# UPSTREAM

## Prevention of youth homelessness and school drop-out

### Results from 3 Flemish pilot projects

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Vlaanderen
is kansrijk opgroeien

# What do we learn from research?

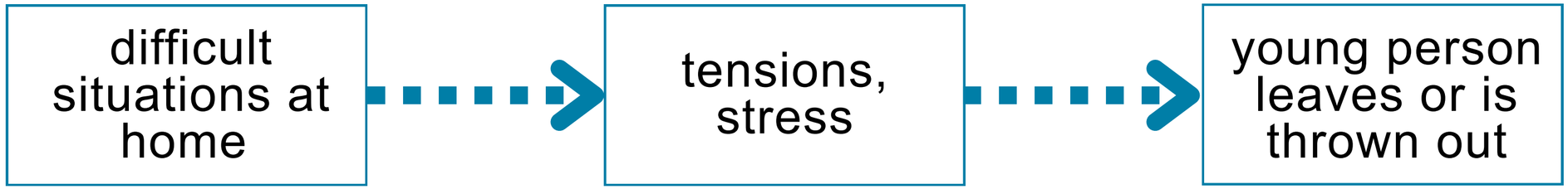
1/5 PEH counted are 16-25y

3 different supgroups

- youth care leavers
- newcomers
- Belgians without care history

Mertens, N., Demaerschalk, E., Marana, A.L., De Moor, N., Moriau, J., Wagener, M. & Hermans, K. (2026). Dak- en thuisloosheid. Globaal rapport 2025. LUCAS KU Leuven.

Demaerschalk, E., Robben, L.-I., Mertens, N., & Hermans, K. (2024). Diverse Profiles of Homeless Young Adults: Implications for Tailored Prevention Strategies—Insights from Belgian Homelessness Counts. Youth, 4(3), 1271-1286. https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4030080



What if we could detect those young adults faster?

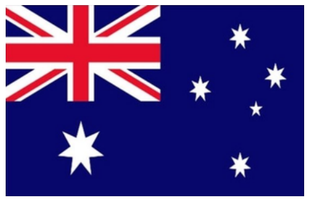
**Could we avoid them becoming homeless?**

# Yes!
## with Upstream

**40%** reduction in youth homelessness

**20%** reduction in school dropout

**Inspired by:**



Upstream Australia (former The Geelong Project)





Upstream Canada
Upstream USA
Upstream Cymru (Wales)

## How?

We conducted a broad survey in high schools

Quick and easily accessible care for the young adult and/or family

## Can we try this in Flanders?

Vlaanderen
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# 3 Flemish pilot projects

## KEMPEN

**Projectleiding**

**Upstream-team**

**COSS-partners**

ASO Spijker
HTO Turnhout
PTO Turnhout
Campos Turnhout

## MECHELEN

**Projectleiding**

**Upstream-team**

**COSS-partners**

BA Botaniek
BA De Beemden (BUSO)
BA Stassart

## ANTWERPEN

**Projectleiding**

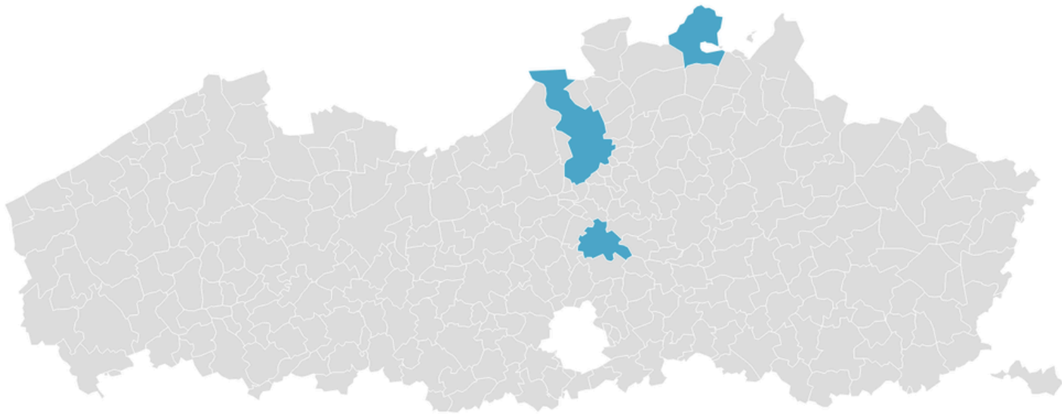
**Upstream-team**

**COSS-partners**

St Willebrord
Heilige Familie
KNMC

### Upstream regions

Mechelen, Antwerpen, De Kempen



Bron: LUCAS KU Leuven • Gecreëerd met Datawrapper

1



Students complete a standardized assessment;

