance use.

Reason for Drug-Use	Portugal	Italy	Greece	Cyprus	Serbia	Poland	Total
Peer pressure	36	33	15	28	34	42	188
Stress or personal issues	41	59	21	40	29	50	240
Lack of information about risks	7	15	2	16	8	6	54
For fun and experimentation	41	55	30	39	38	51	254
Other (specified)	—	—	1 – Desire to feel cooler	1	1 (No explanation)	1 – Desire to feel older or cooler	4

Perceived Prevalence of Drug Use in School/Community

This section shows how common young people think drug use is around them, whether at school or in their community. Some see it as rare, while others believe it happens quite often, especially at parties or social events. Understanding these perceptions helps to know where prevention efforts should be focused.



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Perception of Drug-Use	Portugal	Italy	Greece	Cyprus	Serbia	Poland	Total
Very widespread	7	6	17	12	4	7	53
Somewhat widespread	36	30	31	0	13	15	125
Rare	5	13	13	8	15	26	80
Non-existent	2	3	0	0	11	7	23
I don't know	5	17	8	4	8	7	49

Perceived Accessibility of Drugs

This section explores how young people perceive the availability and ease of access to different substances in their daily environments, including schools, social gatherings, and neighbourhoods — offering key insights into the social contexts where drug use is most likely to occur.

Location Where Drugs Are Easily Available	Portugal	Italy	Greece	Cyprus	Serbia	Poland	Total
Near school premises	10	2	12	17	5	2	48
In the neighborhood	2	29	8	14	6	8	67
Through social media/online platforms	2	9	9	5	0	9	34
At parties/social gatherings	33	17	27	9	29	30	145
I don't know	8	12	13	6	11	62	112

Perceptions of Specific Substances

This section examines how young people perceive the risks, effects, and social acceptability of specific substances — including both legal (e.g. alcohol, tobacco, energy drinks) and illegal drugs (e.g. cannabis, LSD, cocaine). By analysing their views on which substances are considered harmful, addictive, or socially normalized, we can better understand where prevention efforts



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need to focus in terms of correcting misconceptions, addressing underestimation of harm, and responding to shifting attitudes influenced by peers, media, or lived experiences.

Substance	Never Heard of It	Not a Drug	A Drug, but Not Addictive	A Drug and Can Be Addictive
Coffee & Tea	4	269	27	57
Energy drinks	7	237	36	76
Nicotine (Cigarette smoking, vaping, snus, tobacco - snuff)	2	70	19	266
Painkillers	13	118	73	153
Sleeping pills (Benzodiazepines)	45	60	57	185
Alcohol	5	96	24	232
Cannabinoids (Marijuana, Hashish)	15	6	31	305
Hallucinogenic mushrooms (psilocybin)	57	4	41	252
LSD	72	4	20	260
Amphetamines	84	5	19	249
MDMA, MDA (Ecstasy)	79	3	21	254
Fentanyl	107	8	20	222
Cocaine	3	2	18	331
Heroin	15	1	18	323
Methadone	109	6	19	219
Opium	87	7	16	247

Substance Use Patterns

This section explores which substances young people use, how often they use them, and why. The analysis combines data on the frequency of use — especially of common substances like alcohol, energy drinks, and painkillers — with the reasons behind their use, such as having fun, relaxing, reducing anxiety, or feeling more confident in social situations. Understanding both the patterns and the motivations helps tailor prevention strategies to real behaviours and needs, rather than assumptions.





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Substance	Never	Single Use	Rarely	Socially	Occasionally	Regularly	Daily
Coffee & Tea	13	12	45	15	36	78	150
Energy drinks	63	39	80	22	71	52	16
Nicotine (Cigarette smoking, vaping, snus, tobacco - snuff)	137	43	43	26	12	26	47
Painkillers	97	20	108	5	85	19	7
Sleeping pills (Benzodiazepines)	293	22	23	—	10	3	5
Alcohol	82	29	61	100	45	25	6
Cannabinoids (Marijuana, Hashish)	268	12	23	15	17	6	6
Hallucinogenic mushrooms (psilocybin)	330	6	5	1	1	—	3
LSD	342	5	4	1	—	1	3
Amphetamines	274	4	5	0	0	0	3
MDMA, MDA (Ecstasy)	337	2	4	0	0	0	3
Fentanyl	339	1	3	0	0	0	3
Cocaine	335	3	4	0	1	0	4
Heroin	338	2	3	0	0	—	3
Methadone	339	1	3	0	0	—	2
Opium	337	2	4	—	—	—	2

Reasons for Using Substances/Alcohol

	Number of Respondents
Out of curiosity	37
To have fun	124
To explore new/different emotions	33
To feel better with others	45
To last all night	24
To avoid thinking about other problems	46
To let off steam	53
To lose control	15
To feel part of the group	29
To reduce anxiety	51
To expand my consciousness (spiritual reasons)	6
To manage a down phase	38



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To improve my mood	57
I don't use it	119
Other:	11
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A habit (e.g. Drink coffee/A coffee and a cigarette) • Enjoy the taste (Alcohol) 	

Quality of Life and Support

This section looks at what young people say is important for their wellbeing and where they find support in their daily lives. Family, friendships, physical and mental health, education, and financial stability were seen as key to a good quality of life. Most participants also highlighted the importance of emotional support, mainly coming from family and friends. These insights help show how strong personal relationships and access to services can protect young people and reduce the risk of substance use.

Factors Affecting Well-Being

Factor Impacting Well-Being	Number of Respondents	Relevant respondent quote
Financial situation	74	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «A job and a regular salary that you can spend on things that make you happy besides paying the bills» • «Money buys health, money buys education and opportunities, money buys freedom and independence. » • «Quality of life depends on the quantity of goods and services we can enjoy. Quality of life will be higher if we have access to education, hospitals, means of transport, etc., and our living conditions, such as having a place to live and food. » • «Happiness in life results from the quality of our relationships. However, it's hard to take care of relationships when you don't have a roof over your head, so I can't ignore life aspects such as economic freedom (high purchasing power of citizens),



		opportunities for career development and beyond, freedom of speech, access to healthcare»
Family relationships	152	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «A good relationship with family: playing board games and going for walks together» «Good relationships, good people, loving family»
Friendships and social life	160	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «To have company and people I can confide in»; «That people around us feel safe and free when they spend time with us» «Healthy relationships with peers» «For me, it's very important because, in addition to connecting with others, you need it because you're a human being. Everything is important in life. »
Academic or work-related stress	64	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Good grades at school» «Have the opportunity to work on what I love»
Physical health	160	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Healthy: knowing where and who can help me» “Healthy food, regular and moderate physical activity, no use of psychoactive substances, limiting stimulants like coffee or energy drinks, being in harmony with oneself”
Mental health	164	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Balance/time for all the activities that matter to me (family, school, friends, boyfriend). » «A good quality of life is not worrying unnecessarily, living in harmony with yourself and others, being happy and healthy. » «Having "safe" spaces where you can find refuge, whether physical or personal, is essential. / Being at peace with oneself, having supportive people, and living freely are key to happiness. A fulfilling job, education, and moments of tranquility contribute to a good life, while love and travel add richness to experiences.
Access to recreational activities	59	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Access to extra-work recreational activities» «Have free time to devote to personal interests» Scouting «Going out with friends: to the cinema, bowling»
Sense of purpose or motivation	37	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Possibility of learning and expansion of knowledge» «Feeling of fulfilment (achieving my personal goals) » «A sense of fulfilment, achieving your dreams»



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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having knowledge and awareness of my surroundings is important. Being an informed person allows me to feel good with myself and in society. I believe the only way to be free is to always stay informed. »
Sleep quality	3	
Exposure to risky environments	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Living safely»
Substance use	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «To eat healthy and not take anything» • «Not needing drugs to be well» • «No drugs or smoking» • «No use of psychoactive substances, limiting stimulants like coffee or energy drinks»
Access to education	23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Have the right to education»
Healthy food	7	
Freedom of decision and independence	23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Have the freedom to think for ourselves» • «Having the freedom to make my own decisions» • «Freedom of speech» • «Honesty with oneself»
Travel	3	
To be loved and respected/Happiness	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Being happy»
Peace	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Social peace»
Housing	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Housing suited to your needs»
Environment (Nature)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Its relationship with the environment. »

Sources of Emotional and Social Support

	1	2	3	4
Supportive family	1	14	32	272



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Trustworthy friends	2	7	63	260
Safe community spaces (e.g. schools, youth associations, churches, local associations)	16	50	94	173
Opportunities for education and employment	6	20	73	234
Access to health and mental health services	4	23	65	239

Activities That Could Improve Quality of Life

Activity	Number of Respondents	Examples or relevant quotes
Sports and physical exercise	105	<p>Collective and individual sports:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volleyball • Running • Swimming • Gym • Basketball • Football • Horse therapy • Rollerblading • Yoga/pilates • Dance • Acrobatics • Outdoor physical activities • Muay Thai
Access to mental health support	82	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Free psychological services and safe spaces for young people» • Workshops: Mental health (youth and parents), emotional regulation workshops, social media and self-worth, coping with stressful situations, adult life preparation • Psychological therapy
More recreation facilities	69	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English course

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops: AI, mental health, politics, time management • Open events in parks • Youth trips organized within the city • More regular passion-based activities • Well-organized youth communities
Opportunities for creative expression	98	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art classes/ small personal art projects • Photography workshops • "Circles" for exchanging skills, opinions, and cultural knowledge
Volunteering or community involvement	55	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community events • Volunteering: activities to teach skills while encouraging the community to get to know each other» • Volunteering with animals • Local neighbourly initiatives and connected neighbourhood community • Youth communities • Scouting
Social events and gatherings	65	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plays • Exhibitions • Concerts • Outdoor parties in the neighbourhood • Free activities and initiatives on various topics • Integration meetings for youth • "Chat" meetups • Open events in parks
Career guidance and educational support	25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job fairs • Scientific workshops • Lectures on brain/body functioning • Workshops on adult life preparation • Job opportunities or internships • Educational and vocational support programs
Financial assistance programs	17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «More services aimed at supporting the most vulnerable groups, more activities focused on social issues and healthy aggregation»
Meditation, mindfulness, relaxation	36	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaxation classes e.g. face/hand massage, yoga • «Workshops in class or outside to experiment with new things. »



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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meditation
Workshops on the harmfulness of drugs	1	
Access to health services/Rehabilitation	1	

Feedback on Drug Prevention Programs

This section gathers young people’s opinions on what works — and what doesn’t — in drug prevention. They showed a clear preference for interactive and relatable approaches, such as real-life stories, peer mentors, and activities that include mental health and coping strategies. In contrast, traditional lectures and digital-only campaigns were seen as less effective. Many suggested that prevention should be more engaging, honest, and connected to their everyday experiences. These insights are key for improving future programs and making them more relevant to young people’s needs.

Effectiveness of Drug Prevention Programs (Number of Respondents)

	1	2	3	4
Relatable peer mentors	19	25	100	136
Real-life stories	14	32	74	214
Interactive activities	21	57	111	145
Focus on mental health and coping skills	9	37	88	200
Use of social media & digital content	40	107	102	85
Cool & drug-free events	41	63	78	152
Education on harm-reduction	23	50	116	144
Engaging technology	44	108	83	99



Suggestions for Improving Community Support for Young People

This section explores young people's ideas and expectations on how community structures, spaces, and relationships can be improved to better support their wellbeing and reduce vulnerability to substance use. The focus is on identifying what kind of environments, resources, and approaches they believe are most effective in helping them feel safe, included, and heard.

