DEUTSCHER PRÄVENTIONSTAG

The multiple Challenges of Youth facing Violence

by

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Youth, as victims and as offenders, are central to the preoccupations of the European local elected officials. This is why the European Forum for Urban Safety, a non-governmental organisation which brings together some 300 local authorities around issues of crime prevention and urban safety particularly welcomed the opportunity to share with you today some thoughts stemming from cities' experiences as well as the recommendations issued at the Zaragoza Conference.

Challenges

a) Definitions and measures

The first challenge for local actors is that of defining youth. Defining "youth" is neither an easy task nor a purely theoretical one. It is a definition that changes according to the individual's situation (perpetrator or victim, both or neither).

Children in the United Nations' definition are all youth under 18 years of age. Legal majority in Europe is set at 18 years. In many of our European countries however, the age of penal responsibility is 16 years old, in some 14… Penal and civil sanctions change according to the age of the delinquent, which shows how important and yet arbitrary the notion of youth is.
This is a good example of huge discrepancies between our legal systems which makes the establishment of a coherent European policy in the field of juvenile justice all the more difficult. However, one basic trend to be noted is that the ages of penal responsibilities are regularly lowered.

Indeed, it is felt by public opinion, and relayed by politicians, that "offenders are getting younger and younger" and "young offenders are getting more and more violent".

Statistical studies do not corroborate an aggravation of the situation. Studies from the mid 1980s show that petty crime starts at pre-adolescence (around 10 years old), accelerates with adolescence to reach a peak at age 15-16, stagnates, and then decreases during the twenties and thirties. (Farrington, 1986 ; LeBlanc, 1995)

To come back to the definition of youth, I would like to underscore a paradox, well-known by youth workers especially in deprived neighbourhoods.
Young people are increasingly being treated by the criminal justice systems like adults, with tougher sanctions, including adult-like prisons…

However they also enter adulthood later and later. The difficulty of entering the job market and obtaining a stable job, decent housing, the difficulty of starting a family means that these young people are not allowed an "adult" status. While this is a widespread phenomenon in

Europe, this is especially salient in the poorest and most marginalized communities. Poorly educated, social and/or ethnic minorities (who also have to face discrimination in the hiring process and on the housing market.) face even greater challenges entering adulthood.

This is why social and economic integration programs implemented at a local level are instrumental in a wider prevention strategy. A juvenile crime prevention and reduction strategy would fail, however brilliant it may be, if there are no initiatives and investments in providing jobs, housing, health services to young adults.

Has youth violence increased?

One question that has come up since the beginning of this conference is whether youth is more violent and delinquent today than in the past.

While I would not risk myself to provide a single answer, one element I would like to add to the many explanations developed is that a certain rise in violence may be inherent to modern society with its increasing focus on consumers' goods. The importance of cars, motorbikes but also cell phones, Ipods, brand clothes for young people make them great consumers but also increasingly thieves when they cannot afford to buy themselves these goods.

Studies show parallel curves of increases in thefts and increases in unemployment of youth under 25 years old (Lagrange, 2001). The frustration process born out of the coexistence of a consumers' society with mass unemployment mean that this youth violence is not a recent phenomenon that a stricter response could eradicate but a structural consequence of our modern society.

Furthermore, it must be noted that youth violence is particularly visible. Anti social behaviour which is often carried out by youth as well as rebellious acts – against representatives of authorities like schools, the police… - are extremely visible to the general public and often spectacular. This is in opposition to categories of crime like family violence that are more hidden but far more prevalent. Or to white collar crime which has much more economic impact than petty theft but far less everyday visibility. Its great visibility seems to make youth violence particularly difficult to tolerate in our communities.

b) Accepting the complexity of youth violence

Youths generate violence, but are also the victims of violence, violence inflicted by the adult world, by their peers and also by themselves.

This is why there is no single, unilateral solution that will succeed in resolving such complex issues as what commonly is labelled "youth violence".

First of all, is it necessary to remind ourselves that disobedience, identity crisis, at-risk behaviors, even reactive violence to the adult world, are an integral part of adolescence?

Furthermore, it is well established that those children who have been precociously exposed to physical or psychological violence within their family and their environment, will be more inclined to use physical and verbal violence to express themselves.

It would therefore be counterproductive to youth's development to try to suppress all conflicts.

c) Sharing the benefits of European integration

Ensuring that at-risk categories of youth benefit from Europe's development as much as all other categories of the population is a important objective, although it may not seem immediately essential.

Whilst European integration greatly benefits youth who study, travel and live abroad, its benefits has not always reached young people who have trouble leaving even their neighbourhoods. Decision makers must use financial and legal instruments made available at a European level and lobby at a European level so that at-risk categories of youth benefit from Europe as much as all other categories of the population. Only such equal access can avoid the creation of a dual European society.

Strategies developed by policy-makers

Including youth – in the decision-making process
How do interests of youth - which may be specific - co-exist with that of the wider community?

Encouraging participation through youth organisations, youth parliaments and city councils is one method many local authorities have developed in order to better understand young people's needs, to let them share responsibilities in the planning and implementation of programs that will directly concern them. Among others, this is an important process in that it enables to gradually involve adolescents into the adult-world of decision-making, and to position them as actors and not consumers of services.

