



The Fragile Age: the (un)sustainable (un)certainty of the most vulnerable young adults

Antonietta Maiorano*, **Gabriella Natoli****, **Elena Caramelli*****, **Claudia Tagliavia******

Abstract:

The increasing incidence of fragility among young people, particularly the most vulnerable, represents a significant issue that warrants thorough analysis. During the transition to adulthood, young people encounter numerous obstacles in accessing adequate support: dedicated policies and services often lack structured, continuous pathways, resulting in insufficient tools for social and labour market inclusion. This article, drawing on an ongoing INAPP research project, aims to shed light on a context characterised by pronounced vulnerability, which affects the broader community but has especially acute impacts on young people in situations of structural fragility. The focus is on specific groups of young adults who, due to their circumstances, epitomise the complexity of the phenomenon, serving as a lens through which the system's critical issues can be examined. In particular, the study examines profiles of youth vulnerability, with a focus on young adults who have experienced incarceration and those leaving care. The article highlights the challenges these individuals face in achieving social and labour inclusion, while also emphasising the need for institutional and social network interventions to provide more effective and sustainable support.

Keywords: Young adults, vulnerability, social and labour inclusion, young prisoners, care leaver

* INAPP Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche, Università Pegaso, Italy;

Corresponding author: antonietta.maiorano@unipegaso.it

** INAPP Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche, Italy

*** INAPP Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche, Italy

**** sociologist, Italy

1. *Once upon a time there was a simple future. Young-adult generations in turbulent times*

The analytical perspective proposed here¹ seemed to us to be extraordinarily in tune with the novel that won the 2024 Strega Prize: *L'età fragile* (Di Pietrantonio, 2023), which is why we have taken its title. The literary work tells us that we are always fragile, recounting a fragile age that affects one specific generation with particular intensity, but at the same time spares no one, hitting some groups and categories of young people harder than others, but sparing no one, understood in terms of age but recognised as typical, marked by global vulnerability, of the historical age of our present. We are all, without distinction, albeit with many differences and abysmal inequalities (Oxfam Italia, 2022), exposed to the elements – in a sort of immersive experience, to use current terminology – of a rampant and contagious vulnerability. In some ways, it resembles the basic condition of finitude and fragility that constitutes human existence², but now amplified on a planetary scale and substantiated by a new feature that pertains to today's temporal dimension, to the historical time in which we find ourselves. Whether merely perceived, greatly feared or actually experienced, this new form of heightened vulnerability is the hallmark of our times – “time out of joint”, to quote Hamlet, Prince of Denmark – a palpable sign of the present, a long shadow over the future. We could define it, in line with global warming, a phenomenon with which it goes hand in hand, with the expression global vulnerability. As has been authoritatively observed, our present is a “time of storm”, a clever play on words around the etymology of *tempus*, which encompasses the phenomenon of chronological time and the phenomenon of atmospheric time, signifying the need to bring time back into a context, which in the case of our present is an adverse context, a time of turmoil, of disruption of normality (Marramao, 2021).

¹ The reflections contained in this paper refer to the project ‘Policies and services to combat poverty among young adults and promote social and labour market inclusion’, carried out as part of the activities conducted by INAPP (National Institute for Public Policy Analysis), in its capacity as an intermediate body of the National Programme “Youth, Women and Work” 2021-2027. The project, carried out by the INAPP Social Inclusion Unit, is currently underway with the aim of contributing to the development of effective and replicable intervention models. It involves field research through interviews with young adults in particularly vulnerable situations (care leavers, ex-prisoners, etc.) and with managers and operators of facilities dedicated to them.

² The Barcelona Declaration (Biomed II Project, 1998) introduces an important innovation in the definition of fundamental ethical principles in bioethics and biolaw, incorporating, alongside the traditional principles of autonomy, dignity, and integrity, the principle of vulnerability. This is understood as an expression of the finitude and fragility of human life and constitutes an ethical principle that calls for the protection and care of vulnerable individuals.

The Covid-19 pandemic is shocking evidence of the rupture of time, a tangible sign of the arrival of a time of turmoil on the global stage, a dress rehearsal for vulnerability that has exploded simultaneously almost everywhere. Our shared vulnerability to the virus, the ease with which the disease spreads, and our shared experience and fear of being in mortal danger have announced to the whole world the advent of universal change.