2



Based on the results, students who are flagged for potential risk have the opportunity to participate in validation interviews with case managers;

3



Once needs are determined, a collaboratively developed care plan is established and students are connected to supports.

Sohn, Jacqueline. Gaetz, Stephen (2020). The Upstream Project Canada: An Early Intervention Strategy to Prevent Youth Homelessness & School Disengagement. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

# How?

1 **Upstream-survey in 10 schools**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Antwerp** | 3 schools, 325 students |
| **Mechelen** | 3 schools, 336 students |
| **Kempen** | 4 schools, 552 students |

2 **Quantitative analysis results**

- ✓ Analysis of the survey results
- ✓ Upstream workers record their client contacts in Myneva

3 **Interviews with 12 students**



4 **Focus groups with Upstream workers**

September 3rd 2024
May 12th 2025

5 **Focus groups class trajectories**

April 18th 2025

# Results

| | | Kempen | | Mechelen | | Antwerp | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Homeless youth |  | 15 | 2,7 | 22 | 6,5 | 16 | 4,9 | 53 | 4,4 |
| High risk of being homeless |  | 46 | 8,3 | 73 | 21,7 | 44 | 13,5 | 163 | 13,4 |
| Risk of being homeless and/or dropping out of school |  | 56 | 10,1 | 56 | 16,7 | 57 | 17,5 | 169 | 13,9 |
| |  | 435 | 78,9 | 185 | 55,1 | 208 | 64,1 | 828 | 68,3 |
| **Total** | | 552 | 100 | 336 | 100 | 325 | 100 | 1.213 | 100 |

**385** young people are eligible for the Upstream project

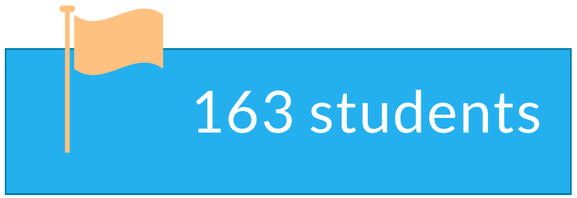


53 students

*“It wasn’t really healthy to stay at home anymore and I really didn’t feel well to the point that I had suicidal thoughts.” (student)*

*“Stepfather on drugs and alcohol so mom and I went to sleep at my grandma’s for about 2 months.” (student)*

