

Wiesbaden Declaration of the 12th German Crime Prevention Congress A strong youth – a strong future

Since its inception in 1995 the German Congress on Crime Prevention (*DPT – Deutscher Präventionstag*) has focussed on youth crime and its prevention as one of its important and ongoing topics. The 12th Congress on Crime Prevention (held on the 18th and 19th of June in Wiesbaden) placed presentations, consultations, discussions and Dr Steffen Wiebke's expert opinion "Youth crime and its prevention - perceptions versus empirical evidence" under the heading "A strong youth – a strong future". On the basis of the aforementioned expert opinion the *DPT*, its standing partners and this year's hosting sponsors unequivocally state that:

Crime prevention works

- ⌚ Over the last few years there have been encouraging developments in the areas of youth crime and youth violence, not least because efforts regarding crime prevention amongst children and young people have been considerably stepped up. Preventive strategies have led to remarkable progress.
- ⌚ Strategies aimed at the prevention of violence are mainly dominated by pedagogical strategies inspired by the fact that the prevention of violence amongst children and young people must be linked to aspects of growing up. The *DPT* supports these approaches.
- ⌚ Violence during adolescence should be addressed in terms of everyday education, clearly defined learning, engendering self-esteem, learning to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence as well as acquiring and practising other social skills.
- ⌚ In this sense violent acts by children and young people constitute a challenging opportunity for those who actively pursue prevention work with the aim of teaching the young people concerned concrete and effective life experiences.
- ⌚ To this end it is vital to react to potentially relevant behaviour under criminal law and to set youngsters clearly defined limits. This can be achieved by means other than using criminal law. Informal reactions by parents, teachers, friends and other people to whom children and young people closely relate have proved to be very effective.
- ⌚ In Germany's federal *Laender* and its regions violence prevention strategies have both been accepted and established and have generally led to positive results. However, certain aspects need improving, including better targeting on certain groups such as young intensive offenders and young people with migration backgrounds. It is also extremely important to strengthen the perspective of the victims.
- ⌚ One of the most important challenges for the *DPT* is to embed, promulgate and develop existing strategies. This includes developing existing cooperation structures, initial and further training of employees in the field as well as quality assurance and evaluation.
- ⌚ The *DPT* feels that it is necessary to have an age-specific, child and youth related understanding of violence as well as a narrow understanding of violence prevention. Only strategies aimed at programmes, measures, and projects which are mainly focussed on preventing or reducing violence during childhood and adolescence should be seen as violence prevention.
- ⌚ Establishing prevention strategies has focussed more attention on and led to an increased sensitivity for (potentially) violent behaviour in young people. Also the population at large, as well as youngsters

themselves, are now displaying a stronger tendency to report incidents. These developments are part of a culture of "not turning a blind eye" and as such are to be welcomed.

⌚ However, an increased tendency to also report violent acts of a less serious nature - which used to go unreported in the past - might give rise to problems, particularly when informal conflict resolution gives way to earlier formal social control and when age-typical behaviour amongst young people is disproportionately categorised as unacceptable and might even be prosecuted.

Overall progress in youth crime in recent years

Generally speaking the level of exposure to crime, and particularly violent crime, is officially higher amongst young people as compared to adults. This has been observed for over a hundred years, i.e. since the advent of crime statistics. It holds true for Germany as well as other countries around Europe and places further afield, such as Northern America.

This is a basic observation which is valid over the long term and can be attributed, amongst other things, to processes of modernisation in society and their (sometimes undesired) effects. In the short and medium term, however, there may be uncharacteristic developments in crime figures and people's exposure to crime levels. Sometimes there are downward trends but there may also be perceivable upturns which usually lead to mounting concerns. The current situation can be described as follows:

⌚ In terms of crime reported in police crime statistics youth crime, as an overall phenomenon, is falling after a ongoing perceivable rise in the 1990s.

⌚ For certain types of crime, however, there is a continued upward trend in the number of officially reported cases. These include violent offences and, for the group of young people, assaults in particular.

⌚ Yet caution should be exercised when evaluating these seemingly obvious statistical findings: When we also include findings from studies of unreported crimes we can see that crimes committed by young people today are more frequently registered by the police than in the past and that, as such, behaviour deviating from the norm is indeed becoming more frequent amongst the younger generation. However this can also be largely explained by the aforementioned higher sensitivity of the population and the resulting willingness to report more crimes.

⌚ Findings from current empirical youth studies in various German regions and cities on self-reported delinquency (offender surveys) and self-reported victimisation (victim surveys) support this assessment.

⌚ Both offender and victim surveys show that depending on the area of study the level of violent crime amongst young people is either predominantly stable or even falling.

⌚ Having questioned several thousands of young people in Germany these surveys also showed that the propensity to violence is decreasing and that more and young people disapprove of violence.

⌚ As part of an overall assessment of the circumstances, the findings from both reported and unreported case data give no indication for a dramatic increase in the levels of violence or brutality amongst young people in Germany.