Like spillover, the leap between species made by viruses (Quammen, 2017), the arrival of the time of storm is not a passing phenomenon, but a point of no return, an epochal and paradigm shift that strikes at the very root of the meaning of human activity, the very ideas of change used until now. Meanwhile, at exactly the same time, the climate crisis is worsening, with global warming continuing its scorching trajectory, adding new upheavals to the stormy landscape between one extreme event and another, along with rising temperatures. Climate change, with its devastating consequences, amplifies the sense of impending threat, elevating it to a risk to the survival of an entire planet. Underlining the map of a world dangerously in the balance are the increasingly extensive theatres of war, fraught with ruinous implications at both the individual and global levels. ACLED data (2024) paints a stark picture of the situation: 1 in 8 people are estimated to have been exposed to conflict so far in 2024; 50 countries rank in the Index categories for extreme, high, or turbulent levels of conflict; in the past five years, conflict levels have almost doubled; for 2020, we recorded 104,371 conflict events; this year, for the same period, nearly 200,000. Marking this time of turmoil, close on the heels of the pandemic shock, are two gigantic and endless wars, both with an intricate tangle of ancient roots and overlapping layers: Russia's war on Ukraine, which has been going on for three and a half years, and Israel's war on Gaza, triggered by Hamas's terrible terrorist massacre on 7 October 2023, but which has become an action of extermination and erasure of the Palestinian population.

The convoluted complexity of the issues and reasons behind the conflict, the escalation of violence in each conflict, the many points of contact between two such vast arcs of crisis, the disconcerting volatility of the balance of power and alliances between the powers involved, and the risk of nuclear weapons being used all contribute to the possibility of a catastrophic short circuit. The proliferation of such imposing and interconnected fractures on a global level – health crisis, climate crisis, geopolitical crisis – outlines a scenario of unprecedented vulnerability: the entire planet reveals its fragility,

exposes its limits, and hints at the possibility of an end. What is new about the current scenario compared to other equally serious crises in past historical periods can be found in its space-time dimension: global space and synchronous time. Furthermore, the storm that is currently raging is, in a sort of historical nemesis, striking its own cause, shattering a model of development that is no longer sustainable: the very idea of progress based on man as the supposed measure of all things, once useful for overcoming crises and ensuring the survival of human existence, now appears useless and shows all its fallibility. This gives rise to the hypothesis of rethinking the world from a new and multiple perspective, in a posthuman key (Marchesini, 2009); to grasp the necessity, which is also a happy opportunity (Braidotti, 2014), to abandon the anthropocentric vision based on dichotomies - man/nature, man/animal, man/woman, etc. - now in disarray, in order to seek a new, authentically inclusive way of inhabiting the earth.

In this context, characterised by multiple crises and increasingly disturbing existential threats, it is possible to find the critical capacity to develop a new paradigm, a new social model that recognises vulnerability as an irreducible feature of all existence, to be protected and countered in its premises – the idea that justifies as plausible or physiological the presence of the category of 'minus habent' and the unequal paradigm underlying neoliberal ideology (Revelli, 2014) – which have proved to be a lethal mistake, not only for specific groups of people considered vulnerable from time to time, but also for animal species and the natural ecosystem, in conflict with the planet's chances of survival. Recognising vulnerability as a constitutive feature of our present opens a window of understanding, knowledge and salvation, forcing us to look with new eyes at phenomena and risks hitherto considered the prerogative of certain categories: the so-called vulnerable groups. Here, we adopt an approach that understands vulnerability not only as a complex and multidimensional concept (Ranci, 2002; Istat, 2020; Giolo & Pastore, 2018) in the broadest ontological sense of the term - and as an extension of the ontological perspective already indicated some time ago by Fineman (2008) - as a universal condition extending not only to all human beings but to all living beings and the entire planet. Extensive ontological vulnerability, therefore, which nevertheless does not erase inequalities and injustices, but on the contrary takes on manifestations of greater strength and severity in relation to specific contextual situations (Pariotti, 2024). Our analysis focuses on a condition that is particularly – and again, certainly not uniquely

(Magni, 2020) – exposed to vulnerability, namely that of young people, seen in the critical phase, by definition fraught with pitfalls, anxieties and possibilities, of the transition to adulthood (Andreoli, 2024; Lancini & Madeddu, 2014; Riva Crugnola, 2024; Rosci, 2022), and moreover observed through the most extreme forms of vulnerability: young care leavers and young adult prisoners. The focus on two particularly vulnerable groups is intended in heuristic terms, in the awareness of the limitations inherent in the controversial concept of group vulnerability (Macioce, 2021), without conceding anything to stigmatisation, without ever forgetting the concept of vulnerability mentioned above, nor the stormy times it brings. The endless difficulties inherent in youth in this historical phase – for an analysis of the myriad issues and concerns that affect young people today, we refer to some recent works (Bertolini Borgna & Romanò, 2022; Bertolini & Goglio, 2023; Casavecchia, 2018; Crepaldi, 2019; Migliavacca & Rosina, 2022; Istituto G. Toniolo, 2024; Spanò, 2018, 2019) – and even more so the inadequacy of welfare policies and systems to provide appropriate responses to the needs of young people (Agostini, 2024; Monti, 2022; Rizza, 2023) in the case of young care leavers and young prisoners are magnified to the point of caricature, making them more evident than ever.

