

***Violence Prevention in Germany -
Experts' evaluation and perspectives***

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Violence Prevention in Germany¹

Experts' evaluation and perspectives

In the reunified Germany, violence prevention strategies have now been shaped at various levels in different arenas for over 25 years. A year ago, on 16 and 17 February 2016, the Alice Salomon University (ASH), Berlin, hosted the symposium entitled '25 years of violence prevention in unified Germany – evaluation and perspectives', a joint event organised in conjunction with the German Congress on Crime Prevention (Deutscher Präventionstag, DPT) and funded by the German Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ)². The results, which have now been extensively documented and thoroughly evaluated, gave occasion for retrospective observations and the formulation of future perspectives. The following article centres on the symposium, focussing specifically on the current need for action. A respective expert format will be offered shortly after the 22 German Congress on Crime Prevention in Hanover in June 2017 (www.gewalt-praevention.de).

Background and occasion

In 2015, the reunified Germany was looking back on 25 years of work in the fields of violence prevention and violence intervention. During this quarter of a century, the two fields have developed and gained relevance at a rapid pace, not least due to the fact that the number of violent crimes in Germany was rising until the early 2000s hand in hand with rising violence awareness among the population. This development is reflected not only by the numerous programmes and action plans set up by the Federal government, especially the German Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, and the German states, which were, and still are, dedicated either exclusively to violence prevention and violence intervention or to certain aspects thereof, but also by the respective activities carried out in this field by numerous German municipalities.

¹ This text first appeared in German in the 'forum kriminalprävention' magazine (no. 1/2017, 22 – 26). The magazine (ISSN 1618-4912) is published by Stiftung Deutsches Forum für Kriminalprävention (German Forum for Crime Prevention (www.kriminalpraevention.de)).

² Cf. symposium report in 'forum kriminalprävention' 1-2016, p. 9 ff (editor's note)

Aside from the implementation of countless violence prevention and intervention (model) projects, measures and programmes, the developments in this field in Germany from the beginning of the 1990s to the end of the millennium were also dominated by efforts to set up structures at the national and state levels that would reflect the growing importance of violence prevention. The key results of these efforts include, among other institutions, the German Congress on Crime Prevention (Deutscher Präventionstag, DPT), which took place for the 20th time in 2015, and the establishment of the German Forum for Crime Prevention (Deutsches Forum für Kriminalprävention, DFK) in 2001, whose board of trustees includes representatives of all Federal ministries relevant to violence prevention. On top of this, the states of Schleswig-Holstein, Lower Saxony, Berlin and Hesse set up state crime prevention boards during this time, which played, and still play, an important role in the development of prevention in Germany – to some extent also at the municipal level.

2015 also saw the 25th anniversary of the day on which the results and recommendations of the Independent Government Committee for the Prevention and Fight against Violence, Committee on Violence (Gewaltkommission), which has had a material impact on prevention efforts in Germany, were submitted to the Federal government³.

The above developments, especially a quarter of a century of violence prevention and violence intervention work in Germany, were reason enough to cast an eye on prevention work in the past 25 years and review its progress in the context of a national conference. Even more so, this provided an occasion to look at the future and focus on the challenges and requirements prevention work will face in the coming years in terms of programmes, measures and activities as well as the structures that have been created in this field so far.

Given this background, we reached the conclusion that a nationwide discussion process among experts regarding the future shape of violence prevention at the municipal, state and Federal level is not only worthwhile but also urgently needed – especially with a view to cooperation and linking up prevention research, practice, administration and politics. We were guided by the vision that making our future prevention work even more sustainable and more effective in terms of peaceful coexistence than in the past crucially depends on violence and crime prevention and intervention strategy at these levels that is integrated into mandatory network and cooperation structures. Furthermore, we were convinced that the implementation of the technical developments considered necessary in the individual violence prevention subareas or spheres of action would depend to a large extent on suitable overall framework conditions in the field of prevention work.

³ Cf. Schwind, Hans-Dieter, Baumann, Jürgen et al (eds.): Ursachen, Prävention und Kontrolle von Gewalt. Analysen und Vorschläge der Unabhängigen Regierungskommission zur Verhinderung und Bekämpfung der Gewalt (Gewaltkommission). Band I: Endgutachten und Zwischengutachten der Arbeitsgruppen. Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1990.

Objectives

The symposium therefore focused on the question of the specific design not only of a stable and effective foundation for sustainable prevention work in the respective violence prevention areas but also of the underlying framework conditions at the Federal, state and municipal level. Accordingly, it was the aim of the symposium to develop Perspectives on Prevention Work for the coming years that would provide prevention practice, science, administration and politics with guidance and suggestions for respective activities in the fields of crime prevention and violence intervention.

