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Youth deviance and youth violence: A European multi-agency perspective on best practices in prevention and control.

Local interview study

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Results from the Belgian study

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1 Introduction

The underlying philosophy of conducting local interviews with experts was to obtain a multi-dimensional perspective on (perceived) local problems and prevention practices and approaches existing in the selected local regions. These interviews are complementary to the school survey, conducted in the same 3 (Belgian) areas, and should all together permit a thorough analysis of local conditions of youth crime and deviance and its prevention. We were convinced that it was indispensable to take into account the perspective of prevention “clients” (youngsters) and confront this with experts’ perspective. Therefore we decided to conduct several group discussions with youngsters. This local interview analysis is an important attempt to sketch out future challenges and developments for the field of the prevention of youth crime and deviance.

2 Methodology

The semi-structured interviews with experts and the group discussions with youngsters were conducted in person and transcribed afterwards. Since we used a tape recorder, all the interviewees were asked for their permission to record the conversations and were ensured that their privacy would be respected.

Experts were all selected according to their relevant professional background. We considered a very broad approach in choosing respondents: from teachers to street workers, prevention officers, police, ...

We opted deliberately to organize group discussions with youngsters only. First of all we have experienced a large non-response with experts through the course of the research project. Secondly we were convinced that youngsters would feel more comfortable to express their opinions and experiences in the presence of peers instead of in a discussion including experts. We conducted 3 group discussions in total. In February 2012 we started to conduct the interviews and in May the group discussions. Everything was finished in October.

3 Sample description

3.1 Interviews

We constructed a sample that consists of a wide range of actors who are in some way connected to youngsters. The underlying idea was that when studying prevention, we should not only focus on targeted/explicit prevention measures, but to include general prevention strategies as well. Hence

we did not only contact the rather classic actors like street workers, police officers, ... but also teachers and people working at general welfare services.¹

Table /1 Overview respondents local interviews (according to field of work)

Field of work	Frequency
School	5
Judicial domain	2
Community work	4
Police	7
Welfare service / Social work	5
Prevention Service	2
Total (N)	25

In the table above an overview is given of the experts according to their field of work.

In our urban area, Brussels, we conducted 11 interviews: two interviews with street workers, (one was the coordinator of the general network in Brussels), a director of a school, a teacher, a community worker, a social worker at the prevention service of the city, a person from a social organisation for youngsters in the city centre, one interview with the coordinator of youth work of the Flemish Community Department in the centre of Brussels and finally three with police officers (one regular officer, a neighbourhood policeman and an officer working at the youth section).

In Hasselt (semi-urban/rural area) the 9 interviews were conducted: a teacher, a coordinator working at a school offering part-time education, social worker from social service at the youth court, a community worker, two police officers, a person from a general welfare service, criminologist working at the bureau for alternative measures for youngsters and a person working as a coach for school drop-outs and truant youngsters.

Finally in our rural area Dinant, only 5 interviews were conducted. It was very hard to find respondents willing to participate in this region. This could be explained by the fact that first of all this rather small town is very far from Brussels and it is French speaking so perhaps they had less affinity with a Flemish speaking university in Brussels. Finally there are also less services and actors involved in youth work compared to Brussels and Hasselt just simply because the town is smaller.

¹ In Belgium these centres are called CAW's

We conducted interviews with a teacher, two social assistants from the police department², one police officer, a person from the local prevention service and one criminologist working at a social service for youngsters.³

3.2 Group discussions

As mentioned before three group discussions were conducted. One was organised during a lunch break at a school participating in the school survey. We asked in several classes who would be willing to participate in a group discussion. Eventually 4 youngsters aged between 15 and 17 volunteered. The two other group discussions were held during class in a school located in the centre of Brussels. The youngsters who participated were aged between 16 and 20. In the first discussion 10 students participated, 15 in the second one.