2. Vulnerable young adults: an attempt at definition

The stormy landscape is also affected by the phenomenon of the so-called “demographic winter”, a disturbance that is anything but temporary, which particularly affects Italy and its young population, a condition that is fragile from the outset, given the now structural decline in its numbers. The younger generations are in fact becoming increasingly scarce in Italy. A few figures effectively illustrate the critical nature of the situation defined in terms of “de-youthification”: the old-age index on 1 January 2024 is 199.8, which means that for every 100 young people up to the age of 14, there are almost 200 people aged 65 and over (Istat, 2024). Furthermore, Italy is the EU country with the lowest incidence of under-35s in the total population and the greatest generational imbalance, with the young adult age group (25-34) being about 30% smaller than the 55-64 age group (CNEL, 2024a). In the turbulent scenario outlined above, young people are affected by multiple crises (Bertolini & Ramella 2023) and are at the mercy of continuous and pervasive uncertainty (Cavalli, 2023), especially in the already critical and destabilising phase of

transition to adulthood, which involves significant changes in relation to certain crucial steps that now appear increasingly blurred, suspended and delayed over time: from leaving the family home to creating a family of one's own, to decisions about procreation, to the far from smooth entry of young people into the world of work (Fondazione Unipolis & Fondazione Adapt, 2021; INAPP, 2025). Emerging adults experience a complex web of critical issues, including the influence of the local area, which may be more or less welcoming to the needs of young people (Guglielmi et al., 2024). These transformations that have affected contemporary society have therefore had an impact on the debate that has developed in the field of Youth Studies. These changes have called into question most of the theories and concepts developed in the field of youth sociology, which are no longer able to account for the loss of linearity and standardisation in life paths, and have necessitated a broad rethinking of terminology, as evidenced by the term “young adults” itself. Therefore, in addressing this issue, we were aware that 'in a changing context, in which young people and their living conditions are changing so radically, and in which profound changes are also taking place in the sociology of youth, the most fruitful attitude is one of openness and discovery. The basic idea is that this is not yet a time for certainties but for reflection' (Spanò, 2018, p.13). In taking part in this debate, we wanted to focus above all on the aspects concerning the most difficult transitions to adult life, namely those of “vulnerable young people”. In doing so, particular emphasis was placed on the concept of “vulnerability” – with particular reference to the work of Robert Castel – due to its procedural and non-deterministic nature, as will be explained in more detail in the following pages. So, what changes have affected life paths? Firstly, it seems increasingly difficult to identify and recognise the stages and transitions that mark the biographical experience. The concept of youth emerged in the nineteenth century to indicate an intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood. However, it was in the middle of the last century that this phase of life became the subject of attention and study, to the extent that the twentieth century is considered the era in which youth was “created”. The transition to adulthood was represented by the achievement of certain milestones, real markers of passage: the completion of studies, entry into the labour market, independence in terms of housing, marriage and the birth of children indicated, in fact, the successful transition to adulthood. The biographical course was thus characterised by relative predictability and sequentiality.

In the following decades, and even more so in recent years, the transition to adulthood has become increasingly less definable, and the life markers that in the past signalled its arrival have become less and less effective. The postponement of these stages, which are increasingly incomplete and non-sequential, is often accompanied by the reversibility of choices (Bonini, 2008) and, especially for the younger generations, the transition from late adolescence to early adulthood is a particularly complex one, mainly due to the difficulties of predicting and planning one's future, but also because the time spent in education is lengthening, delays entry into the world of work, makes it difficult to find a good and stable job, changes family relationships, and all this can generate uncertainty and confusion, translating into concrete difficulties in coping with growth and putting profound dimensions of the self in crisis (Parrello & Sestito, 2004). The main systems of social integration have therefore been affected: work, family and the welfare system (Ranci, 2002b). Precarious work, the gradual weakening of the affiliative function of the family, and the loss of benefits provided by the welfare state produce not only 'a deficit of resources but also exposure to processes of social disarticulation that reach a critical level, i.e. they jeopardise the stability of the models of organisation of daily life. This creates a situation in which individuals' autonomy and capacity for self-determination are permanently threatened by unstable integration into the main systems of social interaction and resource distribution' (Ranci, 2002b, p. 25). The phenomenon of NEETs (D'Amico, 2024; Maiorano & Lese, 2024), which is currently the subject of an important INAPP survey³, also falls within the scenario of suspension and instability mentioned above. The less linear transition from youth to adulthood has therefore suggested the use of a term that reflects the fluidity between these stages of life, and so we have begun to talk about “young adults” or “quasi-adults”: 'the transition takes the form of a “no longer” and a “not yet”, a passage that encompasses both the movement of becoming and being in transition, moving towards change and remaining in it, walking and staying while passing through' (Demetrio, 1997, p. 17). The notion of young adult therefore affirms that becoming an adult is an increasingly uncertain path and, using this term, refers above all