There are many examples of participatory practices that work well, in schools, community centers, sport organisations throughout European cities. Some communities are even trying to engage with the most marginal and hard to reach groups of youth, represented by street gangs.

The phenomenon of gangs exists everywhere, in the countries of the North as well as the South, in both urban and rural areas. A source of insecurity and an object of speculation, a lot of misapprehension often surrounds this phenomenon; media hype, rumour and perceived ideas all interfere with knowledge. Although gangs have a lot in common, they nevertheless have different forms and characteristics. One thing that all youths in gangs tend to have in

common is their difficult or even conflicting relationships with their family, school or social environment. The gang represents a second family, a refuge from a society in which youths feel excluded. The reason for feeling or for effectively being excluded, the ways of reacting to this exclusion, involvement in crime, the links with criminal groups, these are all elements which characterize gangs.

The city of Barcelona has an important number of youth gangs, sometimes created locally, others imported from Central and Latin America. They have become increasingly violent and policing strategies to reduce their impact have failed. The city has decided to establish a constructive dialogue with these gangs or at least those that are willing. The city recognizes the gang as an area of socialisation, as a group to be acknowledged and engages with gang members to design violence reduction strategies. This seems to be a promising practice in so far as it no longer antagonizes youth who are solely looking for a "second family" in gangs, but instead provides them with other actors to work with and with constructive alternatives.

Acting in the child's best interest is an obligation we have given ourselves as nations when signing the European and UN charter on Children's rights.

In most cases, it is relatively easy to understand what is meant by the Child's best interest and how one can act to ensure it.

However, acting in the child's best interest is also major challenge for our policy makers-throughout European cities - when that interest seems to contradict other interests. The most evident example is that of unaccompanied minors.

The arrival in Europe of isolated underage children is a phenomenon which has greatly increased on recent years. These children come mainly from countries affected by war, countries with a critical political, social and economic situation which often forces them into emigration. These are children in an extremely dangerous situation exposed to the risk of exclusion, and without any guardian protection of their rights.

They are also the first preys of high level or low level criminal networks. Without any resources, they rapidly engage in criminal activities, putting themselves and others in danger. They constitute for cities in which they arrive both a child protection issue and a public safety issue.

The current debates focus on the determination of the relevant administration to respond to the problem and on the distribution of responsibilities between the various actors and administrative levels. Solutions to the problem are mainly national or even departmental; no European solution has been conceived yet. European territorial communities need to participate actively in building cooperation to overcome national juridical obstacles and to put the protection of minors first.

But mostly, politicians must have the courage of placing the child's best interest above the local community's fear and prevalent negative feelings towards illegal immigrants. In that, protecting these children from violence (from the violence they would endure and the violence they may generate) is a new challenge for European policymakers at all levels of governance.

Partnerships

Youth violence is a complex, multi-faceted issue that requires multi-agency integrated approaches. It requires that all adults in a community get involved according to the youth's needs, and situations. Today, the adage "it takes a whole village to raise a child" translates into partnerships set up locally involving a wide range of actors. In France, for instance, to tackle troubles faced in school, Teams for Educational success (" équipe de réussite educative") including psychologists, teachers, youth workers, city prevention coordinator have been set up. They work in a coordinated fashion, around a shared strategy, centered on individual at-risk cases, to develop appropriate responses to youth at risk of dropping out or of being expelled.

As in many such fundamental domains, the local authority plays a key role in coordinating agencies and non-governmental organisations. For instance, the City of Budapest provides technical and financial support to a successful Safe Schools project, led by a NGO. This project organises the mentoring of at-risk youth in primary schools by university students.

Local "European strategies"

City to city cooperation, within networks such as the European Forum for Urban Safety or through partnerships with youth-led organisations, can bridge the existing gap between the reality of European integration and the most marginalized communities in our cities. EU funded programmes can be used to finance language or vocational training, which will enable young people to travel abroad and exchange with counterparts, widening professional but also personal horizons. These educational and social programs, implemented with a European dimension, should constitute the cornerstone of prevention strategies at the local level.

Recommendations

The European Forum's mayors, representatives of local and regional authorities, having met in Zaragoza in November 2006 for three days of capitalisation and prospective work, issued recommendations on the themes that they have considered essential. Youth facing violence is amongst them.

Recommendations from the Zaragoza Manifesto

Young people must occupy a central place in our local policies. They must not be considered a danger nor designated as scapegoats for insecurity, especially as they are the first victims of violence in all its forms: suicide, abuse, road violence, precariousness and absence of prospects. They are also subjected to more muted violence, sometimes resulting from our institutions (school, police, social services...). These various types of violence hinder their development, their capacities for learning and proper insertion into society, which can generate new violence. In order to avoid this spiral, prevention must be as comprehensive as possible.

Responses must at once:
Take all aspects of the life of the child and adolescent into account: emotional, psychological, academic and familial, as well as legal status.
Develop the dialogue and contact between generations,
Be based on the participation of young people themselves and the mobilisation of their life instinct,

Be viewed as long term and aim at lasting solutions. The effectiveness of the responses depends more on the quality of dialogue and coherence than on the increase in the number of police, judicial, social or academic measures. If the local echelon of cities allows for stable, community, reactive and multidisciplinary policies, a trans-national approach is also indispensable in face of the growth of migrations and trafficking, and must consider the child as a minor to be protected and the foreign child as holder of a right benefiting from this protection.

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