4 Findings

4.1 Perception of problems

4.1.1 Expert's views

In general the experts indicated similar problems in their area. The most important ones that were mentioned were drug and alcohol use, truancy, hanging around in public space and harassing people. The latter types of behaviour are strongly related with incivilities in public space in Belgium.⁴ Several experts did also refer to this field, mostly expressing their concern about the lack of tolerance within society. Furthermore different forms of violence, theft, vandalism and extortion were also brought forward.

Although the perceived problems are rather common for the three areas, we can still detect some important differences. In the urban and semi-urban area the respondents reported troubles with youth in public space (cf. hanging around and harassing people) to a higher extend than the experts in the rural area. Apparently the most important perceived problems here were related to the use of alcohol and other associated problems, like driving without a license and speeding. In Hasselt it was obvious that several experts evaluate the public transport and the train station area as important places where problems with youngsters occur. Hasselt is a city where a lot of high schools are located

² Since this was a double interview both offering the same perspective and answering together, we have decided to count this as one interview.

³ This service is called AMO and stands for help for youngsters in an open environment

⁴ This will be discussed in detail on page 12

so the train station is before and after school a place occupied by many youngsters. The risk that problems with young people occur is logically higher where there are more youngsters present.

4.1.1 Youngster's views

The youngsters in the group discussions indicated more or less the same types of problems, mainly theft; violence; alcohol and drug use; harassing people and hanging around in public space. The students in Hasselt think that youth crime is not that present compared to other Belgian cities. There is however in their opinion a lot of drug use. They also confirmed the expert's opinion on the concentration of problems around the train station and public transportation. Several students who participated in the urban group discussions emphasized the amount of drug use amongst youngsters. They stated that it is very easy to buy drugs. It was remarkable that in both discussions organised in Hasselt and Brussels some respondents mentioned that generally youngsters do forbidden things just because it is not allowed. Therefore they think that more young people use drugs, leading one student to state that soft drug use should be legalised.

4.2 Key features of youth crime

4.2.1 Experts' views

If we take a look at the key features of youth crime it is clear that the experts have drawn a rather classic profile of the juvenile delinquent: (migrant) adolescent boys aged between 14 and 18 year old from disadvantaged families and neighbourhoods. Only in Brussels the experts mentioned the presence of youth gangs. It was remarkable that only in the urban and semi-urban area the respondents mentioned 'migrant' as a characteristic of youth offenders.

The perceived image of the victims of youth crime classically referred to mainly peers and vulnerable people. Some stated that many youngsters still have a lot of respect for elders where others think the opposite.

When we turn to the background and underlying aspects of youth crime it was clear that the majority agrees upon the contribution of structural factors. They emphasized the role of precarious social economical situation like poverty, living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and families. The experts from all three regions also indicated that youth crime may be more concentrated in vulnerable neighbourhoods, where they also referred to 'social blocks'. In Brussels some respondents

mentioned that there are more disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Brussels so therefore more problems as well. They pointed at the specificity of the urban context with the presence of public services (like for example asylum application centres), different cultures, generations, the housing conditions, ...etc.

A theme that came up several times in the interviews was racism. For example in our rural area, Dinant, the experts expressed concerns about racism and prejudices amongst youngsters. In Hasselt it's more a case of 'reverse racism' towards "native" young people. Finally in Brussels, racism was mainly mentioned when discussing the relationship between police and youngsters.

4.2.2 Youngsters' views

The students did not really brought forward a clear-cut profile of young delinquents. However they did refer frequently to young people using drugs and school dropouts. According to the respondents, the latter ones have nothing to do and due to boredom they start harassing people and displaying problematic behaviour. When it comes to the image of the victims, youngsters agreed with the experts. They indicated that peers and vulnerable people are more likely to become victim of youth crime. Moreover, also girls were perceived as important targets. Apparently many young girls in the urban area have a lot of feelings of insecurity.

It was striking that problems with different cultures and associated acts of racism were brought forward more than once. According to the students there is a lot of hatred towards each other, discrimination and racism. Racist acts and way of communicating from the police towards youngsters but also 'reverse racism' was indicated several times. This was apparently mostly towards Flemish speaking people.