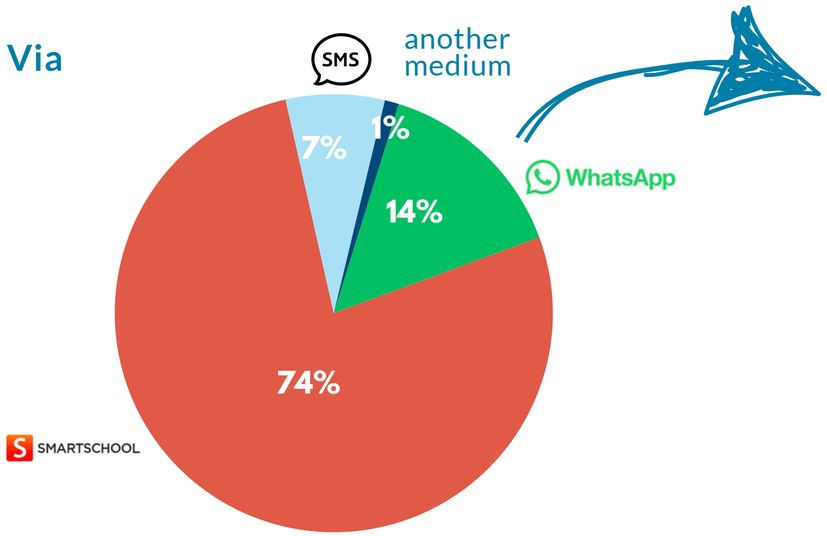
*“No need for my mother”. (student)*




| | Not at all | Usually not | Neutral | Usually | Absolutely | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I feel safe at home | X | X | | | | 42 students |
| I want to leave home soon | | | | X | X | 111 students |
| I am afraid I will be kicked out of home | | | | X | X | 50 students |
| I am afraid that I won’t have a place to live next year | | | | X | X | 19 students |
| I often have bad arguments with my parent(s) | | | | X | X | 95 students |

# Contact

Via




**1/2** does not react (47,7%)

**1/3** wants to meet (30,4%)

**1/6** reacts but does not want to meet (17,3%)

## WHAT WORKS?

visibility Upstream-worker in school

free

accessible

anonymous

Fast/no waiting list

Meetings at school

demand-oriented

Voluntary

Warm

Familiar face after school survey

# Youth experiences

*It was a kind of therapy that I actually needed. Things I couldn't tell my family, I could tell her. She keeps it all anonymous, and only she knows, and she looks for solutions. (student)*

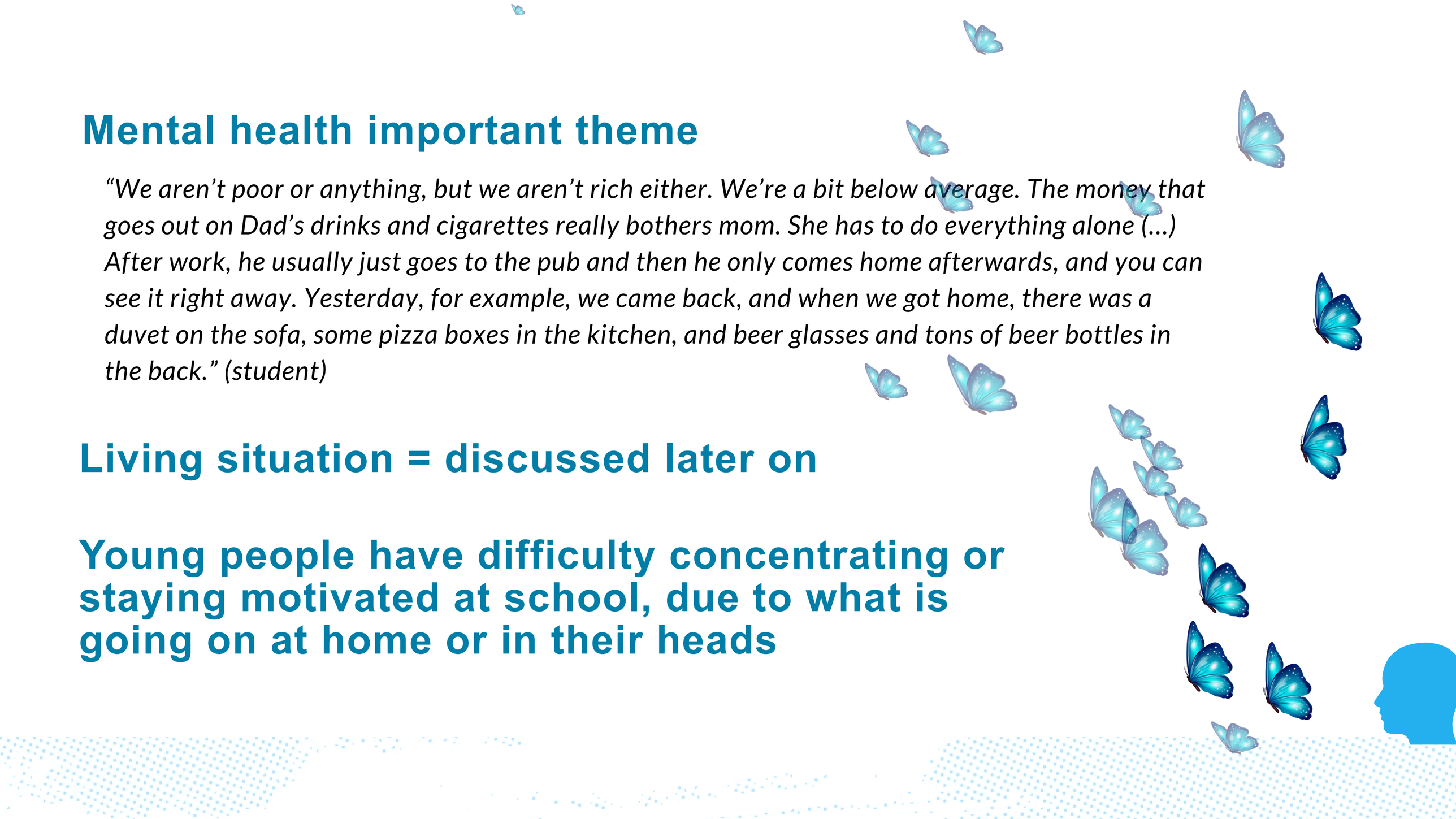
*I never tell people things, because I have little trust. But the Upstream worker kind of feels like a mother. Things you can't tell anyone, you can tell her. Just imagine, having someone you can tell everything to. That is how she was to me. (student)*