³ Within the framework of the National Plan for Youth, Women, and Work, INAPP is currently conducting the survey *“Policies and Services for NEET Youth”* on a sample of 1,500 NEET young people. <https://www.inapp.gov.it/rilevazioni/rilevazioni-non-in-corso/il-fenomeno-dellinattivita-giovanile-protratta>

to a period of variable duration, an age cohort, an interval of years between late adolescence and early adulthood rather than a completed transition (Bonini, 2008). The transition from minority to adulthood, as a phase in which significant and structuring choices are made for the rest of one's life, is also the phase in which social disparities unfold in a particularly significant way. This is not only because of the differences between points of origin and points of arrival, but also because of the 'configuration of the paths that connect them' (Schizzerotto, 2002, p. 9), to the extent that they can also generate blocked or stagnant transitions with a high risk of exclusion and disengagement, or damaged transitions that pose a danger to vast areas of life (Besozzi, 2012). The procedural dimension associated with the term young adult is therefore particularly useful in explaining how pre-existing different and unequal conditions influence the transition to adulthood, especially if, as in our case, we want to analyse the risks of vulnerability affecting a large proportion of young people. But what do we mean when we talk about young adults at risk or in vulnerable situations? The issue of vulnerability is certainly not new in academic debate, having been addressed for some time by various authors and from different angles (Casavecchia, 2014): from a social perspective (Ranci, 2002a), from a legal perspective, in the relationship between protection, stability and work (Castel, 2004), as well as in terms of policy implications (Raciti, 2009). A multifaceted and constantly evolving issue – which has unsurprisingly returned to prominence during the Covid pandemic and, more generally, during particularly dramatic and striking critical events – vulnerability is now interpreted and valued in terms of its educational (Merenda, 2022), methodological and heuristic (Furia & Zullo, 2020) significance. From the outset, the concept of vulnerability has established itself as a notion of *entre-deux*, an intermediate zone that designates both a risk of exclusion and, indirectly, a possibility of integration. More precisely, vulnerability designates a border area between the zone of integration and that of disaffiliation – i.e. lack of social integration – an area that is not defined once and for all, nor is it static: 'It is not so much a question of placing individuals in these “zones” as of clarifying the processes that cause them to move from one to the other, for example, from integration to vulnerability, or from vulnerability to social non-existence: how are these social spaces nourished, how are statuses maintained and, above all, how are they dismantled? This is why, rather than the now widely used term “exclusion”, I prefer “disaffiliation” to define the outcome of this process' (Castel, 2007,

p. 31). If exclusion is a static notion, designating a condition of deprivation, the term disaffiliation requires us to trace the path that leads to that deficit. Thus, choosing the perspective of vulnerability involves “being attentive to borderline states, seeking the relationship between the situation in which one finds oneself and the one from which one comes, not considering extreme situations as autonomous, but linking what happens downstream with what happens upstream”. (Castel, 2007, p. 32). In other words, vulnerability indicates an intermediate, unstable zone, therefore particularly suitable for investigating the transitional condition that characterises young adults. Using this concept, we avoid the idea that fragilities are insurmountable, ascribed and inescapable. The very etymology of vulnerable refers to “one who can be hurt”, i.e. a potential linked to a context, to a process of vulnerability, and does not place the vulnerable person in a condition of permanent exclusion. Of course, the potential inherent in the concept of vulnerability means that no one is truly immune to the risk of “tipping” towards conditions of disaffiliation and therefore implies the impossibility of establishing a clear distinction between “us” and “them”, between the protected population and the excluded. In this way, it also reduces the risk, inherent in any social investigation, of creating a deep divide between the subject and object of observation and allows, indeed requires, that the analysis not be limited to areas of deprivation but broadened to include transformations of the social system as a whole (Soulet, 2005). Our focus is thus on a condition that is doubly fluid because it examines the intermediate zone between two phases of biographical experience and the equally unstable zone that combines the precariousness of social conditions with the fragility of local support systems. In this area, people in vulnerable situations or at risk of vulnerability are very often those to whom public policies pay particular attention: young people with difficult migration experiences, those “outside the family” or without adult role models, those with disabilities, prisoners, young people who are homeless or wandering, victims of discrimination, for example, because of their sexual orientation, and so on. For those who reach the threshold of adulthood from a disadvantaged position, the boundaries between integration and exclusion become more significant. Even in a world marked by widespread vulnerability, inequalities tend to increase and factors of fragility tend to accumulate. Hence, the focus on the causes and conditions of vulnerable young adults, among whom we have chosen to address the cases of care leavers and young prisoners. But there is also a need to identify possible

paths to integration, because the scientific community has often underestimated the human capacity to grow “well” after adverse events and has perhaps not paid enough attention to ways of “mending” the rifts and lacerations that mark the lives of many quasi-adults. Studies on the empowerment of young people (Prati, 2019) point in this direction, as do those on concrete experiences of supporting young adults in difficulty. These studies provide useful inspiration but still lack systematicity and, above all, struggle to translate into possible models of intervention and action, which is the explicit aim of the INAPP survey.