We could observe two issues where the majority of experts and the youngsters seem to agree upon. First of all they both think that the youngsters today are seen as the scapegoats of our contemporary society. Secondly they stressed the problematic relationship between police and youngsters. According to several youngsters they claim that a negative and disrespectful attitude of police evokes frustration with young people. This is especially the case in Brussels where youngsters stressed several times, in relation with the 'stop and search' police actions, a racist attitude of police. Finally several students stressed the impact of media and technological evolutions such as computer games.

4.3 Current state of youth crime prevention in the selected regions

4.3.1 Experts' views

The respondents were asked to draw an image of the current state of prevention activities aimed at controlling youth crime in their areas. Firstly according to the experts in our urban and semi urban region in general a lot of measures are aimed at drug use, truancy and incivilities, thus the problems mentioned earlier. In general they listed rather 'classic' actors who are involved in prevention like community work, welfare and social services, non-profit organisations, schools and centres for student assistance. The latter service is connected to a school and aims to offer general assistance to pupils, not only with regards to their study career but also on psychological and social level. It is important to note that experts in the rural area mentioned similar actors, however different activities. Most referred to general animation initiatives like for example djembe sessions, animation projects in school or projects that aim to learn how to express feelings in a proper way.

We could conclude that perhaps there is an important difference when speaking about prevention in an urban context: the applied prevention strategy is apparently more targeted, secondary prevention.

4.3.2 Youngsters' views

When we asked the youngsters the same question they did not provide a list of possible activities or actors involved in prevention of youth crime. The majority stressed the lack of an appropriate offer for youngsters. In their view too little activities are being organised and they don't have sufficient information or knowledge on existing activities. In the group discussion organised in Hasselt (semi-urban region) the youngsters listed three things that should be avoided in trying to keep youngsters on the right track, namely: administrative sanctions aimed at incivilities, projects aimed at youngsters 'hanging around ' and last but not least 'a severe attitude of police towards youngsters.

4.4 Financing and cooperation

The question of finance and of cooperation within the prevention field was obviously only discussed in the interviews with the experts.

When it comes to the cooperation of several actors and services, views were divided. In our urban region most experts stressed the fragmented policy and lack of communication between involved services. Moreover, because in Brussels several governments have (different – but competing or

complementary) competences in the field of youth, it becomes very difficult to get an overview of what is being organised and who is responsible.

In Dinant experts were apparently satisfied with the state of cooperation, although people working at the police office all stressed a lack of information exchange. In Hasselt the opinions were very divided: some are satisfied, others stressed the long waiting lists for assistance for youngsters and a lack of accessibility of several services.

When it comes to the state of financing, all respondents agree: total lack of financial resources for prevention projects and for their evaluation.

4.5 Future challenges, opportunities and recommendations regarding prevention

4.5.1 Experts' views

From the interviews with the experts it was clear that the majority attaches great value to education in the prevention of youth crime. The experts argued that education should be an instrument to tackle exclusion instead of stimulating it. They suggest that in the future we need to invest, restructure and support education in Belgium. There is a need for smaller classrooms and more cooperation with actors outside the school. A second conclusion we could draw was the fact that there needs to be more activities and initiatives for youngsters, especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. More space needs to be created like squares to sport or 'hang around'. Finally some experts recommended some general methods in keeping youngsters from trouble. This mainly involved the importance of parents, who need to be included in the assistance and have to take their responsibility. Furthermore the experts stressed the value of early intervention, emancipation, participation and an offer adjusted to youths.

4.5.2 Youngsters' views

The youngsters in the group discussion gave more or less similar answers. They too attach great importance to investing in the offer of activities for youngsters, close to their world. The youngsters in the semi-rural area saw the school and the influence of education as very important. The youngsters from Brussels referred more to the value of the neighbourhood you are growing up in and with the type of friends you hang around with.

4.6 Group differences and controversial issues with regard to perspectives on youth crime prevention and recommended approaches

During the interviews and group discussions, several important issues related to the youth crime prevention field in Belgium were brought forward by both experts and youngsters. In this section we will shed a light on specific themes on which no consensus was reached or that in our opinion simply deserve a moment of reflection.