Suggestion Category	Common themes identified	Example responses (if applicable)
More engaging prevention programs	Lectures and education Drug prevention programs and improved education about substances Stories of ex-addicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Lectures in which everything is openly discussed, i.e. to go deeper into the topic because I think awareness will be raised about how dangerous it actually is» «Mandatory one-time school classes with real-life stories and examples» «Teachers should have more knowledge about drugs» «Games, real-life experiences, and interactive methods, instead of monotonous presentations. »
Increased peer mentorship	Awareness sessions overlooking personal experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> « Young people should have someone to talk to who can be a reliable helper because trust is hard to build» « If someone my age talks to me directly, it reaches me much more than an adult with whom I feel I have no connection»
Better mental health support	Increased access to free programs and seminars focused on mental health support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Anonymous, safe sites to talk with psychologists» «Providing proper psychological help»
More community involvement	The role of parents/community and their openness to discuss this topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Open conversation with parents, understanding and care from their side» «Always be by their side, no matter what, helping them understand their mistakes and what might be behind all this mess that's so widespread nowadays — but doing it in the

		right way, and above all, always being there for them so they know they can trust you and that you'll always be there for them. »
	Educate youth on resisting peer pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Encourage outdoor activities, provide spaces for games, and promote social interaction. »
	Social media and campaigns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Be authentic, pick real people for campaigns» «Motivation campaigns on social media, influencers»
Innovative educational approaches	Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «From early age, even about caffeine» «Education instead of slogans, take youth seriously» «Better information on these issues to be provided in schools. This would help destigmatize substance use and lead to a more effective and compassionate approach to addressing the problem. »
	Surveys and courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> « Should be carried out on a larger scale, as they increase interest in certain topics and create greater opportunities for developing awareness-raising courses»
Legislation	Regulation and prohibition/legalisation of consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Law; serious penalties «Drugs should be legal and regulated to increase awareness»

1.2 Data Insights and Analysis

This transnational analysis compiles and compares data from six participating countries (Serbia, Portugal, Poland, Italy, Greece, and Cyprus) to better understand how young people perceive drug use, what motivates their substance-related behaviours, and which prevention approaches resonate most with them. Although the socio-cultural contexts vary, several common themes emerge across national results, alongside notable differences that reflect distinct educational, social, and policy realities.



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A total of 357 young people took part in the surveys across the six countries. Participants ranged in age from 13 to over 21, with the largest age group being 18–21-year-olds (166 respondents), followed by 16–17-year-olds (111), and then 13–15-year-olds (75). A small number of respondents were older than 21 (5 participants, all from Serbia). Gender-wise, female participants represented the majority in every country. Urban youth were the dominant group, particularly in Portugal, Italy, and Greece, while rural representation was higher in Poland and Cyprus. These differences influence both exposure to substances and access to preventive resources.

Most participants evaluated their knowledge about drugs as moderate to high, although responses varied by country. Greek participants reported the highest levels of self-assessed knowledge. Substances like cannabis, nicotine, and alcohol were widely recognised as addictive. However, many respondents—especially from Poland and Serbia—showed low awareness of lesser-known drugs such as fentanyl, LSD, and methadone. Confusion was also notable around the addictiveness of legal drugs like sleeping pills and over-the-counter painkillers.

The main reasons for substance use were remarkably consistent across all six countries: the desire to have fun, cope with stress, and respond to peer pressure were cited most often. In Serbia and Cyprus, peer pressure was particularly emphasised by younger respondents. In contrast, Portuguese and Italian youth, particularly the older age group, more frequently linked use to emotional self-regulation, such as avoiding problems or improving mood. Curiosity and the need to fit in were additional motivations, while spiritual or self-exploratory reasons were rare.

Legal substances like coffee, energy drinks, alcohol, and painkillers were the most frequently consumed, though patterns varied. Coffee was the most regularly consumed daily substance, especially in Portugal and Italy. Energy drinks and alcohol were mostly consumed occasionally or socially. Poland and Greece showed slightly higher levels of occasional painkiller use. Illegal substances, especially hallucinogens and synthetic drugs like MDMA or fentanyl, had very low reported usage across all countries. Cannabis use was present but largely limited to rare or social occasions, with higher reported use in Italy and Greece.





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Drugs were perceived as most accessible in social contexts like parties and gatherings. This was consistent across countries, although in Cyprus and Greece, school premises were also frequently mentioned. In Poland, many respondents selected “I don’t know” regarding drug availability, possibly indicating lower exposure or greater uncertainty. Online and social media channels were not widely identified as common sources of access, with Italy and Greece showing slightly higher awareness of digital channels.

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of supportive families and trustworthy friendships as pillars of emotional wellbeing. These were particularly valued in Portugal and Cyprus. Access to education, employment opportunities, and mental health services were also seen as crucial for a good quality of life. Polish and Serbian respondents placed more emphasis on the need for safe community spaces and access to healthcare, pointing to gaps in local infrastructure. A cross-cutting theme in all countries was the lack of places where young people feel safe to express themselves without judgment.

Sports and physical exercise were the most frequently cited activities that could improve quality of life, particularly in Greece and Italy. Opportunities for creative expression—such as art, photography, and cultural exchange—were strongly valued in Portugal and Cyprus. Access to mental health support, including free psychological services and emotional regulation workshops, was a recurring request, especially in Poland and Portugal. Social gatherings, community volunteering, and youth events were also seen as crucial in building a sense of belonging and purpose.

Across all six countries, young people expressed clear dissatisfaction with fear-based or overly moralistic drug prevention approaches. Instead, they called for peer-led initiatives, emotionally engaging formats, and real-life storytelling. These preferences were especially pronounced in Greece and Poland, where youth highlighted the limitations of digital campaigns unless complemented by authentic, participatory elements. There was also a widespread call for school-based education to move away from didactic formats toward honest, relatable, and inclusive dialogue.





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Across countries, youth want prevention to be participatory, emotionally intelligent, and relevant to their realities. While emotional wellbeing, peer pressure, and curiosity are universal themes, the role of stress and mental health challenges was more pronounced in Portugal and Italy. In Serbia and Cyprus, social belonging and group conformity appeared to be stronger motivators for substance use. Urban youth tended to report higher substance exposure and accessibility, while rural respondents showed lower engagement with substances but also lower access to services and prevention.

Differences in school engagement with drug education were also notable. In Serbia and Portugal, schools were mentioned as a key source of information, while in Italy, Cyprus, and Poland, young people pointed out a lack of systematic or high-quality educational interventions.

Youth from all six countries are calling for a shift in how drug use prevention is designed and delivered. Their input makes clear that effective prevention cannot rely on one-size-fits-all messaging or impersonal digital campaigns. Instead, interventions must be grounded in real-life concerns, focus on strengthening emotional resilience, and foster meaningful social and community engagement. Support must be holistic, integrating health, education, creativity, and emotional wellbeing—and above all, must be co-developed with youth themselves.

These insights underline the importance of context-aware, inclusive strategies that recognise both shared experiences and the distinct needs of young people in each country.





2. Expert Consultation (T2.1.2)

Objective of Data Collection: The expert consultation aimed to gather qualitative insights from professionals in relevant fields (psychologists, sociologists, public health professionals, and educators) to understand the challenges faced by youth and identify best practices for drug-use prevention and health promotion.

Consultation Methodology:

- **Focus Group:** Groups of 20 experts participated in a focus group to discuss the challenges youth face, as well as the effectiveness of drug prevention programs and strategies.

AND

- **Individual Interviews:** 19 individual interviews were conducted with experts to gain in-depth insights into their professional experiences and knowledge.

Privacy and Consent: The interviews and focus groups were conducted in accordance with the project's privacy policy, ensuring confidentiality of participants' insights. All participants provided consent for the interviews to be recorded.

Discussion Topics Covered:

- **Current Trends and Challenges:** Identifying risk factors and mental health issues influencing drug use among youth.
- **Best Practices for Drug Prevention:** Sharing successful programs and initiatives.
- **Psychosocial Strategies:** Exploring how counselling, peer support, and community involvement can enhance prevention efforts.
- **Collaboration and Innovation:** Discussing how schools, families, and communities can collaborate more effectively, as well as innovative approaches and tools for prevention.



2.1 Data Insights and Analysis

Profile of experts (Demographics and Professional Background)

Number of Experts Interviewed	39
Fields of Expertise	Drug prevention; Mental health; Social worker; Education; Policymaking; Psychotherapy; Youth rehabilitation; Community support
Years of Experience	0-5; 5-10; 10-15; 15-20; +20
Sector represented	Government agencies; NGO's and foundations; Healthcare; Education; Community organizations; Child and youth care institutions; Correctional facilities
Geographical Representation	Urban; Rural; National
Contribute to Drug Prevention	Counselling; Rehabilitation; Mental-health support for at-risk youth; Implement drug education programs and early intervention strategies; Education and promotion of youth competencies

Current Trends and Challenges in Youth Drug Prevention

Key risk factors identified

Risk Factor	Expert Insights & Observations	Examples or Case Studies
Mental Health Issues	Lack of family and community support leads young people to seek belonging in risky environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Young people lack the security and support they do not receive at home and in their immediate environment. Often, risky societies offer them a sense of belonging and understanding.»



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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In smaller communities, stigma prevents youth from accessing help for anxiety, depression, or early trauma. • In conservative households, youth fear parental judgment and suppress early struggles, escalating risk factors.
	Substance use often serves as a coping mechanism or an escape from reality, and many young people lack the tools or awareness of alternative ways to manage challenging situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Rates of depression and anxiety are alarmingly rising, while access to specialist support remains limited. • «A lack of ability to name one’s emotions leads to unhealthy ways of coping with them. » • «We’re seeing teens who spent formative years in lockdown now using cannabis to manage social anxiety. » • «they're self-medicating depression"»
Peer Pressure	Peer pressure and fear of rejection drive risky behaviour, especially in new social environments like secondary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «In order to be accepted or avoid exclusion, many teens start smoking or using other substances. » • «Nightlife settings in Cyprus often encourage experimentation without clear boundaries or support systems. » • «A 16-year-old told us, ‘Everyone smokes weed— it’s no big deal. »
	Masculine socialisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «In rural areas, drinking is part of masculine identity - boys learn early that alcohol equals being a man. »
Socio-Economic Factors	Lack of role models in low-income, time-constrained families can lead young people to make poor life choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Families of lower socio-economic status, and single parents sometimes work two jobs and simply do not have time to devote to a child. All this contributes [...] a young person makes the wrong choices later. » • «Lack of supervision and low social status significantly impact young people’s vulnerability. »
	Vulnerability varies in visibility and is frequently connected to financial hardship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • « It’s a very interchangeable relationship between vulnerability without clear signs and vulnerability that isn’t obvious. It could be linked to economic situations»
Family Dynamics	Broken family dynamics and parental separation often expose at-risk youth to trauma and emotional issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «A majority of young people at risk come from families where the parents are divorced, where family relationships are unhealthy and broken, and the young person picks up problems and traumas. » • «Emotional coldness, family conflict and domestic violence are all risk factors.” • «The 14-year-old who attempted suicide had alcoholic parents who were physically present but emotionally absent. »