3. Care leavers between fragility and prospects

The term care leaver refers to boys and girls who, on the threshold of adulthood, leave the care facilities where they were hosted during their childhood. They are often removed from their families of origin by the judicial authorities⁴, who ascertain the inability of the adults of reference to adequately provide for the minors' growth and upbringing and even expose them to serious safety problems, as in the case of domestic violence or parental abuse and addiction. To these are added foreign minors who increasingly face migratory routes without reference adults. For these teenagers, specific support and hospitality measures are envisaged, which, however, in the vast majority of cases, stop when they come of age. These are, therefore, young people who, for reasons of force majeure, have been forced to live a large part of their lives (childhood and adolescence) in a community or in hetero-family foster care. Once they come of age, they lose the right to be protected and supported, being suddenly catapulted into the adult world: these young people find themselves in a limbo that puts them at a disadvantage compared to their peers (Belotti, Mauri, & Zullo, 2012). Care leavers, therefore, are all those young people in public protection and guardianship who, once they have come of age, lose the right to be protected and supported and are forced into rapid adulthood, regardless of the stage of growth, the path of reparation still underway for them and for the family system, the goals they have achieved and the outcomes that have yet to be consolidated. Not surprisingly, boys and girls raised outside the family often have a lower level of education than their peers, experience forms of early parenthood and are more frequently unemployed and

⁴ Law 205, 27/12/2017, art. 1, c. 250.

homeless (Nagy, 2021). These young people are particularly numerous in the marginalized segment of the population: mental health problems affect the vast majority of them with suicidal tendencies and depressive symptoms as well as drug addiction and alcohol abuse are widespread (Goyette & Frechon, 2013). It is important to specify that in Italy there exists the legal provision known as “*proseguo amministrativo*” (administrative continuation), which allows for the extension of child protection measures until the age of 21. This provision enables young people to remain in foster care or residential facilities beyond the age of majority⁵ (Gatta, 2020). For care leavers, reaching the age of majority is not always as desirable a goal as it is for most of their peers: for them, turning eighteen brings with it a whole series of problems, challenges and responsibilities, with the awareness that they have to support themselves. These are young men and women who suddenly have to grow up, go out into the real world and start providing for themselves (Belotti & Mauri, 2019). They have to quickly prove their independence and simultaneously – rather than gradually – deal with all the transitions involved in moving into adulthood: the search for housing, financial resources, a job and social relationships (Sourmais & Pallez, 2015). This also includes young people who have never known their parents or those who have had bad experiences in foster care. Care leavers also have to deal with past traumas and need continuity in their relationship with the social services that supported them when they were still minors (Bastianoni & Zullo, 2012). While the problems encountered in their families of origin remain unresolved, preventing them from returning home, the possibility of remaining in their foster families or care facilities is not always guaranteed, leaving these young people without any points of reference. Regardless of the reasons that led these young people to a residential experience “outside the family” and the context from which they come, what matters is the level of risk that arises when they turn 18 or, in any case, at the end of the residential project (Cigliuti, 2024). For most care leavers, turning 18 opens up a life full of uncertainty, where there is a risk of becoming the target of prostitution and organised crime (Miniotti & Spada, 2024). This is a formative age for adult life, in which to lay the foundations for the future: for these young people in particular, it is necessary to build

⁵ This instrument allows for continuity in the assistance offered to minors in foster care once they reach the age of majority, but does not solve the problem of the lack of a path towards independence.