4.6.1.1 The role of police

A recurrent topic in the interviews was the role of police with regards to the prevention of youth crime. In general many youngsters mentioned the negative attitude of police and the way they approach youngsters and communicate with them. We could observe that this perception was also confirmed in many interviews with the experts. However to a lesser extend in Hasselt, our semi-rural area. A significant part of the respondents (both youngsters and experts) thinks that the police's attitude is too repressive, aggressive and authoritative. On the other hand several youngsters also stressed the lack of severity of police in tackling youth crime. This contradiction could perhaps mean that youngsters think that the police is too soft in dealing with 'real youth crime', notwithstanding when it comes to a general approach of youngsters or the reaction on 'small deviant acts' they think the police is too severe.

- **Quote 1 youngster:** *"two years ago the police came into our class after a case of drug use in school. They invaded the room and everybody was searched in a very disrespectful way. That evokes frustrations"*
- **Quote 2 expert (on police officers) :** *"De number of youngsters that get beaten up or insulted (...) some police officers are stuck in a trip of culturalization"⁵*
- **Quote 3 youngster:** *"the police in Brussels doesn't do anything against bad juveniles (...). They are afraid to do something (...). They are not tough enough."*
- **Quote 4 expert (police officer):** *"The police education/ formation is always pretty repressive (...) that's the resistance I was mentioning earlier (...). You can make it go wrong from the start (...). It has to do with the way you start (...)"⁶*

⁵ This concept refers to the process of linking cultural and ethnical components to the occurrence of problems like crime and deviance

⁶ In this case the police officer refers to the way one approaches a youngster for the first time

As mentioned before it is believed that a trend of multi-culturalisation of (youth) crime is currently going on. Acts of racism, discrimination and related stop-and-search actions (and even violence) are very present today according to our respondents. Concerning this problematic relationship between youngsters and police forces, some recommendations were formulated. For example an expert pleaded for developing a network between police and youngsters. A youngster recommended a more relaxed atmosphere between both to try to bring police closer to youth's environment and way of thinking. That way 'resistance' (cf. quote 4) of police officers towards youngsters may be avoided. These aspects also need to be taken up in the police formation in general.⁷

4.6.1.2 Administrative sanctions and incivilities

Administrative sanctions were established in Belgium to react faster to incivilities. In 2004 a law was introduced to include minors up until the age of 16, however this year a legislative proposal was made to reduce the age even to 14 year. It is clear that currently this is a popular debate in Belgium especially with regards to the field of youngsters, since they are an important target group of these measures. This observation got also reflected in the interviews.

As mentioned in the beginning of this report, many respondents indicated incivilities and related behaviour like harassing or hanging around in public space. Several experts and youngsters also gave their opinion on the way it is tackled in Belgium:

- **Quote 5 expert:** *"If youngsters display certain behaviour we need to react as a society saying that we do not tolerate this. However the reaction needs to be a decent one"*
- **Quote 6 expert:** *"Please remove child's play under 18 from the judicial sphere"*
- **Quote 7 expert:** *"Youngsters that hang around in public facilities are apparently nowadays also seen as problematic without them doing anything actually wrong"*
- **Quote 8 youngster:** *"how many people receive the label of ADHD just because they have a tough personality (...) The whole society tries to reshape youngsters for the future...taking away their freedom. This way you provoke crime because they are trying to express themselves"*
- **Quote 9 youngster:** *"the government does not give money to these youngsters, ... doesn't give them a chance to express themselves"*

⁷ Implications for police formation will be discussed in the manuals for police officers that are produced within the frame of this research.

From the quotes above it is clear that hanging around in public space and other forms of incivilities take an important place in the current debate related to the prevention of youth crime. However, this doesn't necessary imply a consensus on how this phenomenon is policed. One question is whether incivilities by youngsters need to be subject of these kinds of measures in the first place. Where the first quote clearly points in that direction, other respondents plea rather for a decriminalisation. However we have to note that incivilities in this context have more to do with hanging around in public space. In quote 9 the youngster clearly problematizes the role of government as not providing space and chances for youngsters to express themselves.

