

7.0 Introduction

Education as the foundation of a safe society

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KEY MESSAGES

- **A longer educational pathway, provided on equal terms for all, helps prevent offending.** The state has a duty to provide education that accommodates pupils with different abilities and ensures equal opportunities for development. However, the current regulatory framework is at times overly general and leaves the boundaries of schools' responsibilities unclear. This creates unequal conditions for young people in accessing education and continuing their studies. A pupil's ability to cope at school influences the kind of education they receive and how far they progress. The higher the level of education attained, the lower the risk of offending in adulthood.
- **A safe and supportive school environment significantly reduces the risk of deviant behaviour among young people.** The risk is higher among pupils who attend schools perceived as disorganised – schools where theft, fighting, vandalism and substance use are more common. Young people who feel safe at school and have strong bonds with it are nearly one third less likely to commit an offence than those whose ties to school are weaker.
- **Adolescent offending often occurs immediately after school hours – equally accessible extracurricular education would help address this problem.** On school days, adolescents most frequently commit offences between 14:00 and 20:00, when lessons have just ended, young people spend more time together and adult supervision is limited. Extracurricular education can effectively prevent adolescent offending if it is easily accessible to as many young people as possible during this risk period.



INTRODUCTION

Education carries a far-reaching responsibility: to support pupils' development into law-abiding members of society. Section 2(3)2) of the Estonian Education Act provides that the purpose of education is to shape individuals who respect and abide by the law.

This objective is directed at preventing deviant behaviour among both children and adults. The more effectively education fulfils this aim, the more it can influence young people's behaviour and the fewer resources are likely to be required to address the consequences of offending. The five articles in this chapter are framed by the view that education is a cornerstone of Estonia's security. The course and quality of education have a tangible impact on the prevalence of risk behaviour among school-age young people and adults.

The chapter begins by examining weaknesses in the Estonian school system, including in addressing the needs of vulnerable children and preventing deviant behaviour. It outlines the current approach to dealing with juvenile offenders. Based on recent data, the chapter analyses the types of offences committed by school-age young people in Estonia, the ages at which they occur and the times of day when they are most frequent. It also examines how educational attainment may affect offending in adulthood and the course of related criminal proceedings. The findings enable a more considered assessment of how to prevent youth deviance more effectively and thereby strengthen security in Estonia.

SCHOOLS CARRY GREAT EXPECTATIONS, BUT NOT SOLE RESPONSIBILITY

In their article, Aigi Kivioja and Ülle Madise point to the importance of the state's obligation to provide education suited to pupils with different abilities and to ensure equal opportunities for development. Their analysis shows that the current regulatory framework is, in places, too general and leaves the scope of schools' responsibilities unclear – for example, in organising support services for children in need and regulating

smartphone use. Academic workload may also vary considerably between schools, including in the volume of homework. School life must be regulated clearly enough to ensure consistent rules and equal opportunities for every child to fulfil compulsory education requirements and progress in education.

Schools are increasingly expected to do more: alongside teaching, they are also expected to prevent and address social problems. Andra Reinomägi and Ingrid Saarepuu emphasise that children in need must be identified early and supported promptly in order to prevent harmful consequences both for the child and for society. Effective prevention of offending begins long before the first contact with the justice system and depends, among other factors, on close cooperation between education and social welfare services. Children in need must be supported where they are, whether at school or at home; what matters most is that intervention is not delayed. Although schools play a central role, they cannot meet these expectations without strong cross-sector cooperation, clearly defined responsibilities and well-functioning support structures.

RISK BEHAVIOUR DEPENDS ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S SENSE OF BELONGING

Anna Markina's article shows that youth risk behaviour increases sharply when pupils do not feel supported at school and experience exclusion or insecurity. A school environment that provides a sense of safety significantly reduces the risk of deviant behaviour among minors. Young people who feel safe at school and have strong bonds with it are around one third less likely to commit an offence than those with weaker school attachment. Weak attachment is reported particularly by basic school pupils, especially those whose first language is Russian and children from families with fewer resources. The article also shows that nearly one fifth of young people in Estonia experience cyberviolence. The most common forms include threats, hate speech and the non-consensual distribution of intimate images. The highest-risk group again consists of basic school pupils, particularly Russian-speaking

pupils from economically vulnerable families. Boys more often commit offences related to cyberviolence, while victims are predominantly girls. Much of young people's communication now takes place in virtual environments, and school has become one of the principal physical spaces for interaction during the day. This further increases the importance of schools in shaping young people's behaviour. Much of young people's communication now takes place in virtual environments, and school has become one of the principal physical spaces for interaction during the day. This further increases the importance of schools in shaping young people's behaviour.