The symposium

Given this background, we organised the symposium as a workshop for invited violence prevention experts and broke it down into 19 subject-specific⁴ and interdisciplinary working groups. During three work stages, the subject-specific working groups, which were headed by two expert contributors, one from the field of practical violence prevention and one from the field of crime prevention research, and attended by a further 5 to 15 experts, analysed and discussed the development of prevention work in the respective violence prevention areas in the last 25 years. Current debates and requirements were identified and issues relating to networks, cooperation and framework conditions for violence prevention at the municipal, state and Federal levels were discussed with a view to formulating respective demands to be put to administration and politics. These discussions were prepared with the help of the contributors’ working papers, which were available in advance on a dedicated symposium web page, overseen by the contributors in the role of presenters and documented by minute writers. The results of the working groups, in particular their demands, were then made available to the participants of the interdisciplinary working group meetings which took place on the next day. During these meetings, fresh combinations of participants discussed the demands that may lead to the envisaged results in the development of violence prevention in Germany, this time from an interdisciplinary perspective. The results of the working groups were documented such that they could be integrated into the symposium’s concluding presentation by Dr. Wiebke Steffen and could thus be made available to all participants.

Initially, some participants had reservations about the highly structured and disciplined approach necessary to implement this conference concept. However, in the end, most of them had been convinced of its effectiveness.

⁴ Intimate partner violence (domestic and sexual violence), violence by adults against children and adolescents (violence in education and childcare), child protection, violence in daycare centres, violence at school, violence in sport – example of football, violence in public spaces, violence and the media, juvenile delinquents with multiple symptoms, violence against senior citizens, prejudice-driven violence, right-wing violence, (de-)radicalisation of young adults, police intervention and prevention, administration of juvenile law, victims of violence, municipal prevention, prevention at the state and Federal levels, violence prevention and public health, evaluation and quality development in violence prevention and intervention.

Results

The evaluation of violence prevention work in Germany has shown that there is significant potential for raising awareness of violence, supporting victims, guiding perpetrators back to a path of non-violence and, especially, reducing violence. Relevant examples consist of the progress made in the fields of domestic and sexual violence, child protection, protection against violence in education and childcare, work with football fans, work with juvenile delinquents with multiple indications, general child and juvenile delinquency and victim protection as well as in the fields of evaluation and quality development / assurance, to name just a few. 25 years ago, some aspects of violence prevention which we take for granted today were still a long way off. This is also true for various important statutory regulations that have been developed in connection with violence prevention and violence intervention as well as for cooperation between actors on the ground which was difficult to achieve at the time. Against the background of this progress, we must now strive to step up and enhance our exploitation of the potential inherent in violence prevention work.

However, at the same time, the symposium also showed that there are still substantial deficits, in prevention practice, science, administration and politics alike. They exist at the Federal, state and municipal levels, to various extents, but in almost all areas of violence prevention.

On the one hand, they relate to statutory and structural framework conditions in connection with mandatory, sustainable violence prevention (e.g. overall legal basis of violence prevention, statutory provisions in individual crime prevention areas, coordinated comprehensive strategies for individual crime prevention areas, mandatory curricula in educational institutions, especially in daycare centres and schools, integration of violence prevention in standard structures and services, mandatory and sufficient financing of crime prevention work, acknowledgement of cooperation and networks as core crime prevention tasks that require financing).

On the other hand, there are deficits in research and practical violence prevention as well as in their interaction (e.g. lack of long-term interdisciplinary fundamental research, lack of evaluated prevention and intervention concepts, serious lack of panel studies on the effects of prevention practices, lack of research and knowledge in the field of prevention alternatives or combination of various prevention approaches, lack of sufficient insights which actors implement which type of violence prevention measures in Germany under which framework conditions. As a rule, interaction between science and practical crime prevention does not result in sufficient exploitation of potentials or adequate reception of the respective knowledge and insights. In many cases, scientific findings are too theoretical to be taken up by practical violence prevention, there is a lack of interdisciplinarity in research, research landscapes are fragmented, there is a lack of research management, research funding focuses on short-term effects, research is underfunded and generally lacks an overall concept).

Deficits also exist in the *conception of comprehensive, need-driven services* (e.g. in the field of victim support, care, municipal prevention, police prevention, domestic and sexual violence, basic and advanced training), in the *exploitation of violence prevention potential* (e.g. in public health), in the *shaping of cooperation and networks* (e.g. lack of human resources and time resources, lack of professional organisation and coordination, lack of continuity, little or no interdisciplinary cooperation in administration and ministries), in *quality development / assurance* (e.g. gender reflection in prevention work, development of quality standards and qualification profiles based on the latest scientific findings, mandatory quality development and assurance, quality control in educational violence prevention services, standards for databases and information services) as well as in *basic and advanced training* (e.g. lack of interdisciplinarity and inclusion of scientific findings).

Reducing these deficits – whether they refer to individual or interdisciplinary crime prevention areas – in the long run is the central challenge of the coming years.

At the symposium, numerous concrete suggestions were developed and presented with regard to these *deficits*, both in the subject-specific and the interdisciplinary working groups. A detailed description of these suggestions would go far beyond the scope of this article.