Youth crime is widespread

⌚ Reliable findings from national and international research show that delinquent behaviour amongst people might be widespread but that is mainly episodic in nature.

- ⌚ This means in concrete terms that for the majority of young people delinquent behaviour is only temporary and that it either corrects itself during a young person's development or with the help of interventions of people or institutions in their immediate environment.
- ⌚ This age-related phenomenon should therefore not be interpreted as an indication that most young people will continue to be long-term delinquents after they committed one or several offences.
- ⌚ Youth-typical delinquent behaviour of the majority of younger people is often linked to personal problems during their various stages of development, to conflicts in terms of finding out who they are and the resulting dissociation from parents and other educators, to getting used to becoming an adult and to peer pressure. It hardly ever has to do with grave behavioural disorders or educational deficits.

Serious youth crime is fairly rare

- ⌚ Only a small section of young people display long-term criminal tendencies linked to frequently committing serious offences.
- ⌚ These developments often start in early childhood and regularly point to considerable social as well as individual deficits and shortcomings.
- ⌚ Young people who frequently become noticed by the police over a period of time (so-called multiple and intensive offenders) display many risk factors. Protective factors are either missing entirely or are not available on time.
- ⌚ Crime statistics, youth study findings and practical experience show that this risk group of young multiple and intensive offenders mainly includes young males and particularly those with a migration background.
- ⌚ In these serious cases it is essential to show these young people where their limits are. This also implies quick responses as soon as possible after an offence has been committed. Serious interventions and long-term measures need to be tailored to the individual young person in order to be effective. To this end we recommend a multi-disciplinary approach, e.g. case conferences which bring together youth and child services, the police, the prosecution service and the courts.

Conclusions:

Over time there have always been young people who have overstepped the mark, tested their limits, looked for adventures and sought recognition of their peer group. Norms have always been breached and crimes have always been committed.

- ⌚ Empirical findings do not necessarily confirm the public's perception that youth crime today is more frequent and youth violence more brutal than ever.
- ⌚ Neither studies of unreported cases nor any statistics by the police, the courts or otherwise, provide reliable pointers that there is a rise in brutality amongst young people across the board.
- ⌚ There is also no evidence for the widespread assumption that there is a perceivable ongoing rise in violence amongst girls or violence in schools. There are different reasons for the gap between public perceptions and empirical findings on youth crime and youth violence, one of the more prominent ones being media reporting. Media coverage tends to focus on spectacular individual cases which occur from

time to time and which are unusual and, because of that, create a great deal of furore. Non-spectacular statistical findings regarding overall patterns do not necessarily make the papers.

Over time this may lead to large parts of the population being under the impression that it is not just a few young people but a large number and increasingly bigger sections of children and young people who are turning to crime and violence and who are becoming more reckless and brutal than the young people of earlier generations. Particularly in troubled times such as these when the population seems to have so many different fears and concerns it is essential to reduce feelings of fear and threat when it comes to problem situations or young people deviating from the norm by having unbiased media coverage and balanced discussions.

For this reason the DPT considers it to be an ongoing priority for experts and those responsible in the field to keep referring to all available facts: facts regarding youth crime as well as facts regarding all the different ways and possibilities to effectively prevent delinquent behaviour by children and young people.

These facts together with empirical data support the general diagnosis that trends are not as clear cut as is commonly assumed along the lines of: "ever more, ever worse, ever younger and ever more desperate". Certainly, practical experience shows that there are specific areas which give rise to concern and which need to be monitored diligently. These include the aforementioned multiple and intensive offenders but also integration issues for young people with migration backgrounds and the dangers posed by new media formats, by early drug and alcohol consumption and vandalism.

General developments in terms of youth crime might be favourable but they should not distract from the fact that in some cities and communities problem situations have arisen relating to certain areas or certain groups be they particular neighbourhoods, youth clubs or even schools. Here we need effective, integrated programmes of local crime prevention to be used as counter-measures.

The DPT calls on those responsible in the media and in politics

- ⌚ to take note of the positive developments in terms of youth crime
- ⌚ to support the educational tenor of initiatives and programmes in the area of crime prevention and
- ⌚ to promote the numerous cooperation efforts between the various fields of activity in the spirit of a generally accepted understanding of crime prevention.

The DPT feels it is vital that data on youth crime and strategies for the prevention of violence in the lives of children and young people are presented and discussed on a rigorously scientific basis and by drawing heavily on the experience of practitioners.

To this end DPT explicitly welcomes

- ⌚ the Periodic Safety Reports published by the German government and
- ⌚ the Report by the German Youth Institute based on a decision by the Conference of Prime Ministers of the *Bundesländer* and drafted with the cooperation of the German Forum for Crime Prevention (*Deutsches Forum für Kriminalprävention*) and the Police Crime Prevention Units of the *Laender* and the Federal Government (*Polizeiliche Kriminalprävention der Länder und des Bundes*).