self-esteem and confidence, “because the worst poverty for a young person is perceived poverty” (Rossini, 2025). The time needed to achieve full autonomy, especially after traumatic experiences, is necessarily subjective and not legislative, as it cannot be anchored solely to reaching the age of 18 or the end of the administrative process. Interventions should therefore be gradual and activated from an early age. It is essential that communities, in conjunction with the relevant social services, implement long-term plans that allow minors without a family environment to be gradually accompanied towards autonomy, in accordance with their own inclinations and personal timelines (CRC Group, 2022). These are young people who are at an extremely delicate stage in their lives: children and young people in the care system who, often after a long stay in residential facilities, face the difficult challenge of achieving independence in terms of housing, work and relationships. Furthermore, long-term planning and monitoring could be an essential step in measuring the effectiveness and quality of support interventions, in a system that has long overlooked the difficulties associated with the post-care phase (Rozzi, 2023). It is therefore necessary to focus on what measures are needed to support, facilitate and prevent the risks of forced entry into adulthood in the absence of the necessary protection and safeguards. First of all, it would be useful to work with them from the age of 14, so that a life plan can be devised that respects their aptitudes and abilities in order to try to accompany them in their life outside the institution (often the only reality they know). Care leavers express a desire to become independent and to overcome a difficult past, but at the same time they need to be able to ‘count on an ‘open door’, a metaphor for the meaningful relationships built up during their time in care, which remain a point of reference to which they can turn for some form of support to help them face the future and its challenges on their own’ (Cerantola, 2013.). Care leavers, therefore, have clear perceptions of themselves and their needs, as well as of the characteristics that interventions dedicated to them should have in order to be effective. Among the first elements to improve the transition process to adulthood are authentic and consistent relationships with adult role models, i.e. those who play a parental role, while the main obstacles highlighted are insufficient recognition and lack of support for the psychological dimensions of the transition, aggravated by inadequate support networks (Atkinson & Hyde, 2019). A first concrete step at national level was taken in 2017 when Parliament established, on an experimental basis, the “Care Leaver Fund” to finance

projects supporting these young people⁶. In 2019, as part of the Fund for the Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, in collaboration with the Istituto degli Innocenti in Florence, implemented the Care Leavers Project⁷ (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies & Istituto degli Innocenti in Florence, 2019). This is an experiment in interventions that aims to accompany them towards autonomy by creating essential support and, if necessary, also providing financial assistance, to enable them to gradually build a future for themselves once they leave the care system⁸ (Ministry of Labour, 2019,2022). Furthermore, starting in 2020, the Ministry of Labour has included care leavers among the categories of people entitled to be registered on targeted employment lists⁹, as they are considered deserving of protection in terms of professional integration. Support for these measures comes from the Agevolando Association¹⁰, founded by senior care leavers in 2010, which, through the establishment of the Care Leavers Network, has enabled young people to present their recommendations to the institutions with a view to improving the out-of-home care system and support for independence. They are calling for legal recognition of the status of “unaccompanied young people”, to whom specific measures should be directed in relation to certain crucial aspects: continuing their education, entering the world of work, stable housing and a network of support. (Dante, 2025). These young adults are still vulnerable, therefore, they urge institutions and the local community to put in place new protective measures of various kinds, ranging from educational intervention to family support; from economic

⁶ The fund, which was allocated €5 million for the 2018–2020 period, also provides a financial contribution known as the *Autonomy Grant (Borsa per l'Autonomia)* for cases in which the young person is not eligible for other forms of income support. Although this measure (for which an extension up to the age of 25 has been proposed) represents a step in the right direction, it currently remains experimental and reaches only a small percentage of care leavers.

⁷ An overview and brief summary of the overall project can be found at the following links: <https://www.minori.gov.it/it/minori/interventi-sperimentale-favore-dei-care-leavers>
<https://www.minori.gov.it/it/minori/progetto-care-leavers>

⁸ Approximately 400 young people have been involved in the implementation of educational or vocational pathways, or in accessing the labour market, through the *Autonomy Project*, supported by an *autonomy tutor* and social services, with special attention given to friendship networks and social inclusion.

⁹ Law No. 68 of 1999, Article 18, paragraph 2.

¹⁰ See also: <https://www.agevolando.org> Over the years, the *Agevolando* association has opened branches in almost every Italian region, creating a kind of surrogate family for young people who support one another. Within this context, the *Care Leavers Network* was established: a network of young people aged 16 to 24 who are currently or have previously been placed in out-of-home care settings (e.g., foster families, group homes, residential communities). These youth are engaged in a process of active participation and citizenship.

assistance with rent, loans and mortgages to access to sensitive companies willing to reserve jobs for them; from the expansion of informal networks of solidarity, friendship and neighbourliness to the establishment of special associations with which they can identify and to which they can belong (Pandolfi et al., 2020).