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	Domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «The child’s family is affected by domestic violence, alcohol abuse, and joblessness. »
	Drug use is normalized and often present within families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Some of these situations involve family businesses, where there is a history of trafficking and selling substances within the family. » « Substance use often stems from the home environment and the reality these individuals experience. If everyone engages in certain behaviours, it’s not considered problematic. »
Academic unsuccess / School absenteeism	Absenteeism often reflects underlying complicated issues affecting children’s learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> « When a young person struggles to learn, especially after reaching lower grades like the fifth year, they often begin to feel disconnected from school. Initially, difficulties may be hidden in the earlier stages of education, but by the time they reach a stage where greater autonomy and academic investment are required, problems start to surface. Students may resort to behaviours such as acting out in class or skipping school, seeking inclusion and integration in contexts outside the classroom. »
Easy Access to Substances	Easy street access to substances increases the risk of use among vulnerable and directionless youth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Substances are accessible almost everywhere» «Drugs and designer substances are easily available, and their use is often trivialised. » «In low-income areas, teens use cheaper substances» «Reports of vapes and THC edibles circulating in schools.»
	Cultural and parental facilitation of early alcohol use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Greek parents think giving ouzo at weddings protects kids - it does the opposite. By 15, most kids have been drinking at family functions for years. »
Stimulants Culture	Tech-driven lifestyle fuels demand for stimulants to maintain wakefulness and productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «A general epidemic of stimulants. The digital and technological revolution brings new changes that drug manufacturers use, so stimulants are needed to keep people awake, productive, and active. »
Idle youth culture shaped by online toxicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boredom and unstructured free time, combined with social media influence, lead adolescents toward risky behaviours. Youth spaces lack prevention programming Institutional responses are disconnected from daily youth experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Young people without goals or structured activities are more likely to use substances. » «Social media is saturated with toxic behaviours, including drug use promoted by influencers. » «Prevention efforts are not integrated into environments where youth spend time»

Trends in youth substance use and behavioural patterns

Trend	Expert Insights & Observations	Supporting Expert Statements
Increase in Polysubstance Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple substances are combined in a single occasion, without awareness of the risks (energy drinks with alcohol or nicotine, cannabis with prescription drugs, and in more extreme cases, mixing synthetic stimulants with depressants) These practices are sometimes imitated from internet personalities or peer groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «The relationship with substances like cannabis and MDMA follows the pattern of "the more, the better. » “I’ve seen cases where teens mix prescription sedatives with cannabis, unaware of the health risks.” <i>“Music events and after-school hangouts are key points where multiple substances are accessed and used simultaneously.”</i>
Shift to Prescription & Synthetic Drugs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of benzodiazepines has been increasing Young people admitting to taking medication from their parents Increasing use of cheap synthetic substances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «They may consume two 1mg pills daily, which results in them becoming heavily sedated. They rely on these medications to help with sleep, concentration, anxiety, or to escape from reality. » «Misusing prescription medication, such as sedatives or ADHD drugs, often without any understanding of the risks involved. »
Online Drug Markets & Social Media Influence		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Internet, social networks and the prevailing Internet culture are very toxic and aggressive towards young people (along with YouTubers and TikTokers who normalize toxic behavior). » «The prevailing music trend in Serbia is very bad, because 90% of the lyrics deal with sexual relations, violence, marijuana, abuse, and adultery. Young people are exposed to this aggressive trend that peers often impose on each other. » «Some young people imitate online creators who mix substances in live streams — it normalises polysubstance use. »

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Social media promotes false ideals of success, fun, and 'perfect lives. » • «There’s growing access to encrypted drug markets via messaging apps. Teenagers know how to use them better than adults. » • «Young people often see cannabis or even psychedelics being portrayed as tools for creativity or stress relief online. »
<p>Normalization of Cannabis Use</p>	<p>Cannabis, being a plant, is much healthier and carries fewer risks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Cannabis is still considered a “soft” drug, which is “okay” to try when you're young. » • «Risks associated with it, especially since modern cannabis plants are much more potent than those from 20 years ago, many young people are completely unaware of this. » • «In some social groups, smoking marijuana is as normal as drinking a cup of coffee» • “Online platforms are filled with content presenting cannabis as natural, therapeutic, or even ‘cool’. » • «They'll say 'it's just weed' while experiencing panic attacks and not connecting the dots. » • «At school parties now, cannabis is as common as beer was for previous generations. »
<p>Age of First Use is Decreasing</p>	<p>The desire to grow up quickly and achieve independence</p>	<p>«Teens use substances to gain peer acceptance. »</p>
<p>Youth involved in substance trafficking</p>	<p>Young people who not only consume substances but also some who are already involved in selling drugs. [...] additional challenges in terms of intervention, as drug trafficking brings legal, safety, and behavioural concerns»</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Older people abuse minors. Children under the age of 14 are often used to transport and sell drugs, because according to Serbian law they cannot be held criminally responsible. » • « We had a specific session on legislation, and it was impressive to see that most young people knew that in Portugal, the consumption of substances is decriminalized, meaning it is not a crime. They were able to recall the specific quantities of each substance that were considered consumption versus trafficking, knowing exactly what they could or couldn’t carry with them. »

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «It is crucial to explore the interconnection between substance use, micro-trafficking, and dynamics of violence, particularly in neighborhoods most exposed to social marginalization.»
Lack of drugs literacy	Many myths surrounding substance use	«An activity to distinguish myths from facts, and discovered that some information is quite inaccurate, yet deeply ingrained. »
Difficulties in diagnosis	Various prevention activities to engage with young people, but when the problem reaches it has already become significant	«Updating the diagnosis, [...] information it is always very difficult to obtain, and often we rely on studies we manage to conduct. »
Substance use and sexuality	Significant intersection between substance use and sexuality	«Substances being used not just for recreational purposes but also in relation to sexual experiences. »
Underestimation of Alcohol Consumption Compared to Other Substances	Alcohol often overlooked when no immediate consequences arise	« A tendency to downplay the significance of alcohol consumption, despite it being the most used substance among young people. Alcohol is frequently consumed alongside other substances, which complicates the understanding and addressing of its impact»

Gaps in current prevention efforts

Gap	Expert Insights & Observations	Suggested Improvements
Lack of youth-Centred Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lectures on the dangers of drugs are usually not suitable for young people (should not use PowerPoint presentations but immediately give games and examples; no 45-minute lectures, no passive listeners) Tools available are primarily designed for younger children, and there is a lack of resources for older adolescents Educational initiatives are outdated, overly theoretical, or disconnected from the lived realities of teenagers The lack of real gathering spaces for adolescents and young people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people should be offered short, clear, concise information, written in their language, and above all proactive. Young people need facts, not fear. Scare tactics don't work anymore. Develop peer-led workshops where youth co-create content about real substance use dilemmas they face, using social media formats they prefer. Youth prefer honest, relatable content grounded in science and facts.

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<p>Insufficient Mental Health Support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of free mental health support • In schools, one psychologist/pedagogue often cannot devote himself to every child in need • Reduction in funding and technical staff • Lack of physical access and schedule to psychological support • Stigma around asking for psychological help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An increase in the number of technicians and locations for psychological consultations • «Therefore, when we are available on-site, it becomes much easier for the young person to come to the office during a break or after school hours to receive support. This approach has proven to be very effective.
<p>Limited Family Involvement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Parents often, whether overwhelmed by their responsibilities or unaware of the seriousness of the topic, often avoid talking to their children about the harmfulness of drugs. Some of them are not even knowledgeable enough about it. » • «Communication is weakened by emotional distance, generational gaps, or socioeconomic pressures. In many cases, adults are unaware of the challenges adolescents face or underestimate their seriousness. » • «Despite organizing initiatives specifically for parents, attendance is often low, reflecting a lack of interest or resistance to engagement. • Additionally, some parents actively prevent discussions on critical topics with their children by refusing authorization for interventions. » 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create family engagement programs focused on communication skills, early detection, and resilience building.
<p>Inconsistent School-Based Prevention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a lack of a program/subject that would last throughout the year and cover this topic in more detail to young people, so that the consequences would be more visible to them. • Frequent turnover of teachers or shifts in project preferences often lead to a lack of continuity in preventive work. • School-based prevention is the reluctance to acknowledge certain issues, often due to concerns about reputation. • Lack of consistency in how schools approach prevention — both in content and delivery. Teachers and school staff often feel unprepared to deal with mental health or substance use issues, and school policies vary widely. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is crucial to establish long-term commitments and encourage schools to maintain a consistent approach. • “We need more sustained, interactive programmes — not just check-the-box activities during a ‘prevention week’.” • The school cannot act alone: it is necessary for it to recognize its crucial role and open to dialogue with other educational and social actors in the area, with a focus on shared responsibility and co-design.

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Lack of Peer-led Initiatives	Young people respect and listen much more to those young people who already have a court order or have the same goals or lifestyles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> E.g. Scouting - «how powerful peer support can be when it’s built on trust and shared values». Alternative educational methods that center around the self-determination of the new generations and are based on trust in their ability to change the game. Create structured spaces for co-design alongside young people, recognizing them not only as recipients but as key actors in the processes of prevention, education, and social transformation.
Educational gaps in informal youth settings	Informal spaces such as youth cafés, sports venues, and festivals lack educational touchpoints	Develop mobile prevention units or pop-ups in informal community spaces targeting hard-to-reach youth.

Successful Drug Prevention Strategies

Examples of evidence-based programs that have shown effectiveness

Program Name	Country	Description	Proven Outcomes	Expert Insights
Science Talks for Youth	Cyprus	Interactive workshops combining neuroscience of addiction with real-life case stories and non-formal discussions led by youth workers and educators.	Improved engagement in health education, better understanding of consequences, destigmatization of mental health topics.	«Young people respond better to honesty. Presenting facts without moralising creates space for open dialogue.»
Youth-Led Drop-In & Support Circles	Cyprus	Weekly in-school peer-led support sessions and access to mental health professionals during lunch breaks or after class.	Increased help-seeking behavior, reduction in reported anxiety and substance curiosity.	«Creating a safe, youth-owned space normalizes help-seeking and breaks down stigma faster than lectures ever can. »
Creative Prevention Labs	Cyprus	Youth are given mini-grants to design and implement art, video, music, or podcast	Broader reach, higher retention of prevention messages, ownership over change-making.	«Prevention becomes meaningful when youth see



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		campaigns around substance use themes, in collaboration with artists.		themselves as the messengers, not just the audience. »
RESTART Social Enterprise	Serbia	A company that employs a marginalized group of people (rehabilitated and recovered ex-addicts and ex-convicts) and their family members. This company provides transport services, furniture moving services, deep washing of furniture and vehicle interiors, mowing, clearing and maintenance of green areas and small-scale renovation works.	This company helps ex-addicts get back on their feet as soon as possible, earn money, learn new skills and get back into everyday life more easily.	«You must be careful with this group of people. Give them love, support, acceptance, understanding. These people are our neighbours, relatives, friends who are working to make them better. People like to engage them, and many people are not prejudiced. When someone recovers, people like to reward them. »
RESTART Youth Club	Serbia	One-week workshops and social gatherings led by social work students. For students and at-risk youth (18-21). It is intended for young people who are on the verge of becoming addicted (some of them are already using marijuana and whatever is available to them, they also gamble).	Young people have quality free time, socialize, and become aware of the consequences of the path they have taken (which leads to greater addiction).	«These workshops fill the free time of young people in risk, leaving them less time for the streets. They also have the opportunity to socialize with their peers, play games, and feel accepted. »
Program for children of convicts and addicts	Serbia	A support and guidance program for very young children whose parents are drug addicts.	Children receive psychological help in order to overcome their traumas. Also, in this program, they see a different pattern of behavior as an example different from the one they had at home.	«Sometimes addicted parents who start the rehabilitation process ask us to help their children. And sometimes they are grandparents or custodians of children whose parents often ended up in prison. »
Coffee House	Serbia	Weekly meetings of addicts or people in trouble.	Addicts tell their life stories, how they got out and how they live	«The goal is to send the message that no matter how