However, the suggestions are included in the symposium documentation⁵ – not only in the numerous articles provided by the speakers, who also discuss the violence prevention developments in their individual spheres of activity over the last 25 years as well as current debates and required action, but also in the included synopsis of the demands formulated by the working groups and in a review of the symposium that includes a systematic summary of the results⁶.

Perspectives

In his opening speech at the symposium, Dr. Ralf Kleindiek, State Secretary at the German Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, gave the following answer to the question how the above-mentioned task should be implemented:

*“25 years of violence prevention in unified Germany – this represents a mandate to continue ... Perhaps now is the time to formulate a long-term national strategy that defines all necessary cross-functional and inter-agency aspects.”*⁷

⁵ Voß, S., Marks, E. (eds.) (2016): 25 Jahre Gewaltprävention im vereinten Deutschland – Bestandsaufnahme und Perspektiven. Pro BUSINESS, Berlin, or www.gewalt-praevention.info

⁶ Voß, S. (2016): Zu den Ergebnissen des Symposions „25 Jahre Gewaltprävention im vereinten Deutschland – Bestandsaufnahme und Perspektiven“. In: Voß, S., Marks, E. (eds.): 25 Jahre Gewaltprävention im vereinten Deutschland – Bestandsaufnahme und Perspektiven. Pro BUSINESS, Berlin, p. 21–94.

⁷ Kleindiek, R. (2016): *ibid.*, p. 102

We believe that the symposium has shown that such a strategy is necessary if we want to develop a reliable and sustainable foundation for violence prevention work in Germany. Looking back on the work of the Committee on Violence (*Gewaltkommission der Bundesregierung*) which highlighted a series of options for shaping violence prevention and intervention strategies twenty years ago, the important role played by the Committee in advancing violence prevention is surely undisputed. However, at the time, political and other relevant decision-makers were not involved in the Committee's work and no standards for dealing with the Committee's conclusions existed. As a consequence, implementation of the results was not a binding obligation. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, progress was made in violence prevention work, albeit at an intermittent, rather unplanned and unsystematic pace, often depending on the commitment of individuals, sometimes on particularly appalling events (e.g. in connection with spectacular child protection cases) or the fear that such cases may occur (e.g. world football championship 2006), on political developments and moods and sometimes simply in response to social pressure (e.g. in connection with the hard-won de-legitimisation of domestic and sexual violence): The potential of violence prevention work, which undoubtedly existed, was not fully exploited and a truly sustainable foundation for violence prevention work was not developed. The fact that numerous structures may have developed in the violence prevention field in the last 25 years, among them municipal prevention councils, state prevention boards, *the German Congress on Crime Prevention (DPT)*, *the German Forum for Crime Prevention (DFK)* including the *National Centre for Crime Prevention (NZK)*, to name just a few, may have contributed to this; however, what has been missing up until now is a (financially) independent association of violence prevention actors at the national level which, just like actors in other areas, formulates perspectives on violence prevention work, propagates respective concepts and suggestions at the public level and points out the importance of violence prevention in Germany to the expert community, the general public and the political and administrative sphere with the required urgency, given our increasingly polarised society whose cohesion appears to be more imperilled than ever before.

Such an association of violence prevention actors could work for the establishment of an Excellence Initiative at German universities focussing on non-violent coexistence. Perhaps now, after 25 years of violence prevention, it is really time to consider such an association of crime prevention actors. If we want to develop a stable foundation for violence prevention work, the establishment of committees following the pattern of the Committee on Violence, which had no powers beyond making recommendations, or the creation of institutions based on the DFK and NKZ will not be enough. Instead, we need a strategy that focuses on the establishment of binding objectives for the further advancement of violence prevention as well as on the steps necessary to implement these objectives. The development of such a violence prevention strategy can succeed if the underlying process is professional, coordinated, interlinked

and financed and involves the Federal, state and municipal governments as well as non-governmental organisations, practical violence prevention, science and administration. Countless actors in politics, administration, practice and science now have the required expertise and experience.

The insights and perspectives on violence prevention gained and presented at the symposium could be integrated into a national violence prevention action plan which relates to both interdisciplinary and specific needs in the field of violence prevention and can be combined into a long-term sustainable violence prevention strategy.

However, the development of a national violence prevention action plan depends on the political will, the assumption of responsibility and the support of the Federal, state and municipal governments as well as of NGOs. After 25 years of violence prevention in the unified Germany, its development and implementation would be an important step beyond the work and function of the Federal government’s former Committee on Violence, a step towards the strategic design of a mandatory violence prevention strategy in Germany that is supported by society as a whole.

Next steps

The implementation of these perspectives on prevention practice, research and policies certainly requires patience and a longer-term process. Initially, however, it requires a respective debate and perhaps agreement on the conclusions that should be derived from the symposium. The continuation of the Berlin symposium in the form of an accompanying event at the upcoming German Congress on Crime Prevention in Hanover in June 2017 will provide a platform for this debate.

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