4. Between Walls and Hopes: The Fragility of Young Adults in the Prison System

Within the broader reflection on young adults in vulnerable circumstances, it appears crucial to focus attention on a particularly exposed and often overlooked population: individuals in conditions of confinement. Their situation constitutes an emblematic manifestation of extreme fragility, one that demands systemic, integrated, and, at the same time, highly individualised responses. The intrinsic vulnerability of young people, when combined with specific environmental, familial, and socioeconomic risk factors, may translate into a heightened susceptibility to deviant trajectories (Maggiolini et al., 2008; Winnicott, 2013). These pathways, often characterised by antisocial behaviour or the commission of offences, may involve both minors and young adults, with potentially severe consequences, including entry into the criminal justice system and the imposition of custodial measures. A young person who comes into contact with the justice system thus finds themselves in a profoundly distressing situation, as the experience of arrest and the ensuing judicial process carry a deeply humiliating and degrading connotation in the social imagination. When manifestations of deviance are analysed in light of the personal histories within which they are embedded, biographical trajectories emerge that are marked by structural disadvantages, developmental discontinuities, challenges in identity formation, and dysfunctional relational patterns (Bertolini & Caronia, 2015). Young inmates embody a “fragility within fragility”: they are individuals in transition between adolescence and adulthood, suspended between juvenile and ordinary justice systems (Ciconali et al., 2019). Often already burdened by contexts of social, economic, or emotional vulnerability, they are further exposed to the traumatic impact of imprisonment, which may severely compromise their prospects for rehabilitation and reintegration. They represent not only a legal category but also a delicate human condition, in which wrongdoing intertwines with a lack of opportunity, and where incarceration risks extinguishing any remaining potential for personal growth. From a psychological perspective, imprisonment during early adulthood has a profound—and

often irreversible—impact on identity formation, occurring at a stage of life in which individuals are still engaged in a search for meaning, belonging, and recognition. The prison experience, and the social dynamics that develop within carceral environments, can crystallise feelings of inadequacy, anger, mistrust, and self-exclusion. These processes may generate a cascading effect that shapes long-term life trajectories, frequently characterised by reduced opportunities for positive development and an increased likelihood of adverse outcomes (Ackerman et al., 2024; Valente & Caravita, 2021). Despite the acknowledged complexity of this developmental phase, deprivation of liberty continues to be imposed disproportionately over alternative measures, with insufficient consideration of the potential offered by programmes focused on social reintegration, rehabilitation, and re-education (Telesca, 2019). Imprisonment—intended as a measure of last resort in dealing with individuals whose personal and professional development remains in formation—has instead become the predominant response. This neglects the significance of interventions that, if adequately implemented, could facilitate more effective reintegration, preventing recidivism and the consolidation of deviant identities (Maiorano et al., 2020). The incarceration of young adults—those in the delicate age range between eighteen and twenty-five—thus represents a growing phenomenon, the impact of which significantly exacerbates the already precarious conditions of the Italian prison system, long affected by chronic structural overcrowding. The situation has evolved into a genuine emergency, with increasing numbers of individuals under 25 being transferred from Juvenile Penal Institutes (IPMs) to adult prisons, often without reintegration programmes and into facilities already operating beyond capacity. Such conditions give rise to borderline situations, occasionally culminating in tragic outcomes. According to the 2024 Report of the National Guarantor for the Rights of Persons Deprived of Liberty, the year ended with the highest number of suicides recorded in over three decades of ministerial monitoring—83 in total, the youngest being 20 years old. Suicide is the leading cause of death in European prisons (WHO, 2023), with overcrowding and inadequate mental health provision identified as aggravating factors. Numerous studies have demonstrated that inmates—especially younger ones—are particularly vulnerable due to a confluence of factors, including inexperience within the prison environment, the breakdown of affective ties, and individual traits that intensify psychological distress, potentially resulting in self-harm or suicidal behaviour (Gonçalves

et al., 2016; Fazel et al., 2008; Edgemon et al., 2019; Cunha et al., 2023). Psychological distress among young inmates is often accompanied by extensive use of psychotropic medication and, in some cases, illicit substances, which may further undermine rehabilitative processes (Fazel & Danesh, 2002; Mulvey et al., 2010). Italy has been contending with this state of overcrowding for years, consistently reporting inmate populations exceeding the regulatory capacity of penal institutions. Official data from the Ministry of Justice indicate that, as of 31 December 2024, the prison population stood at 61,861 individuals—approximately 10,000 more than the legal capacity of 51,312—with 3,983 detainees under the age of 25 (7.8% of the total). A significant proportion of these are former unaccompanied foreign minors who, upon reaching adulthood, find themselves deprived of social and institutional support, thus facing an elevated risk of exclusion and recidivism. A similar scenario can be observed in Juvenile Penal Institutes, where, according to the VII Antigone Report on Juvenile Justice (2024), there were 560 inmates as of 30 September 2024—approximately 220 of whom were already of legal age. This represents the highest figure since 2012 and appears to be linked to the effects of the so-called Caivano Decree¹¹, which introduced stricter punitive measures, thereby encouraging the use of detention and adversely affecting reintegration pathways. A particularly critical issue concerns the management of young adults detained in IPMs, where the presence of a considerable proportion of adult offenders (around 39% of the total) raises concerns about the compatibility between the educational needs of minors and the coexistence with older individuals. Under current legislation¹², measures designed for juveniles may be extended to individuals up to the age of 25, unless the court deems that security considerations or non-compliance with rehabilitative programmes necessitate transfer to adult facilities. However, the transition from IPMs to adult prisons is highly problematic, as the latter are already burdened by intractable overcrowding, further exacerbating the risk of recidivism and social marginalisation¹³. Ideally, these

¹¹ Decree-Law 123 approved by the Chamber of Deputies on 8 November 2023 ‘Urgent measures to combat youth distress, educational poverty and juvenile crime, as well as for the safety of minors in the digital sphere’ so-called Caivano Decree.