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			now. They find themselves in an environment where no one will judge them and where they can hear real human experiences	difficult it may be to recover, life is very beautiful without drugs. »
VIBE	Portugal	Youth Experience and Emotional Mastery.	«It is a multi-component, multi-level intervention [...]. The intervention has specific objectives [...] but it is tailored to the needs, characteristics, and priorities of each context. It is not uniform or homogeneous across the various institutions that host the intervention [...]. Our approach with young people involves dynamic, interactive strategies that encourage their active participation, allowing them to share their experiences and opinions. This fosters a sense of value and involvement, while also helping us assess their knowledge, perceptions, and any unrealistic beliefs that need to be addressed. »	«We do not focus solely on substance use, but also address other topics of interest, useful, and relevant to young people. Partners such as APF (Portuguese Family Association), which deals with issues related to sexual and reproductive education, and MAR (Union of Alternative and Response Women), which addresses topics related to gender-based violence and other forms of sexualized violence.»
Consultas sem Paredes (MAAT, Lisbon)	Portugal	Psychology and psychiatry consultations at the museum	The dialogue established is personal, multidisciplinary, artistic, and therapeutic dialogue, a dialogue without boundaries. More than just consultations, at this Museum consultations is a safe, confidential, and innovative space.	«I believe it is working well. [...] That is, to deconstruct the idea that psychological or psychosocial support must necessarily take place in an office. »
Pontos Lilás (Punts lila)	Portugal	«Given that nighttime experiences are prevalent within this population, there is an intervention, which is	«The purple points address not only substance use and provide support in this regard, which can range from psychoeducational	« And has proven to be an approach with positive results. »

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		particularly strong in Spain, where it originated: the 'purple points.' »	support to crisis intervention. When someone is experiencing what is referred to as a 'bad trip' or a very difficult experience, we act immediately to provide support. Additionally, the initiative also addresses issues related to harassment, gender-based violence, and sexual violence. »	
Eu e os Outros - ICAD	Portugal	It is structured around nine narratives, each targeting specific addiction-related behaviours. These narratives cover topics such as gaming, social media, alcohol, and sexuality, ensuring relevance to a broad age range from 10 to 18. This structured approach is an effective model in addressing youth substance use and behavioural risks.	The program includes free training for teams, supervision, and regular meetings for facilitators to support effective implementation. It also features a new narrative focused on involving families, especially through online platforms for easier mobilization. The program is designed for continuous delivery, with each narrative being taught over a full academic year through 14-20 sessions.	The program follows European best practices by being interactive and tailored to the needs and characteristics of young people. The program can serve a dual purpose. If evaluated, it can also contribute to suicide prevention, alongside its primary focus on substance use prevention. This highlights the program's versatility in addressing multiple aspects of youth well-being and risk behaviour.
Futebol de Rua - Cais	Portugal	Street football is used to develop skills among young people. A tool for poverty eradication - funding received to preventing homelessness. Training for young people to become coaches, referees, and players, equipping them with valuable skills that extend beyond sports (responsibility, leadership, and teamwork.	One of the major challenges of street football initiatives is the logistical complexity involved. Unlike traditional football, this format requires specific infrastructure, special rules, and an organized framework that demands coordination with municipalities and local authorities.	Street football serves as a tool for youth empowerment, but its success depends on consistent implementation and structured partnerships across different regions.

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<p>+Contigo (Coimbra School of Nursing)</p>	<p>Portugal</p>	<p>A project focused on preventing self-harm behaviours among youth.</p>	<p>Supported by the Ministry of Health and the National Mental Health Plan, and it shares many competencies with other related programs. The successful programs do not just focus on a single issue, such as self-harm or substance use. Instead, they address broader themes relevant to young people, ensuring that these issues are tackled in a holistic way.</p>	<p>Core competencies are consistently emphasized across programs include communication skills, emotional regulation, and decision-making under peer pressure. These competencies are critical and applicable in various contexts, ensuring the transferability of skills across different programs.</p>
<p>Fundacja Strefa Dorastania – „Baza” / “Safe Space for Youth” Clubs</p> <p>Day care facility and street work: Stacja Malbork+</p>	<p>Poland</p>	<p>Local, informal youth centres offering mentorship, skill-building activities, and psychosocial support in a non-stigmatising environment.</p>	<p>Increased sense of belonging, improved emotional regulation, reduced incidence of risky behaviours and substance use.</p>	<p>«Creating a space where young people feel accepted, safe, and seen is fundamental. When they can express emotions without fear of judgement, they no longer need to escape through substance use.»</p>
<p>Free Being Me</p>	<p>Poland</p>	<p>A global non-formal education programme developed by WAGGGS and Dove to help young people (especially girls) build body confidence and resist social pressure about appearance.</p>	<p>Improved self-esteem, reduced risk of eating disorders and self-harm, greater resilience to peer pressure.</p>	<p>«When young people understand that their worth is not tied to looks or trends, they’re less vulnerable to peer pressure, including pressure to use substances. »</p>
<p>#3maj_się_szlaku / “Stick to the Trail” Campaign</p>	<p>Poland</p>	<p>A long-term preventive programme developed by the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association (ZHP), aimed primarily at youth aged 11–14 involved in scouting units. It uses peer-group activities, structured educational paths</p>	<p>Increased self-confidence, better emotional awareness, stronger refusal skills, improved decision-making. Greater awareness of substance-related risks and consequences.</p>	<p>«When the prevention message comes from a trusted leader and is embedded in meaningful group experiences, it becomes part of young people’s worldview—not just a slogan. »</p>

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		and positive role modelling by adult leaders. The programme focuses on emotional, cognitive and social development, and encourages alternative ways of spending free time.		
Na Równoważni – Kampania na rzecz zdrowia psychicznego / “On the Balance Beam” – Mental Health Campaign	Poland	A local initiative in Gdańsk, aimed at promoting mental wellbeing and destigmatising professional psychological help. Activities include workshops, conferences, and media campaigns.	Increased willingness to seek help, reduced stigma, broader awareness of mental health resources.	«We need to normalise talking about emotions and therapy. Campaigns like this one create a bridge between silence and support.»
Archipelag Skarbów / Archipelago of Treasures	Poland	A comprehensive, integrated prevention programme developed by the Institute for Integrated Prevention (IPZIN), targeting students aged 13–16. It addresses key adolescent issues such as relationships, substance use, and violence through interactive workshops and activities. The programme involves students, parents, and teachers to create a supportive environment.	Reduced early sexual activity, decreased substance use (alcohol, drugs), and lower incidence of peer violence. Enhanced self-esteem and better decision-making skills among participants.	«It’s about ongoing collaboration and creating consistent support environments for youth.” "Engaging students in meaningful discussions about their values and choices empowers them to make healthier decisions. The involvement of parents and teachers reinforces the programme’s messages and fosters a community of support.»
Fuori dal Giro	Italy	The "Fuori dal Giro" project is an initiative by the Municipality of Palermo aimed at preventing and reducing the harm associated with drug use among young people. The project offers street education activities, support through		A distinctive aspect of this project is the personalized and differentiated approach, which recognizes and addresses the specificities of each situation. This method avoids uniform treatments for different situations, ensuring

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		proximity offices, and two mobile units dedicated to harm reduction and health promotion. Additionally, it collaborates with various schools to raise students' awareness of the risks associated with substance use.		more effective and targeted interventions. The initiative promotes the active participation of young people, creating spaces for listening and dialogue that foster a trusting environment.
Masi	Italy	Masi is an educational initiative promoted by the Bolton for Education Foundation, aimed at strengthening the educational offering and preventing school failure, particularly in contexts marked by social and cultural vulnerabilities. The project, active in three public Comprehensive Institutes in Palermo, adopts innovative and interprofessional laboratory-based teaching methodologies, actively involving teachers and educators in an inclusive and participatory approach.		A real turning point for the educational system lies in overcoming predefined, outdated frameworks. Masi represent a concrete alternative: it works through direct, almost one-on-one contact, adopting a laboratory approach that fosters trust-based relationships between educators and the new generations.
CTC (Communities That Care)	Greece (N/A)	5-stage community-driven prevention model. (The expert explained that this is a very effective program, but have never been applied in Greece)	Reduces youth substance use by addressing local needs.	"It takes 18 months to implement but works because it's tailored to the needs of the community." (
OKANA's Strengths-Based Approach	Greece	Focuses on building resilience and future planning.	Helps youth quit substances by restoring self-worth.	"We highlight their strengths—art, work, education—to rebuild their identity."
KETHEA's Streetwork Programs	Greece	Provides hygiene, food, and creative activities (e.g., yoga, painting).	Reduces harm and offers alternatives to drug use.	Streetwork meets kids where they are. Trust comes first."



Key elements of successful initiatives

Element	Description	Example from Effective Programs
Early Intervention	Especially important for children whose parents are drug addicts or who have started rehabilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Children have insight into correct patterns of behaviour but also can be introduced with consequences of risky behavior. » “#3maj się szlaku” – a programme targeting 11–14-year-olds within scouting groups, focusing on early emotional awareness and refusal skills. School-based psychologists embedded in primary and secondary schools across municipalities (e.g. Strovolos, Lakatamia).
Interactive & Engaging Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content adapted to young people, interesting, interactive. Preferably proactive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workshops, debates, quizzes, social media challenges and similar interactive activities. “Free Being Me” – uses non-formal peer-led education, games and storytelling to build body confidence and challenge social norms. Youth-led podcast production, community video campaigns, and creative labs with influencers and educators.
Community Involvement	Connecting parents, psychologists, educators, schools with sports and cultural centres	<p>Connect parents with educators and psychologists who can identify what the child needs/«Working with children and young people is extremely helpful because they take the message of pedagogy home. »</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start with cultural and sporting events for children, start an initiative in the neighborhood (e.g. organize social gatherings, gather children in the park, organize a play, physical education class). “Na Równoważni” – a city-wide mental health campaign engaging schools, NGOs, specialists, and residents through public events and media. “#3maj się szlaku” – implemented by scout leaders in peer groups, fostering a shared community of values and daily support.