# Mental health important theme

*“We aren’t poor or anything, but we aren’t rich either. We’re a bit below average. The money that goes out on Dad’s drinks and cigarettes really bothers mom. She has to do everything alone (…) After work, he usually just goes to the pub and then he only comes home afterwards, and you can see it right away. Yesterday, for example, we came back, and when we got home, there was a duvet on the sofa, some pizza boxes in the kitchen, and beer glasses and tons of beer bottles in the back.” (student)*

## Living situation = discussed later on

## Young people have difficulty concentrating or staying motivated at school, due to what is going on at home or in their heads



## Where do the sessions take place?



at school
often during class time

- students do not want to meet at home
- no extra time needed after school
- they dont mind missing class

*“I am a very quiet person; I don’t like talking to people, especially not my parents. But with [Upstream worker name], I was immediately very open and told them a lot during our first appointment. I really thought: I can just tell them everything, from beginning to end. Normally, I have a lot of trouble saying that to a person.” (student)*

*“I did notice that all of the young people I met up with  wanted to talk at school. They didn't mind at all if I came to pick them up from class. Some had forgotten our appointment, or didn't know in which room we would meet up, so then I would go to their classroom and that was no problem at all.” (Upstream worker)*

# Class trajectories

*“With the class trajectories, we aim to focus on safety and foster connection in the classrooms.” (Upstream worker)*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Kempen | 2 | 6 |
| Mechelen | 3 | 16 |
| Antwerp | 3 | 5 |

Connecting work
Resilience training
Grief
Bullying

Resultats Upstream-survey at school level

What are the needs?
In which classes?

ARKTOS HET KAN WÉL

PROFO vzw iedereen sterker maken

## Proactive circling

Asking each other questions

Feedback in the classroom

# What did we learn from implementing Upstream in Belgium?

| 🔎 **Feasible** | 📝 **Simple** | 🤝 **Engagement** | 🏫 **Context matters** | 📈 **Trajectories** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Early detection is feasible **in schools** | A brief questionnaire can support **identification** | Reaching and engaging young people remains **challenging** | School context and timing shape **detection & follow-up** | Risk is **dynamic**, not a single point in time |

# What remains to be understood?

## 1 Long-term validity

How well does the questionnaire predict homelessness and other outcomes over the longer term?

## 2 The intervention window: what can still be changed at age 15?

Identifying homelessness risk at age 15 raises an important question: which factors are still modifiable, and what can early intervention influence? Which factors require broader structural responses?

## 3 From detection to prevention

What happens after young people are identified, and which forms of support can effectively alter their trajectories?

→ Follow-up research is currently being developed to address these questions

# Questions?

THE UPSTREAM PROJECT VLAANDEREN

## Get in touch!

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