¹² Decree-Law No. 92 of 2014 (converted by Law No. 117 of 2014) raised the age at which juveniles can remain in the criminal circuit from 21 to 25 years for individuals who committed crimes as minors. Until 2014, these measures were only designed and executed until the age of 21.

¹³ To cope with overcrowding, the Ministry of Justice in February 2025 ordered the transfer of 50 young adults from IPMs to the separate section of the Bologna Dozza adult prison.

institutions should function as temporary stages in the judicial trajectory of young offenders, offering structured educational and rehabilitative programmes through the collaboration of multidisciplinary teams composed of educators, cultural mediators, psychologists, and volunteers. Yet, in the absence of suitable alternatives, young adults frequently remain in IPMs longer than required, or are transferred to adult facilities without continuity of treatment and without benefiting from educational plans responsive to their developmental and psychosocial needs (Chinnici et al., 2014). The prevailing prison-centric model—rooted in the conception of imprisonment as the primary instrument of punishment—stands in stark contrast to the logic of community-based sanctions, which prioritise empowerment and social reintegration. From a reformative perspective, it would be advisable to establish a differentiated detention regime for young adults that recognises their distinctiveness relative to both juveniles and mature adults. Evidence-based, targeted interventions should aim to enhance young inmates' personal and professional competencies, promote structured educational trajectories, and activate robust social support networks. Such strategies could mitigate the risk of post-detention marginalisation and foster a sustainable return to lawful and socially productive lives. Finally, the reform of the prison system should include substantial investment in prison labour initiatives, vocational training, and career guidance (Brunetta, 2024; CNEL, 2024b; Malzani, 2022; Maiorano, 2015).

5. Conclusion

The most fitting expression to introduce this concluding section might be [to be continued...]—as used in serial publications or comics—since the reflections presented here form part of a broader research project still in progress. Referring to the ongoing nature of the investigation thus appears entirely appropriate. Before turning, however, to the future stages of the research, it is worth offering some closing remarks that retrace the main threads of the argument and highlight the elements we consider most significant. The transition to adulthood today is marked by a multiplicity of difficulties, further compounded by public policies and welfare systems that are often inadequate to respond to the changing needs and growing hardships faced by young people. The issue of youth

fragility has been explored here through two emblematic cases of extreme vulnerability: young care leavers and young prisoners. The focus on these two groups does not stem from a reductive or stigmatising intent, but rather from a heuristic one—adopting the notion of group vulnerability within the broader theoretical framework of global vulnerability, understood in both structural and relational terms. For young people approaching adulthood from disadvantaged positions, the boundary between inclusion and exclusion becomes increasingly blurred. In a social context pervaded by widespread vulnerability, inequalities tend to deepen and factors of fragility overlap. For this reason, we have concentrated our analysis on these two emblematic figures, each of which, in its own way, encapsulates the complexity of the contemporary condition of youth.

In the case of young prisoners, the critical issues appear particularly acute. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive reform of the prison system—one that addresses chronic overcrowding and restores dignity to detention by giving real substance to the rehabilitative principle of punishment. Policies must move beyond a purely repressive approach, promoting justice pathways that provide young offenders with genuine opportunities for reintegration and personal development. Similarly, for care leavers, an integrated policy framework is required—one that simultaneously addresses psychological support, the right to education (through measures that reduce the costs of access to university and housing), and pathways towards employment and independent living, including through targeted job-placement and housing initiatives. As noted, the survey currently underway, to which this contribution refers, examines the condition of young people in transition to adulthood across multiple dimensions of vulnerability—from care leavers and young prisoners, discussed here, to women victims of violence, early motherhood, and homelessness. These diverse configurations of youth fragility warrant careful investigation, both to identify the risks of social exclusion they entail and to explore the potential spaces of resilience and subjective re-elaboration that may emerge within them. It is along this continuum—from the pole of vulnerability to that of possibility—that future challenges for research and public policy must be situated. We are convinced that approaching the issue of youth from its most critical and exposed situations can help generate innovative perspectives and practical solutions—responses that may ultimately contribute to alleviating difficulties which, on closer inspection,

concern us all. In doing so, we can begin to untangle the knots that traverse this inherently fragile stage of life.

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