CASE STUDY

Street Outreach in Molenbeek: Building Trust with Disaffiliated Youth

Level 2 – Application | Module 1 – Engaging Disaffiliated Youth in Real Contexts | Belgium

Country	Belgium (Brussels – Molenbeek-Saint-Jean)
Title	Street Outreach in Molenbeek: Building First Contact with Disaffiliated Youth
Organiser / Provider	Youth Centre – Maison de Jeunes (fictitious composite, based on field practices in Molenbeek, Brussels)
Target Group	Young men aged 15–25, school dropouts, NEET, socially disengaged, visible in public spaces
Theme / Focus Area	Youth disaffiliation, street outreach, low-threshold services, trust-building, first contact
Training Level & Module	Level 2 – Application | Module 1 – Engaging Disaffiliated Youth in Real Contexts

1. Context & Challenge

Molenbeek-Saint-Jean is one of the most densely populated and socio-economically deprived municipalities in the Brussels-Capital Region. Youth unemployment among 15–24 year-olds exceeds 30%, and a significant number of young people are disengaged from education, employment, and any formal support services. Many are visible daily in public spaces — parks, street corners, and commercial areas — but actively avoid contact with institutions.

The youth centre had a physical facility and programming, but was unable to reach the most disaffiliated young men. Referred youth rarely showed up for appointments. Workers observed that conventional intake models were failing this group. The challenge was not lack of services, but the invisibility of trust.

2. Intervention

Objectives

- Establish a non-threatening presence in the spaces where young people already gather
- Build relational trust before introducing any programmatic objectives
- Identify disaffiliated youth at risk and progressively link them to support services
- Demonstrate that institutional actors can be approached without fear of judgment or surveillance

Tools & Methodologies Used

- Street presence sessions (2×/week, 90 minutes, fixed locations)
- Non-directive conversation and active listening
- Motivational posture: listening without advising, validating experience
- Peer connectors: trusted young people already known to the centre who introduced workers
- Field notebooks: non-identifying notes on observations and emerging needs

• Low-threshold drop-in space opened on Fridays (no appointment, no registration required)

Duration & Actors

• Duration: 6-month pilot (January–June)
• Lead actor: 2 outreach youth workers (1 woman, 1 man)
• Supervisor: youth work coordinator with weekly reflective debriefs
• Partners: local social worker network informed but not directly present in outreach phase

3. Outcomes & Results

Over the 6-month period, the outreach team made regular contact with 47 young people previously unknown to the centre. The following outcomes were observed:

Indicator	Result
Young people reached	47 new contacts over 6 months
Voluntary re-engagement	60% re-established contact with at least one support service
Centre attendance	28% began attending the drop-in Friday space within 3 months
Referral conversions	9 young people accepted referral to employment support
Trust indicators	Workers reported significant reduction in defensive reactions by month 3

4. Learning Points

1. Presence precedes program: The most critical investment was simply being consistently present without an agenda. Young people needed to observe workers over weeks before initiating contact.

2. Gender and cultural attunement matter: Having both male and female workers enabled different relational dynamics. Workers with shared cultural or linguistic backgrounds were more quickly trusted.

3. Peer connectors as bridge-builders: Young people already connected to the centre served as informal ambassadors, dramatically accelerating trust with the most withdrawn individuals.

4. Institutional pressure undermines outreach: The team required active protection from KPI pressure during the first months. Management had to resist the urge to measure outputs too early.

5. Emotional load is real: Workers reported emotional fatigue from witnessing difficult situations without being able to intervene. Weekly debriefs and peer support were essential for sustainability.

5. Reflection Questions

For individual reflection or group discussion

1. In your own work context, what systemic or institutional pressures make it difficult to adopt a "trust before goals" approach with disaffiliated youth?

2. How do you currently manage the emotional toll of outreach work? What support mechanisms are in place for your team?

3. What one practice from this case study could you realistically introduce or strengthen in your own organisation in the next 3 months?

6. Transferability & Innovation

This model is adaptable to urban contexts in other partner countries (France, Portugal, Serbia) with the following adaptations: local peer connectors must be identified from within the specific community; the drop-in format should be co-designed with young people; and the 6-month timeline is a minimum — trust-building in highly marginalised contexts may take longer.

The innovative element is the explicit decoupling of the outreach phase from the referral phase, which is typically conflated in institutional mandates. By separating these, the programme created genuine relational trust that made eventual referrals far more effective.

⚠ Ethical & Data Protection Notice

This case study is a fictional composite constructed for training purposes, inspired by documented youth work practices in Brussels. No real individuals are identified. All names used in the companion presentation (Youssef, Amina) are fictional. Any resemblance to real persons is coincidental. When adapting this case study, practitioners must comply with GDPR requirements and obtain appropriate consent before documenting real cases involving young people.

7. Additional Resources

• Dynamo International – Street Workers Network: Field Guide for Street-Level Outreach | www.travail-de-rue.net

• Council of Europe – Compass: Manual on Human Rights Education with Young People | www.coe.int

• Eurofound (2023) – NEETs in Europe: Chapter on Belgium and outreach approaches

• EU Youth Wiki – Belgium: Youth Policy, Disaffiliation & Support Services | national.euforyouth.eu

• Kahoot Quiz: "Outreach Strategies & First Contact" (see facilitator guide for access link)