Finally we want to argue that imposing a sanction to minors is rather contradictory to the core principal of the youth protection system in Belgium, where protection is emphasized and not the responsibility of the minor. From the interviews it resulted that this whole concept of responsibility appeared to be a controversial issue as well.

4.6.1.3 The concept of responsibility

Who is responsible for controlling youth crime, was a question that when answered didn't point always in the same direction. Whereas some argued that school and education in general play a very important role (as mentioned before), others think the opposite:

- **Quote 10 expert:** *" we need to strive for a school policy where the school is responsible for each youngster from A to Z"*
- **Quote 11 expert:** *"more need for assistance to parents... to relieve the schools. Everybody needs to retake his own role"*

The need to enforce the role of parents like mentioned above was confirmed by many experts. But also the youngsters think that the upbringing process and family environment has a crucial influence:

- **Quote 12 youngster:** *"I think ... everything starts with how children are raised and in which neighbourhood they grow up"*
- **Quote 13 youngster:** *" I think that parents, well... you can never say that your child is too young for discipline, it has to be taught from the start (...)"*

Finally a lot of respondents claimed that prevention of youth crime is also a responsibility of the society in general. The intolerance towards and criminalisation of youngsters, unemployment, lack of

future perspectives and exclusion of youth were one of many structural factors indicated by the respondents that may contribute to youth crime and can only be addressed by a society in a whole.

5 Conclusion

The local study aimed to shed a light on local conditions of youth crime and its prevention. A first step in this analysis implied a school survey amongst pupils which was conducted in three selected regions: urban (Brussels), rural (Dinant) and semi-urban / rural (Hasselt). In a second phase 25 local interviews were conducted in the same regions with experts from different relevant fields. Since the perspective of the youngsters is of great importance, 3 group discussions were also organised with students between 14 and 20 years old. Unfortunately the amount of interviews and group discussions are disproportionally spread over the three regions, especially with regards to our rural area. This needs to be kept in mind when interpreting the described results.

First of all this study pointed out that both experts and youngsters generally agree on “youth crime” problems in the three areas. Mostly drug and alcohol use, truancy, ‘problematic’ behaviour in public space (incivilities) and different forms of violence were brought forward. The experts expressed concerns on the lack of tolerance with regards to incivilities, while the youngsters stressed the accessibility to buying drugs. Several differences could be observed between the three regions, mainly due to the urban context of Hasselt and especially Brussels (semi urban and urban). The presence of many different cultures, more disadvantaged neighbourhoods, ... were indicated as explanatory factors of more conflicts and problems. Living in these type of neighbourhoods, poverty and other negative social economical factors were mentioned by many experts and youngsters as important background aspects of youth crime.

The experts drew a classic image of the juvenile delinquent and the same can be stated about the profile of the victims, namely: mostly peers. This view was also shared by the youngsters. A reoccurring topic in both the interviews and discussions was racism: from racist prejudices of youngsters in Dinant to ‘inverse racism’ in the Hasselt and Brussels and discrimination and aggressive attitude of police in Brussels as well. Finally we could detect a general agreement between the majority of the experts and the youngsters on the perception of youths today. Both stressed that they are nowadays too often seen as the scapegoats in contemporary society.

Turning to the results on youth crime prevention it seemed that in Dinant (rural area) there is apparently a predominance of more general primary prevention strategy as opposed to Brussels and Hasselt. In these regions more targeted strategies seem present focused on risk factors. In general the youngsters stressed the lack of activities, facilities and space for youngsters.

Asking the participants on their views of future challenges it appeared that they attach great value to the role of education. Other recommendations were offered like involvement of parents, early intervention, emancipation and participation of youths, ... etc.

Finally the results in general revealed some important 'controversial' issues that may have important implications for the current prevention field of youth crime in Belgium. The role of the police, administrative sanctions and the concept of responsibility were selected. We opted to discuss them in order to finish this descriptive research report with an encouragement for reflection.