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	Intergenerational Dialogue	«In these initiatives, when there is any suspicion or when a young person begins to engage in substance use, typically starting with hashish or alcohol, it is the older individuals who try to reason with them and alert the families. »
	Neighbourhood surveillance	«Community support networks, which help greatly with very informal, yet highly effective, surveillance. They can tell if the company a young person keeps, or if a particular vehicle stops in the neighbourhood, indicating that something illicit might be happening. There is also the monitoring of school attendance, because they often share information with each other. They also notice if someone comes home very late, how they arrived, if they went out at night, and with whom.»
Culturally Tailored Approaches	Adapts to regional differences (e.g., urban vs. rural).	
Consistent & Long-Term Support	Programs/subjects in schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools and community centres can train older students or young leaders to facilitate open discussions about substance use, mental health, and coping strategies. Programs like peer mentorship groups or "youth roundtables" can provide a safe space for honest conversations.
	Mental health, cultural and sports programs and events supported by the state, city or municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local authorities that allocate funds for free content for children and youth. Cooperation with a sports club and the children went to free training sessions. Government-funded networks of youth centers with ongoing drop-in counselling, sports, and mental health programs.
	Sustainability of preventive interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish long-term commitments and encourage schools to maintain a consistent approach rather than frequently switching strategies and tools. "#3maj się szlaku" – designed as a year-long programme with regular meetings in stable peer groups led by trained leaders. Baza, Stacja Malbork+ – informal spaces where young people return regularly, building long-term bonds with adult mentors
Participation in decision-making institutions	Connections between social institutions and justice organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Since 2006, representatives in the CPCJ (Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People - Portugal), including in leadership positions. [...], and consequently, with the Public Prosecutor's Office, as well as with EMAT (multidisciplinary technical support teams). Also, a representative serving as a social judge. » Multi-stakeholder focus groups co-organized by ministries, schools, NGOs, and youth leaders to shape national policy.

Role of peer mentorship and interactive learning

Strategy	Benefits	Implementation Examples
Peer-Led Discussions	Builds trust, creates safe space for vulnerable sharing, increases relevance through lived experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth-led panels in schools, peer facilitation training, informal group discussions during after-school programs The approach is grounded in reciprocity: the facilitator does not position themselves as an “expert” who transfers knowledge, but rather as someone who listens and engages in dialogue, offering tools for interpretation and analysis without assuming a superior role. This fosters a horizontal relationship, generating trust and openness within the group. Overall, the workshop-based approach, focused on group building and mutual listening, has proven to be a powerful pedagogical tool, capable of stimulating awareness, strengthening peer relationships, and promoting critical thinking on issues related to prevention (Scout troops)
Experiential Learning	Encourages emotional connection, critical thinking, and long-term memory retention; enhances engagement and reflection. Learning through doing – such as role-playing, games or simulation – builds real-life skills like assertiveness or emotional regulation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workshops using role-play, simulation games, storytelling labs, and drug myth-busting science experiments. Short videos, examples, testimonies of former addicts, interactive presentations. This is what young people need. “#3maj się szlaku” – uses scout-style group dynamics and hands-on tasks to explore themes like values, decision-making and self-awareness. “Free Being Me” – engages participants in expressing feelings, debating media messages, and acting on shared values.
Social Media & Digital Tools	Extends reach, facilitates anonymous engagement, reinforces messaging via platforms youth already use.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instagram campaigns by youth councils, anonymous Telegram Q&A bots, TikTok myth-busting reels.
Support Groups & Youth Ambassadors	Fosters peer accountability, continuity of care, and empowerment of vulnerable youth through relatable leadership. Rituals, symbols and shared language increase group belonging. Safe, informal spaces help make mental health support feel natural.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School-based youth mental health ambassadors, biweekly support groups led by trained students. “Baza” and “Stacja Malbork+” – local youth centres offering ongoing group support, informal mentoring, and involvement in planning activities. Scout circles, safe rooms at school, or after-school spaces with mentors where young people can just “be”. Integrated wellness corners in youth centres or libraries.

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Influencer & Role Model Involvement	<p>Enhances credibility and visibility of prevention messages through admired personalities. Young people spend a lot of their time on social networks, so they can be used for educational purposes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DJ- or athlete-led prevention campaigns, co-created YouTube series featuring local creators and lived experience voices. • «Our rehab center launched a campaign on TikTok where ex-addicts tell their life stories. The videos are short, but meaningful and true, easily accessible and easily shared. »
Promotion of a healthy lifestyle	<p>Community-based healthy lifestyle programs can counter digital overstimulation and risk behaviour through structured leisure.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipality-funded youth sports leagues, nature retreats, blue health initiatives, and communal gardening projects.

Psychosocial Approaches in Prevention

Importance of mental health support in drug prevention

Key insight	Description	Expert Commentary
Mental Health as a Protective Factor	<p>Strong mental health acts as a buffer against peer pressure, emotional distress, and maladaptive coping strategies like substance use.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Prevention strategies should embed mental health promotion as a core element, not an afterthought. » • Skills like emotional regulation, effective communication, and resilience prepare them to face life’s difficulties. Additionally, when mental health is taken seriously, stigma is reduced, creating a more inclusive and supportive school environment. • Teaching youth to name their emotions and express them safely
High Co-Occurrence of Mental Health Issues & Substance Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety, depression, and trauma are common among youth who experiment with substances, often as a form of self-medication. • Substances and experimentation with them are often a reflection of unawareness of the consequences, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Isolation among youth often manifests as emotional and psychological disconnection. Many young people feel profoundly alone and detached, which constitutes a significant risk factor that is difficult to address because it is deeply internal and not immediately visible. » • «Addiction stems from pain. If a young person feels seen, safe, and supported, they’re much less likely to escape into harmful behaviours. »



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	emotional unfulfillment, and shortcuts to overcome life problems.	
Need for Holistic Approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combining education, counselling, and family involvement increases programme relevance and sustainability Programmes must go beyond education and include safe spaces, positive role models, peer groups, physical activity and creative expression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Providing young people with a sense of purpose, identity, and belonging» «We need initiatives that connect the dots – not just knowledge, but places to feel, move, belong, and matter. A leaflet won’t change a life, but a community can. »
Early Intervention is Key	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support must be accessible before crisis hits – ideally in primary and lower secondary education. Ongoing presence of mental health professionals in schools is essential. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «One regular conversation a month can make more difference than a hundred one-time campaigns. »
Destigmatizing Mental Health Care	Youth often avoid seeking help due to fear of judgment. Normalizing mental health care improves access and encourages earlier engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «Counseling should be seen as normal as going to a doctor. We need campaigns and school initiatives that present therapy as a sign of strength, not weakness. » «Let’s stop treating therapy like something secret or shameful. Asking for help is brave – and should be treated that way. »

Role of counselling, peer support, and therapeutic interventions

Support Mechanism	Benefits	Implementation Examples
School-Based Counselling Services	Builds trust with familiar professionals; early identification and referral of at-risk students Assistance and guidance in an institution where children and young people spend most of their time. Accessible, low-threshold mental health support. Allows early detection of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Permanent placement of psychologists in schools (e.g. pilots in Strovolos and Lakatamia with positive feedback from educators and parents) «Regular interactive lectures and workshops during or after school (which became a school project) have proven to be effective and useful. Children would learn about the consequences of substance



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	distress and reduces stigma by integrating care into everyday school life.	use in the place where they spend the most time and where they expect to acquire new knowledge. »
Peer Support Groups	Empowers youth to support one another; promotes openness and reduces stigma Normalises emotions through shared experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth-led prevention clubs co-designed by students and guided by municipal youth workers under Erasmus+ framework «During the school counseling session, there are times when students themselves suggest holding a focus group on a specific topic» Establishing student-run wellness groups in schools where peers can share their struggles and support each other.
Trauma-Informed Therapy	Addresses underlying causes of substance use Promotes healing and resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One-on-one trauma counselling integrated into afterschool wellness programs in urban youth centres
Family-Based Interventions	Strengthens family communication; aligns values and expectations between parents and youth «Parent education has proven to be highly effective. »	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structured evening workshops for parents and youth together, hosted monthly at local community schools - “Szkoła dla Rodziców” (“School for Parents”) – parent-focused workshops on how to talk with teens about emotions, risk and resilience. Not as a hierarchy or vertical relationship, but more in a horizontal sense: parents are more easily perceived as individuals who are part of the same group and share similar experiences. Parental awareness campaigns and family therapy sessions in some community programs.
Helplines & Digital Mental Health Resources	Provides anonymous and immediate support; accessible regardless of location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 24/7 national helpline in Cyprus and promotion of EU-funded digital platforms such as MindSpace or iFeelSafe “Smiling Mind”, “Driven Resilience”, “Grateful”, “Aetheria” apps. Anonymous crisis chat and helplines such as 116 111 (Poland’s child helpline).
Creative youth-centred prevention	Combines creativity with therapeutic engagement, making prevention fun and relevant to youth culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creative Prevention Labs: safe spaces where youth create prevention messages via TikTok, murals, podcasting, and short video production

Integration of psychosocial strategies with educational programs



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Integration approach	Description	Example Programs
Mental Health Education in Schools	<p>Embed emotional wellbeing, resilience, and stress management topics in the formal curriculum: focus on building relationships, creating spaces for listening, working on skills, spending time with the individuals, and understanding their needs.</p> <p>It is crucial to equip institutional and cross-sector spaces, such as schools, with dedicated support services, staffed by professionals in well-being and care.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot programs in Strovolos & Lakatamia with psychologists present in schools. • Programs like those by KEΘEA and OKANA, which include peer-led workshops and seminars on substance use prevention. • Monthly workshops “Emotions First” (Najpierw emocje) led by psychologists. Interactive sessions during school hours on stress, self-esteem and relationships.
Dual-Focus Prevention Programs	<p>Combine drug prevention with mental health support, addressing root causes and behavioural triggers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth-led campaigns that merge awareness sessions with coping strategies and wellness activities. • Eu e os Outros (Me and Others) – Portugal • “#3maj się szlaku” – long-term scouting-based programme integrating prevention, group bonding and value-building. • “Archipelag Skarbów®” – works on identity, relationships, emotions and choices
Teacher & Staff Training	<p>Equip educators with skills to detect early warning signs and respond empathetically to student needs. Extensive training to technicians, educators, and all community education partners to ensure implementation.</p> <p>Sustainability of preventive interventions, it is crucial to establish long-term commitments and encourage schools to maintain a consistent approach.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher workshops in collaboration with social workers and community mental health experts. • Eu e os Outros (Me and Others) - Portugal
Collaboration with Community Mental Health Services	<p>Build formal partnerships between schools and local services for referral, counselling, and crisis support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call-in support systems coordinated by NGOs and government social services; mobile response teams. • Connecting schools with associations of psychologists and pedagogues, governmental or non-governmental mental health support

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		<p>departments and similar initiatives has proven to be very effective.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaia Municipality and Social Services (Gaiurb) - Portugal
After-School & Extracurricular Activities	Offer creative outlets, sports, and peer-led initiatives to promote positive identity and belonging («boredom is the devil's playground»)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipality-backed youth clubs offering arts, sports, and digital storytelling as drug-free engagement. • Gaiurb; Balteiro Jovem; Escola de Ginástica (Gymnastics School - Gaia Municipality, Portugal) • Scout groups, sports clubs, volunteer initiatives, music/art workshops. “Przestrzeń Młodych” – youth-led spaces with meaningful roles and support
Cross-curricular creative prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of prevention messages in non-obvious courses like language, history, or arts using multimedia and co-creation tools. • Co-design programmes with young people to increase relevance and ownership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Creative Prevention Labs” with podcasts, murals, and youth-edited video messages across local schools. • Youth advisory boards in prevention planning. • Consulting teens in shaping school wellbeing strategies or local campaigns.
Support for Long-Term Unemployed and Labor Market Integration	«Because the lack of education, training, and unemployment are risk factors that are often associated with many dependencies. Addressing employment and environmental issues, has a very strong social component [...] to good practices in prevention. »	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escola Oficina (VET School - Gaia Municipality - Portugal) • «A local bakery hired a recovering teen— that’s real impact. »

The Role of Healthy Leisure Activities

Impact of extracurricular activities in reducing risky behaviours

Key Finding	Description	Expert Commentary
Structured Activities Reduce Idle Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing regular, purposeful after-school programs keeps youth engaged and away from risky unstructured settings. • Spaces with positive activities. 	Structured engagement can counteract exposure to drug-prone zones: keeping schools open in the afternoon transforms them into community centers where young people can engage in extracurricular activities, receive mentoring, and participate in educational workshops.
Enhances Social Skills & Emotional Well-Being	Team-based and creative activities improve communication, trust, and emotional resilience among youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Sports are essential tools for youth engagement and prevention, but for overall well-being. » • «Structured activities, build connections, and develop skills is essential. » • «Offering structured leisure activities—whether sports, art, or other community-driven projects—helps to strengthen mental health. These activities offer an emotional outlet, improve self-esteem, and provide a sense of accomplishment. » • «Artistic activities like theatre, music or visual arts create space to express emotions and build confidence. Youth learn to deal with failure, anxiety and relational challenges through practice and group reflection. »
Provides Positive Role Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through youth ambassadors, trainers, and coaches, young people are exposed to constructive influence and relatable mentorship. • Mentorship through coaches, artists, or community leaders was seen as crucial in guiding youth toward healthy choices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • «Young people respond better to messages delivered by peers and community figures they identify with. » • Programs involving former addicts as mentors (e.g., KEΘEA’s peer support initiatives).