ADOLESCENT OFFENDING PEAKS AFTER SCHOOL ON SCHOOL DAYS, BETWEEN 14:00 AND 20:00

The article by Eneli Kindsiko, Mario Truu and Rajar Miller provides the first systematic overview of the days and times when school-age young people in Estonia most frequently commit offences. Adolescent offences occur most often on school days, particularly on Fridays, with the main risk window falling between 14:00 and 20:00. By then, lessons have just ended, young people are spending time together, and adult supervision is often limited – for example, because parents are still at work. During this period, non-formal education could structure adolescents' daily routines and offer meaningful, appealing opportunities for self-realisation that take account of their social needs while also helping to prevent potential offences.

Adolescents, however, participate least in extracurricular education: among 16–19-year-olds, only around one quarter take part in organised extracurricular activities. The problem is compounded by the fact that children from lower-income families have more limited access to extracurricular activities and, at the same time, face a higher risk of dropping out of school and coming into conflict with the law. Extracurricular education can effectively prevent adolescent offending if it is made easily accessible to as many young people as possible during the 14:00–20:00 period on school days. In this sense, extracurricular education is not merely a way of occupying free time but a socially cost-effective

preventive measure. Research has shown that every euro invested in youth sport, and particularly in extracurricular activities for at-risk youth, may yield savings to society of up to 44 euros.¹ This is another illustration of how strengthening public safety is directly and inseparably linked to education and youth policy: non-formal education may be one of the most effective means of reducing youth deviant behaviour.

INTERRUPTED EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS ARE COSTLY FOR SOCIETY

In their article, Andri Ahven and Ingrid Saarepuu examine whether a young person's educational pathway influences their likelihood of leading a law-abiding life in adulthood. They conclude that education beyond basic education significantly reduces the risk of offending in adulthood. This risk is highest among men with low levels of education, particularly in violent and property offences. Individuals with lower educational attainment are also at greater risk of becoming victims of domestic violence. Among persons with higher education, not only is the likelihood of offending substantially lower but the probability of being referred to court is also lower, as prosecutors are more likely to consider court proceedings unnecessary. This means that the higher the level of education, the lower the burden on the criminal justice system and the lower the cost to the state. At the same time, certain less frequent and more specific offences, such as corruption or tax crimes, may become more likely as education levels rise, since they require specific knowledge or access to positions of authority.

The fact that educating individuals is considerably less costly for society than dealing with offenders later in life is illustrated by the following comparison. In the 2023/24 academic year, the average annual public expenditure per pupil in general education schools in Estonia was €6,071.² By contrast, the average cost of maintaining one prisoner is €3,027 per month, or €36,324 per year, and the average cost per probationer is €130 per month, or €1,560 per year.³ Thus, educating a child is, on average, six times less expensive for the state than keeping an offender in prison.

HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?

Political choices in allocating resources. In their reflections, Ivo Visak, Madis Kallas and Raul Kadaste all point, in different ways, to a shortage of resources in both education and social welfare – whether in unequal access to support services and extracurricular activities or in difficulties participating in everyday learning. Recurring themes include the lack of support specialists, uneven levels of competence among professionals working with children, limited resources for teachers to address the concerns of children and young people preventively, and parents' varying capacity to support their children, depending on municipal context and socio-economic background. These challenges must be addressed primarily at the political level – mainly nationally, but in some cases also at the municipal level. Additional resources are needed to alleviate shortages of educational and support staff, raise professional standards and strengthen preventive capacity. At the same time, municipalities should be supported through compensatory measures and targeted subsidies to ensure more equal access to existing services.

Translating values education from paper into practice. A second major challenge concerns entrenched attitudes and mindsets, as noted by Ivo Visak, Raul Kadaste, Gerli Brifk and Jürgen Rakaselg. The contemporary curriculum not only

allows but explicitly expects schools to engage in values education alongside traditional academic instruction. In practice, however, established norms within schools and society are often at odds with these expectations, and the persistence of such discrepancies is frequently defended by reference to school and teacher autonomy. In addition to grades, factual knowledge and standardised test results, greater attention should be paid to formative values and soft skills, so that prevention does not remain merely a formal commitment on paper.

Making parental education preventive. The root causes of risk behaviour among children and young people, and the possibilities for prevention, almost always extend beyond the school environment – into the home, kindergarten or extracurricular settings, as emphasised by Gerli Brifk, Madis Kallas and Raul Kadaste. While the expectations placed on schools and education professionals have changed over recent decades, support for parents must also reflect contemporary knowledge about child development and prevention. This may involve evidence-based programmes to support young people already exhibiting risk behaviour, as well as sustained, structured cooperation between families and educational institutions. Existing approaches should be systematised and shifted from reactive responses towards preventive action.

REFERENCES

1. See V. Gosselin, D. Boccanfuso, S. Laberge, Social return on investment (SROI) method to evaluate physical activity and sport interventions: A systematic review. – *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 17, 2020.
2. Cost per student. – Haridussilm, 19.05.2024, <https://haridussilm.ee/en/node/37>.
3. A. Saarniit, Vangide ülalpidamine maksab riigile iga kuu miljoneid eurosid. – *Postimees*, 18.09.2024.