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# *Mannheim Declaration − Crises & Prevention*

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**The German Prevention Congress – DPT**
**and the permanent partners DFK, ProPK, WEISSER RING**

# Mannheim Declaration
# 28th German Prevention Congress

## Crises & Prevention

The 28th German Prevention Congress focuses on the omnipresent topic of multiple crises and poses the question of the contribution of prevention in terms of both preventing and overcoming crisis situations. Based on the debates at the congress and a comprehensive accompanying publication containing eleven expert opinions from various disciplines[1], the 28th German Prevention Congress, together with the partner organisations Stiftung Deutsches Forum für Kriminalprävention (DFK), Polizeiliche Kriminalprävention der Länder und des Bundes (ProPK) and WEISSER RING e.V., is issuing this 'Mannheim Declaration'.

A crisis is a phase in which serious changes are emerging, but it is still unclear whether a catastrophe will occur. Whether a phenomenon is assessed and perceived as a crisis arises in social interaction, is changeable and is experienced subjectively in different ways. We are currently facing several crises at the same time: climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and war, including in Europe, as well as their consequences: extreme weather conditions, economic downturn, inflation, refugee movements, increasing social inequalities, among others.

It is currently of particular importance that an accumulation of crises is being recognised and that these harbour systemic risks. They therefore jeopardise the system as a whole and are characterised by high complexity, cascading effects and tipping points, among other things.

Prevention in the context of a crisis does not just mean trying to prevent a crisis from occurring in the first place. The term resilience is often used here, which refers to dealing positively with crises that have already occurred. It is essentially about strengthening resistance. Prevention in this sense takes place at an individual, communal/organisational and societal level.

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1 See page 25 in this book

## Prevention at the level of individual coping with crises

- The ability to cope positively with crises in terms of individual resilience is supported by protective factors on a biopsychosocial level. These factors must therefore be specifically considered and promoted. Good experiences and support in this area can prevent crises from leading exclusively to uncertainty, disorientation and feelings of loss of control.
- In particular, a child-centred and personality-strengthening up-bringing provides a solid 'foundation', which makes it easier to cope with stressful situations in adulthood. Children who grow up in difficult circumstances should therefore be supported by paying particular attention to building relationships in education and leisure activities.
- In times of crisis, there is usually a lack of clear concepts based on sound knowledge. Here it is important to be able to deal with divergent views and unclear situations. This ability is referred to as ambiguity tolerance and refers to the ability to endure and accept contradictions, ambivalence and ambiguity. As a central competence, the appropriate handling of different scientific statements, i.e. a trained categorisation of opinions, sources and findings, should also be specifically promoted.
- The sooner people understand the cause-and-effect relationships between events, the better they can deal with crises. If they then see opportunities for action for themselves, they can experience 'selfefficacy' and realise that their actions bring about positive change. This is an elementary need, the fulfilment of which contributes to an active and positive approach to crises. Where possible, appropriate options should therefore be identified.
- If there is a lack of understanding of the crisis, which is particularly the case with systemic crises, there is an increased attribution of blame to 'the foreigner'. Prejudice and discrimination are on the rise. Here, it is important to prevent anti-democratic and radical groups from using these moments in a targeted manner to offer affiliations and identifications with disinformation and conspiracy narratives and thus expand their influence.
- The experience of distributive justice is also highly relevant, as the feeling of being a 'crisis loser' can have similar consequences. In this context, the problem of the loss of solidarity and devaluation of socially weak groups can be observed.
- Crises also represent a major psychological burden for those affected. Offers for recovery and for stress and anxiety regulation can be very

helpful here. Mental health support should be seen as a cross-cutting issue in crisis prevention and be located in various areas of society. Offers can range from counselling and sports activities to the design of green spaces close to residential areas.

## Prevention at the level of organisational risk prevention and municipal crisis management

- At a local level, strengthening local social communities is of central importance. It has been shown that an optimistic self-perception of social cohesion in one's own neighbourhood increases the willingness to help in the event of a crisis.
- Seeing oneself as a community and being able to pursue a goal together is what constitutes local social capital. A high level of social capital is an important preventative factor. Municipalities can identify differences in this respect in the neighbourhoods and should therefore specifically promote social capital in the less advantaged neighbourhoods.
- Based on their general willingness to help, the population should be empowered to play an active role in dealing with and overcoming crises. The concept of 'community resilience' is based on the collective capacity of the population and does not view them as passive and worthy of protection alone, but rather ascribes an active role to them.
- The easier it is to understand the causes of crisis events and the options for action, the easier it is to manage them. However, this is particularly challenging in the case of systemic crises due to their complexity. Crisis communication plays a particularly important role here with the task of making the events comprehensible and explaining solutions and measures. There is still a need for optimisation in terms of the organisation and coordination of communication.
- An effective crisis management culture promotes both broad and subject-specific work. It requires both the ability to think in an integrative and cross-sectoral manner and access to specialised technical knowledge. The basis for this is the transparent exchange between those responsible across institutions. Internal communication based on trust must leave room for controversial discussions and alternative solution options.
- Organisational resilience means being able to adapt to changes and crises, cope with them and emerge stronger. To this end, public

authorities, companies and other organisations must have mechanisms and strategies in place to deal with unforeseen events and adapt their business processes, structures and resources accordingly. Resilient organisations establish a culture of learning and adaptation in which mistakes are seen as learning opportunities and innovative, forward-looking solutions are promoted.

- To safeguard critical infrastructure in particular, local authorities should be aware of the key local players. Communication chains, crisis teams (with assigned responsibilities) and emergency plans should be prepared preventively. The relevant areas must have been identified and the processes rehearsed in order to be able to react appropriately immediately.

## Prevention at the level of society as a whole

- Identifying and dealing with crises is based on subjective assessments and is linked to certain values and norms. Political actors should be aware of this when making decisions in response to a crisis and discuss it transparently. For example, the necessary assessment of which groups and individuals are particularly vulnerable in crisis situations must be communicated in a comprehensible manner.
- In crises, existing social imbalances and disadvantages become even more apparent and tend to intensify. A good social policy is therefore also a fundamental component of preventive crisis management.
- The complexity of current crises means that there are often differing assessments from (scientific) experts. From a decision-theoretical perspective, it is not advisable to simply follow the prevailing opinion. Rather, the risk or the extent of damage must be considered if the minority opinion is right and nothing is done. This must be weighed up against the prevention costs. Against this background, it can also be rational to follow minority opinions.
- Crisis prevention must weigh up how high the costs of prevention are and put this in relation to the risk. Opportunity costs may also be incurred here if other areas could be neglected as a result of prevention work.
- Last but not least, it is necessary to give the actors involved in crisis management the opportunity to reflect on their handling of the crisis. The appropriate resources must be made available for a critical examination of the chosen structures, processes and measures and their ongoing optimisation.

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