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Encourages Healthy Coping Mechanisms	Sports, arts, and nature-based activities give youth alternatives to substance use for stress relief and self-expression.	Nature-based therapy programs (e.g., wilderness retreats) were suggested as underutilized but effective.
Community Engagement Strengthens Protective Factors	Youth participation in community-driven programs increases a sense of belonging and reinforces social accountability.	«Youth-led initiatives in municipalities supported by educators and local NGOs have shown promise in Nicosia area. » «Scouting or volunteering fosters a sense of purpose and belonging. Youth feel needed and empowered to contribute meaningfully to their communities.»

Examples of effective community-based programs

Program Name	Country	Approach	Impact
Creative Prevention Labs	Cyprus	Youth co-create prevention messages through art, video, and music in youth centers across municipalities.	Increased engagement among at-risk youth; improved ownership and emotional connection to prevention.
Community Counseling Anchors (Cyprus)	Cyprus	Municipalities host weekly school-based sessions with embedded youth psychologists and counselors.	Early identification of mental health risks; improved help-seeking behaviour and trust in local systems.
Youth Voices in Action (YViA)	Cyprus	Peer-led storytelling through podcasts and open mic events in local dialects sharing real-life challenges	Destigmatization of drug use discussions; built community solidarity and new peer support networks.
KETHEA's Open/Closed Programs	Greece	Combines housing, therapy, and job training.	85% reduction in relapse
Scout Troops / Harcerstwo	Poland	Youth-led group activities promoting values, responsibility, teamwork and community service.	Participants develop a strong sense of belonging, leadership, emotional resilience and avoid risky behaviours through consistent group engagement.

Recommendations for expanding recreational and educational opportunities



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Recommendation	Rationale	Implementation Strategies
Increase Funding for After-School Programs	Idle time after school is linked to risky behaviour. Structured engagement reduces vulnerability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipal co-funded clubs in schools with afternoon workshops (arts, fitness, mental health) led by youth mentors. • Prevention programs should be regular, but also free so that all children can attend them, even if it means using school sports fields and equipment after classes. • « Some schools previously provided activities like skating or fencing. » (Portugal)
Expand access to Sports & Arts for Low-Income Youth	More youth spaces where young people can organize gatherings, receive useful workshops and training, and debate. We need to work on making a certain number of cultural (films, plays...) and sports content free or affordable, so that young people from different economic backgrounds can participate in them.	Provide free or subsidised access to clubs and supplies; develop outreach campaigns in schools and social services. «We have the Gaia Gymnastics School. We facilitate the transportation. Everything is free.» (Portugal)
Promote Peer-Led Initiatives	Peer support is more relatable and often more effective than adult-led interventions.	Peer mentorship programs: Life skills workshops co-created with students
Enhance School-Community Collaboration	«Everyone must be involved – parents, educators/psychologists, teachers, as well as the wider community with which the child and youth spend time. Only such an approach and reach can be comprehensive.»	« A project called "Divertir com Saber," (Fun with Knowledge) which takes place on Saturday mornings. The primary objective was to address the difficulties students face in learning, on the first cycle up to the high school level. » (Gaiá Municipality, Portugal)
Use Digital Platforms for Engagement	Youth are digital natives, but prevention content must be relevant and appealing to compete with other media.	Launch co-created TikTok campaigns, gamified quizzes, and podcast episodes highlighting youth experiences, present testimonies of former addicts or mental support from experts that they can get through chat.

Collaboration Between Schools, Families, and Communities



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Best practices for multi-sector collaboration

Best Practice	Description	Example/Impact
Regular Cross-Sector Meetings	Scheduled, structured meetings between schools, municipalities, NGOs, and families.	Monthly youth-focused roundtables in Nicosia involving school counsellors, municipal youth officers, and parents.
Data Sharing & Integrated Systems	Establish shared databases and communication platforms for early detection and coordinated support.	A pilot system in Lakatamia (Cyprus) schools allows psychologists to flag vulnerable students to youth services with consent.
Joint Funding & Resource Allocation	Pooling resources between ministries, local councils, and civil society for preventive programming.	Erasmus+ KA2 initiatives combined with municipal sports funds enabled co-financed after-school programs in Strovolos (Cyprus).
Community Engagement & Participation	Inclusive planning processes that involve youth, parents, and neighbourhood representatives.	Youth co-design prevention messages, and parents sit on advisory boards for school wellness projects.
Evidence-Based Approaches	Programs and policies grounded in research, including local pilot evaluations.	Workshops built on science-based addiction modules reduced stigma and boosted understanding in two Limassol schools.

Barriers to effective coordination and how to overcome them

Barrier	Challenges	Strategies to Overcome
Lack of Communication & Silos	Ministries, NGOs, schools, and municipalities often operate independently without shared updates or frameworks. «Youth councillor, but it is the health department that is more directly involved. Distinction between health, youth, and social services becomes unclear, and these areas feel somewhat fragmented»	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish monthly cross-sector coordination meetings and centralized digital platforms for youth services communication. Integrated education network and common strategies Holistic and multidisciplinary perspective

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Funding Constraints	<p>Prevention efforts often rely on fragmented, short-term grants with no continuity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocate for multi-year funding lines; utilize Erasmus+ KA2 small-scale partnerships to seed local initiatives. • Advocate for stable funding streams; diversify sources by including private sponsors or EU funds. • Possibility of at least partial public funding • Social investors could be private sector companies. We managed to secure funding from them
Differing Priorities Across Sectors	<p>Law enforcement focuses on deterrence, education on awareness, NGOs on inclusion—lack of aligned goals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop shared strategic action plans with defined cross-sector roles co-created in facilitated workshops. • Joint, structured prevention programs focused on the real needs of users
Limited Community Trust	<p>Youth often feel alienated or judged Parents fear stigma/ Lack of parental involvement Teachers lack resources to respond.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train community-based youth workers and establish anonymous support hubs co-run by youth and professionals. • Connecting with parents and highlighting the importance of early intervention. • Building trust with families and demonstrating the long-term benefits of interventions for both parents and children.
Bureaucratic Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibilities of state and non-governmental institutions overlap. • Dispersal of services, which can hinder a coordinated and holistic approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplify administrative processes. • Provide clear guidelines for collaboration.

Strategies to strengthen family involvement in prevention programs

Strategy	Why It Works	Implementation Ideas
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Parent Education Workshops	Builds parents' understanding of youth challenges, risk factors, and communication strategies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organize monthly sessions in school auditoriums co-led by psychologists and youth; offer childcare on-site. Facilitate peer-led parent groups; connect families through community centres. Create buddy systems for newly involved families or those at risk. Ongoing need for updates. A new narrative will soon be released specifically aimed at working with families. (Portugal)
Family Support Networks	Creates a sense of shared experience, reduces stigma, and builds resilience through mutual aid.	Develop WhatsApp/Viber-based parent groups moderated by trained facilitators; connect through local councils.
Home-Based Prevention Activities	Requires building trust with families and demonstrating the long-term benefits of these interventions for both parents and children.	Provide toolkits with conversation starters, shared tasks or media recommendations.
School-Family Partnerships	Establishes a continuous loop of trust, early detection, and shared responsibility. Schools have the potential to extend their preventive role beyond the classroom, particularly in addressing environmental risk factors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assign “Prevention Liaisons” in each school to serve as point persons for parental involvement initiatives. Provide a structured program and long-term financial support «There are existing tools that could empower schools to intervene in local spaces, which are points of sale for alcohol and tobacco to minors—a practice that constitutes a crime.»
Incentive-Based Engagement	Encourages participation, especially from families under financial or time pressure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide certificates, event discounts, or gift vouchers for workshop attendance and feedback participation. Offer certificates, priority access to services, or small rewards for involvement.

Innovative Approaches and Future Directions

Use of technology and digital platforms in drug prevention

Theme	Key Insights from Experts	Examples mentioned
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Digital Co-Creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention campaigns are more effective when youth are actively involved in content creation. Co-designing ensures relevance and engagement. Educational games help youth explore consequences and healthy decision-making in a non-judgmental way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creative Prevention Labs in youth centres where teens co-create content for TikTok, podcasts, mural art A series of videos posted on TikTok – Testimonies of former addicts Scenario-based mobile games co-created with youth; app-based simulations.
Cross-Curricular Integration	Embedding digital prevention content into other subjects (e.g., literature, history) to reach wider audiences indirectly.	Educational videos and modules on drug science integrated into language and humanities subjects
Replicating International Models	Adapting proven digital prevention tools from other countries rather than starting from scratch.	"Copy-paste" effective formats from Nordic or Dutch youth-centred prevention platforms
Multi-Channel Messaging	Sole reliance on social media isn't sufficient. Digital tools should be combined with physical spaces and interpersonal follow-up to have an impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Municipalities using both social media campaigns and follow-up through local schools and youth clubs Virtual meetings with people who have overcome addiction offer authentic, emotional learning and help reduce stigma around asking for help. - Guest webinars; school-based Zoom sessions with recovered individuals sharing lived experience. Free apps can support emotional regulation, stress relief, and promote healthy habits: healthy habits — used in school and NGO-led programmes.

Interactive tools and new educational methods

Theme	Key Insights from Experts	Examples mentioned
Non-Formal & Experiential Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth respond better to hands-on, non-formal formats that blend creativity and self-expression. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Podcast creation, open-mic sessions, storytelling through short films, and youth-led local campaigns.



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiential learning through role-play fosters empathy and decision-making in realistic contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drama-based prevention sessions; peer-led scenario games; escape-room style workshops; • Music therapy; graffiti walls; film-making projects; visual journals.
Gamification & Visual Learning	<p>Gamified learning elements and interactive videos increase engagement and retention, especially in school-based prevention.</p> <p>Encourages self-reflection, identity exploration and digital literacy around emotions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug awareness escape rooms, mobile quiz apps, animations integrated into health education modules • Youth-created video blogs on personal challenges and coping; collaborative short films.
Integration Across Curricula	<p>Prevention messages should not be siloed but embedded in various subjects to foster critical thinking and holistic understanding of the issue.</p>	<p>Use of drug-related case studies in history lessons, ethical debates in philosophy, or media analysis in civics</p>
Mindfulness & Self-Regulation Practices	<p>Simple techniques can help young people manage stress, anxiety and impulsivity.</p>	<p>Breathing techniques, guided meditation in classrooms, mindfulness apps integrated in curricula.</p>

Policy recommendations and areas for further research

Policy Area	Recommendation	Expected Impact
School-Based Mental Health Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalise full-time school psychologists and youth counselors across all secondary schools. • Ensure free, discreet, and timely access to psychological and therapeutic support for youth. 	<p>Early detection of vulnerabilities; reduced stigma and improved mental wellbeing in school settings.</p>
Youth Participation in Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce structured funding schemes (e.g., Erasmus+ KA2) for youth-led awareness and peer education initiatives. • Involve youth from diverse backgrounds in co-creating prevention strategies. • Study the long-term effects of youth-led initiatives in prevention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger youth ownership and increased relevance of prevention content. • Ensures relevance, cultural sensitivity, and better uptake across communities. • Validates bottom-up approaches; informs more effective and sustainable programming.

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<p>Integration of Drug Education in Curriculum</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embed drug prevention themes across subjects like health, civics, and history using experiential, multimedia tools. • Introduce mandatory, recurring workshops on mental health, emotions, stress and peer pressure. • Equip teachers with tools to recognise early warning signs and address emotional distress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased understanding and critical thinking on substance use among youth. • Builds emotional literacy and resilience; reduces demand for substance use as a coping mechanism.
<p>Community-Based Infrastructure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish local youth hubs that offer recreational, creative, and support-based services accessible to all adolescents. • Develop family-focused interventions and co-educational models in schools. 	<p>Reduction in risky behaviours by offering safe, healthy leisure alternatives and promoting inclusion.</p>
<p>Support for Peer Mentoring</p>	<p>Formalise and fund peer support programmes in schools and communities.</p>	<p>Strengthens youth engagement, increases help-seeking, and leverages lived experience as prevention.</p>
<p>Substance Access Control</p>	<p>Peer mentorship programs: life skills workshops co-created with students.</p>	<p>Reduced youth access to gateway substances.</p>
<p>Digital Safety</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require platforms to prioritize verified mental health resources in algorithms. • Create national frameworks for online prevention using youth-friendly content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased exposure to substance use misinformation and promotion. • Makes support accessible, especially to marginalised or remote youth; increases reach.

Recommendations for Improvement

Key takeaways from experts on enhancing prevention efforts

Theme	Key Insights from experts	Examples mentioned	Recommendations
Early Intervention	Integrate prevention into mainstream curricula using non-formal tools and relatable content across subject areas.	Use of videos and drug education content in language/history lessons; "Creative Prevention Labs" in youth centres.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reform education to embed drug education across disciplines and launch cross-sector prevention labs at municipal level. Mandate annual mental health screenings in middle schools. Establish a system of regular psychoeducational activities from early adolescence onward.
Community Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local actors such as municipalities, clubs, and families are essential in reinforcing positive behaviours and offering alternative social engagement opportunities. «Everyone needs to get involved, including the media. There is no school that promotes drugs and violence, but what if a child goes to YouTube or social networks, there is no censorship. And that cannot be changed, but it can be influenced how the child views these contents, how he reacts to them and acts. » 	Youth hubs in municipalities, call centers with multi-agency backing, and family-inclusive events Local festivals, charity events, outdoor prevention campaigns, youth advisory groups	Establish permanent youth spaces with access to creative activities, counseling, and civic engagement programs.
Holistic Approaches	Risk behaviours are not isolated prevention must also tackle co-occurring issues like radicalisation, digital addiction, and socio-economic pressure.	Prevention programs blending mental health, arts, physical activity, and identity exploration Workshops on emotions and relationships; mindfulness in schools;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt whole-life programming: combine sports, creative expression, peer support, and digital wellbeing into unified interventions. Integrate job training with prevention programs.



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		volunteer and service projects.	
Youth-Centred Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Messages resonate when co-designed and delivered by youth. • Traditional campaigns lack traction if perceived as top-down or moralistic. 	TikTok campaigns co-developed by youth, peer ambassador clubs, youth-led podcast series Peer-led programmes; storytelling initiatives; youth-designed spaces and content.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create funding streams for youth-led prevention media, encourage co-creation hubs, and embed peer educators into formal school plans. • Involve young people in the design, delivery, and evaluation of prevention programmes. • Offer structured roles such as youth ambassadors or peer facilitators and provide training and mentoring to build their confidence and leadership skills.
Safe & Inclusive Spaces	Young people need welcoming physical and digital spaces where they can speak openly.	Youth lounges, online chat rooms, moderated forums, drop-in centres with mentors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in diverse youth spaces — both offline and online — that are safe, youth-led, and inclusive. Ensure the presence of trusted adults but give young people ownership over the design and use of the space. • Create mechanisms for anonymous feedback and self-referral.

Actionable steps for policymakers, educators, and community leaders

Target Group	Actionable Steps	Challenges	Suggested Solutions
Policymakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund and institutionalize school-based prevention and mental health services. • Support youth-led initiatives. • Legislate psychologist-to-student ratios in schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucratic delays limited cross-ministry collaboration. • Short-termism in funding cycles. • Substance abuse was once a major issue, it is no longer perceived as such, resulting in less funding and attention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce flexible, multi-annual youth prevention budgets. • Incentivize inter-ministerial task forces.



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Educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate drug prevention content across curricula (e.g. through language, history). Receive training in early identification. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of training Burnout Curriculum overload Long-term implementation and engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include prevention and wellbeing modules in teacher professional development; co-develop lessons with youth experts. Constant training and education about new substances and ways to prevent addiction.
Community Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate safe community spaces and youth clubs, support culturally relevant and non-formal prevention activities. Map local risk factors (e.g. drug hotspots). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited infrastructure Stigma in smaller communities Low youth participation Volunteer burnout Limited municipal budgets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transform municipal buildings into multipurpose youth hubs. Engage local artists, influencers, and trusted adults. Dedicated prevention line items in local budgets Set up youth councils or participatory budgeting to ensure their ideas influence actual planning. Address stigma by including testimonies and lived experience voices in community events.
Law Enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shift from punitive to harm-reduction models in youth interactions. Collaborate in awareness campaigns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trust deficit between youth and police. Outdated methods of outreach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Train officers in youth-friendly approaches Co-host dialogue-based sessions with schools and NGOs. Promote community policing practices focused on trust and support rather than surveillance.
Youth Ambassadors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empower youth ambassadors and grassroots campaigns. Support research and data collection on local patterns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth often lack formal power and resources. Disconnect between their ideas and institutional support. Low recognition of peer leadership roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launch micro-funding programs for youth initiatives (e.g. Erasmus+ KA2). Involve youth in local planning committees. Develop clear protocols for collaboration between professionals and peer workers. Ensure supervision and emotional support is available to young leaders.

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			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight successful peer-led interventions in policy discussions and funding applications.
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Strategies for increasing youth engagement and awareness

Strategy	Effectiveness	Examples Mentioned	Recommendations
Peer Mentorship Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High – trusted by youth, enhances relatability and peer influence. • Knowing how to communicate effectively with young people and tailoring the message to them. • Proper training in program development and transversal skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local examples of youth ambassadors leading awareness sessions in schools and youth clubs. • Workshops where ex-addicts or young people with minor convictions testify about their experiences in rehabilitation. • «When I worked in treatment, I used to attend to people with heroin dependency, and they would ask me to conduct sessions in schools. At the time, I didn't realize how inappropriate this was. » 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalize and scale through school clubs and municipal youth offices. • Train peer mentors in basic skills. • It requires different skills and tools.
Social Media Campaigns	Mixed – limited standalone impact unless integrated with offline engagement.	TikTok-based prevention labs, podcasts, influencer involvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use culturally relevant creators and combine digital with in-person outreach. • Co-create campaigns with young people – from scripting to visual design. Use relatable narratives, real peer voices, humour and creativity. • Avoid moralising tones. • Partner with influencers who represent diversity (e.g. neurodivergent, LGBTQ+, migrant youth). Evaluate engagement metrics to adapt content in real time

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<p>Experiential Learning</p>	<p>Very High – boosts emotional connection and practical knowledge.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storytelling projects, school workshops, art-based programs (e.g., mural creation, mini-documentaries). • Youth-designed prevention clubs in collaboration with schools and NGOs. • Theatre-based workshops, “emotional first aid” games, outdoor experiential projects. • Short but effective video testimonials from ex-addicts and young people in rehab posted on TikTok. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include arts, music, and drama in Erasmus+ youth actions, fund cross-disciplinary methods. • Offer flexible formats adapted to different youth groups — including NEET youth or those outside mainstream education. • Provide continuity (e.g. multi-week formats) to deepen impact.
<p>Incentivized Participation</p>	<p>Moderate to High – increases reach and retention, especially for hard-to-engage youth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local mini-grants, Erasmus+ KA2 youth-led activities, volunteer certifications. • Point-based systems for volunteering, recognition via certificates or media, access to special events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create micro-funding for prevention ideas; offer certificates, mentorship, and travel support. • Support youth councils to co-create awareness agendas with municipalities and education stakeholders. • Design flexible incentive models tailored to local realities. • Mix tangible (e.g. vouchers, trips) and symbolic (e.g. badges, shout-outs) rewards. • Avoid competitive ranking — instead reward consistency, creativity and collaboration. Involve youth in defining what feels motivating and fair.
<p>Safe & Creative Youth Spaces</p>	<p>Ownership of space and atmosphere increases autonomy, trust and willingness to participate.</p>	<p>Drop-in centres with music/art corners; youth-designed interiors; informal co-run workshops.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the development of co-governed youth spaces where participants set the tone, decor, activities and even opening hours. Ensure these are inclusive (queer-friendly, culturally safe, neurodiversity-aware). • Combine unstructured “hanging out” space with light facilitation from trained staff.



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			<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote these spaces through channels used by youth (e.g. Discord, IG).
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2.2 Summary of Key Findings from Expert Consultations:

This transnational report consolidates insights from expert consultations across Cyprus, Serbia, Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Poland regarding youth substance use prevention and mental health support. Despite different local contexts, several common challenges emerge across these countries. There is a clear increase in the normalization and easy access to substances like cannabis, vapes, edibles, and synthetic drugs, often driven by peer pressure, social media, and unstructured free time. Mental health problems, particularly anxiety, depression, and trauma, are widely recognized as key drivers behind substance use. However, early access to youth-friendly psychological support remains insufficient. Fragmentation within prevention services, lack of coordination between sectors, and prevention programs that feel outdated or disconnected from young people’s realities were recurrent concerns. Families frequently struggle to provide adequate emotional support due to time constraints or lack of tools, while teachers and youth workers often lack the training and clear referral mechanisms needed to identify and assist vulnerable youth.

Risk factors tend to be interconnected, involving dysfunctional family situations, social and digital isolation—exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic—peer influences, academic disengagement, and socioeconomic difficulties. Worries about polysubstance use and misuse of prescription or synthetic drugs, often fuelled by digital content, are rising. Both urban and rural areas face distinct challenges; rural communities sometimes benefit from stronger social cohesion but suffer from limited infrastructure and stigma.

Across the countries, schools are recognized as crucial entry points for effective prevention. Embedding full-time psychologists, introducing emotional literacy programs from an early age, and facilitating student co-created workshops that address real risks help make prevention more relevant. Peer-led and participatory approaches are essential to fostering trust and authenticity,



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with youth actively involved in designing and delivering prevention efforts through mentorship, relatable storytelling, and campaigns.

Community and informal spaces like youth centres, sports facilities, arts-based programs, and broader community hubs provide accessible, low-threshold environments that promote emotional regulation, social inclusion, and a sense of belonging. Creative and experiential methods, including arts, sports, and nature-based activities, support emotional expression and identity building in ways that resonate with young people.

Sustainable prevention requires coordinated efforts among schools, families, healthcare providers, NGOs, and local authorities, facilitated by clear communication and joint planning. Digital innovation plays a vital role, with mental health apps, gamified educational tools, anonymous chat services, and influencer-driven social media campaigns effectively reaching and engaging youth.

Each country brings specific emphases reflecting local needs and conditions. Cyprus highlights co-creation, culturally grounded dialogue, and the importance of building long-term community infrastructure to counter mistrust of formal institutions. Serbia stresses the necessity of stable funding and structured programs, with a particular focus on early intervention for children affected by parental addiction and the inclusion of extracurricular activities. Portugal calls for holistic and integrated prevention strategies involving intergenerational dialogue and community engagement, while also noting challenges in parental involvement. Italy advocates for territorial and experiential approaches that engage youth beyond clinical or didactic school methods, emphasizing informal dialogue spaces and participatory methodologies. Greece focuses on the mental health fallout from the pandemic, the need for centralized coordination of prevention efforts, the creation of school-based support hubs, and the importance of combating misinformation on social media. Poland demonstrates success with emotional development-based programs, informal support environments, and creative digital engagement strategies.

The experts collectively emphasize the urgent need for consistent, long-term investment in prevention and mental health support services. Integrating psychosocial care into schools and





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informal youth settings, prioritizing youth-centred and co-created interventions that genuinely reflect young people's complex realities and strengthening cross-sector partnerships to improve coordination and streamline referrals are vital. Expanding the use of digital and creative tools will enhance accessibility and relevance.

While national priorities and methods vary, the core message is clear: effective youth substance use prevention must be deeply embedded in daily life, culturally sensitive, participatory, and supported by sustainable infrastructure and funding. Scaling up successful local initiatives and formalizing multisector collaboration will be essential for developing resilient, youth-friendly prevention ecosystems across Europe.



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3. Recommendations for Action

Based on the data collected across national contexts, several key recommendations emerge for the next steps of the project and for broader improvements to youth support systems.

3.1 Youth Recommendations:

- **Rethink drug education** by making it clear, relatable, and science based. Avoid judgmental or fear-based messages—young people engage more with honest, practical information.
- **Use interactive and experiential methods**, like simulations, creative workshops, role-playing, and storytelling. These approaches are more memorable and impactful than passive lectures.
- **Promote peer mentorship**, where trained youth leaders or slightly older peers share real-life experiences in a way that feels authentic and non-preachy.
- **Integrate mental health support** into everyday school life, including emotional regulation workshops, stress management tools, and visible access to counselling.
- **Create safe, informal spaces**—online or offline—where young people can relax, express themselves, and talk openly about their challenges without judgement.
- **Organise drug-free recreational activities** such as sports, music events, volunteering, or cultural outings that offer fun and connection without substances.
- **Support creative self-expression**, through group projects in art, music, or digital media, helping youth process emotions and build identity.
- **Reach youth through digital platforms**, using engaging formats like podcasts, short videos, and influencer-led campaigns that speak their language and context.
- **Ensure early and inclusive access** to support services, especially for vulnerable groups, and simplify pathways to get help when it's needed.
- **Embed prevention in real life**, not just in theory—let young people lead, co-create, and be part of the solution.

3.2 Expert Recommendations:

- **Embed mental health professionals full-time in secondary schools**, especially in rural or underserved areas, to provide consistent, accessible psychosocial support where it is most needed.
- **Ensure long-term and stable financing of school-based prevention programmes**, with a focus on early intervention, particularly for vulnerable and low-income youth.
- **Strengthen cross-sector collaboration** by creating structured communication between schools, healthcare providers, NGOs, and local authorities, enabling a coordinated and holistic approach to prevention.
- **Support youth-led initiatives and peer-based approaches**, offering small-scale but stable funding for prevention labs, campaigns, and participatory programmes that give young people ownership of solutions.
- **Train teachers and school staff regularly** to identify early signs of emotional distress, anxiety, or substance use, and refer students effectively to appropriate support.
- **Create inclusive, low-threshold after-school spaces** that combine structured leisure, creative expression, and mentoring, reinforcing a sense of belonging and emotional safety.
- **Use digital tools strategically**—such as apps, gamified learning, and anonymous support platforms—to reach and engage youth, while also addressing issues like social media dependency.
- **Promote emotional literacy education** from an early age (10–12), integrating it into the curriculum to build long-term resilience and coping skills.
- **Involve families meaningfully** through parent education programmes and school–home partnerships, ensuring consistent support across the youth’s environment.
- **Adopt and adapt successful international prevention models**, tailoring them to local cultural and institutional contexts rather than developing isolated or ad hoc strategies.



Conclusion

This transnational synthesis draws on comprehensive data from youth surveys and expert consultations conducted across six European countries—Cyprus, Serbia, Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Poland—to elucidate convergences and divergences in youth substance use motivations, prevention challenges, and effective responses. The integration of these two complementary perspectives, those of young people themselves and those of prevention experts, provides a nuanced understanding of the youth drug prevention landscape, highlighting both shared realities and context-specific variations.

From the youth surveys, there is a remarkable consistency across countries regarding the core motivations behind substance use. Young people overwhelmingly report using substances primarily to have fun, manage stress, and respond to peer pressure. These motivations cut across diverse socio-cultural settings, suggesting universal psychosocial drivers. However, nuances emerge respondents from Southern European countries (Portugal, Italy, Greece) more frequently associate substance use with emotional self-regulation and mood improvement, whereas in Cyprus and Serbia—both located in Southeastern Europe—social belonging, group conformity, and the need for acceptance within peer groups carry greater weight. Urban youth report higher levels of substance accessibility and use, while rural youth, despite lower usage rates, face significant barriers in accessing prevention and support services, compounded by infrastructural limitations and social stigma.

Young participants also highlight a spectrum of substances with varied awareness: common substances such as cannabis, alcohol, and nicotine are well-recognized and considered addictive, while awareness about newer or less mainstream substances—such as fentanyl, LSD, and synthetic drugs—is uneven and frequently limited. This reflects an educational gap that varies between countries, with Greek youth generally displaying higher self-reported knowledge, and Polish and Serbian youth showing notable uncertainty about less common substances.

In parallel, the expert consultations confirm many of these observations but add critical insights regarding systemic barriers and intervention strategies. Experts across all countries emphasize the growing normalization and accessibility of various substances, facilitated by peer dynamics,





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social media influence, and unstructured free time, especially after pandemic-related disruptions. Mental health issues—particularly anxiety, depression, and trauma—are repeatedly identified as significant underlying risk factors for substance use, with a shared concern about insufficient early access to youth-friendly psychological support services.

Experts also consistently point to fragmentation and lack of coordination within prevention services as a major challenge, noting that prevention programs often feel outdated or disconnected from the real-life experiences of young people. Families frequently lack the time, tools, or capacity to provide adequate emotional support, while teachers and youth workers report limited training and unclear referral pathways to assist vulnerable youth effectively.

Poland stands out in this transnational landscape by demonstrating promising innovation in youth engagement and prevention strategies. Expert feedback highlights the successful integration of emotional development-focused programs, informal community spaces that promote belonging and emotional regulation, and creative digital interventions—such as mental health apps, gamified learning, and influencer-led social media campaigns. These initiatives respond directly to the identified gaps in traditional, didactic prevention approaches and the fragmented service landscape. Polish experts emphasize the importance of peer mentorship and experiential learning as tools for building trust, resilience, and emotional engagement, especially for marginalized groups including LGBTQ+ youth and neurodiverse individuals.

A key area of convergence between youth and experts lies in the recognition of schools as essential settings for prevention efforts. Both groups stress the value of embedding full-time mental health professionals in educational environments, introducing emotional literacy programs early in the schooling process, and facilitating co-created, peer-led workshops that address substance use candidly and relate to young people lived experiences. Youth highlight a strong preference for interactive, honest, and participatory approaches, rejecting fear-based or purely didactic models; experts echo this by advocating for experiential and culturally grounded prevention methodologies that promote trust and authenticity.

However, differences emerge in the emphasis placed on certain aspects. Experts place more weight on institutional challenges—such as securing long-term funding, fostering cross-sector collaboration, and strengthening referral systems—whereas youth focus more on the quality and





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relevance of the prevention content and delivery methods, including the need for safe, informal spaces (both physical and online) to express themselves without judgment. Parental involvement is another domain where the two perspectives intersect but also diverge: while experts frequently highlight the lack of effective parental engagement as a barrier to prevention, young people underscore the importance of supportive families but sometimes perceive adults as judgmental or disconnected from their realities.

Geographic and cultural differences also shape both expert and youth perspectives. Southern European countries (Portugal, Italy, Greece) report more frequent linkage of substance uses to emotional distress and psychological coping, while countries in Southeastern Europe (Cyprus, Serbia) emphasize social conformity and community belonging. Poland’s experience highlights the potential of innovative digital tools and creative community spaces to engage youth emotionally and culturally, reflecting a more technologically integrated prevention landscape.

In terms of recommendations, both youth and experts advocate strongly for peer-led and youth-centred prevention approaches that are emotionally intelligent and contextually relevant. There is broad agreement on the necessity of moving away from impersonal or fear-based messaging towards participatory, engaging methods that empower youth as active agents in prevention. Experts add the imperative of institutionalizing these approaches through stable, long-term funding and multi-sectoral coordination involving schools, healthcare, NGOs, families, and local authorities. Digital innovation is embraced across the board but is seen as complementary to—not a replacement for—trusted face-to-face support.

The convergence on the value of safe, inclusive spaces—where young people can engage in recreational, creative, and social activities without substance use—is striking across countries, underscoring the importance of community infrastructure alongside educational interventions. This aligns with youth calls for more authentic connection and less formality in prevention efforts.

In conclusion, this detailed comparison of youth and expert perspectives across multiple European contexts underscores that effective youth substance uses prevention demands a balanced approach. It must integrate universal psychosocial insights with culturally and locally tailored strategies, embed mental health support deeply within daily youth environments, and leverage both digital and community-based tools. Success hinges on the meaningful inclusion of





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young people as co-creators, the provision of holistic and stable support systems, and the fostering of multisectoral partnerships.

As the project progresses, these findings call for a clear focus on scaling participatory, culturally sensitive prevention programs that bridge formal education, family engagement, and community involvement. Strengthening youth leadership in program design and delivery will be critical, alongside investments in sustainable infrastructure and integrated digital platforms. Cross-country exchange of best practices and lessons learned should be prioritized to enhance adaptability and impact.

Ultimately, the path forward demands a collective, coordinated response that respects both shared challenges and local particularities. By centring youth voices and reinforcing collaborative frameworks, the project can drive transformative changes towards resilient, inclusive prevention ecosystems across Europe.



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