

Crime prevention amongst youth in Denmark.

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The background to this article is that in March 2015 we were in Rio de Janeiro to teach students in the theory and practice of Restorative Justice. This was a very exciting experience for us. It was arranged by Cedeca, an NGO youth organization. During the time we taught these students we also told them about how we work with criminal prevention amongst youth in Denmark. We did not have sufficient time to give a full picture at the time and we therefore want to make up to that through this article regarding crime prevention amongst youth in Denmark. This article was first publicized in a Brazilian magazine in 2016. This edition is for a Danish audience. To be publicized on the home page of the Danish SSP Association (see below).

Youth prevention work is very important because most crime is actually done by young people under the age of 25. However are we to see crime as something a criminal youth does? Or should we not instead see “crime” done by youth as a symptom of something else that is missing in the young person’s life? Or indeed, more banal, is it just an act of youthfulness that anybody can do? Should we criminalize such actions and use the adult sanction system to relate to this? Or should we rather look to ways of reducing risk behavior, including crime by creating environments where young people feel good about themselves and the adults around them. And further, when youth do things that hurt others or themselves, what would be the best way of relating to these actions? This article will attend to these questions in relation to the way that crime prevention for youth has evolved over the last 35 years, and in particular the last 15 years, in Denmark, in which period our knowledge of what works and what doesn’t work has increased immensely.

We will start with a short overview about the history and structure of the SSP co-operation system between the Schools, Social Services and Police (hence SSP). We will then attempt to look at the methods and knowledge that exists to do prevention work within municipalities.

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SSP originates from the need that was felt in the 70's, when youth crime increased dramatically for a closer co-operation between the Schools, Social services and the Police (hereafter SSP). A type of co-operation that aimed to provide the possibility both internally, within the municipalities (between departments that up to then seemed worlds apart) and between external agencies like the police and private associations, of sharing information about youth. This type of co-operation was visualized as to be practiced at the level of the professional, at the managerial level and at the level of local and national politics. The emphasis was on "can" as there were also many hindrances to the smooth co-operation as we will note below.

The SSP co-operation was not tied to a particular legislation. It was and is a "can" task. Not a "must" task for the municipalities. However, all municipalities have a formalized SSP co-operation where SSP consultants ensure that the co-operation works smoothly. At least that is the goal! However it was deemed necessary to legislate on one area and that was where police are involved. In the Administration of Justice Act, §115B, the rules about confidentiality and disclosure of information between authorities can be set aside, if this information is considered necessary for the crime preventive work. The police and the municipality may share personal information about individuals but they are not obligated to. This information may not be used by the police in investigating cases but only in terms of prevention. It is also an obligation to inform parents afterwards that their children have been discussed at a meeting. This part of the SSP co-operation is usually done on a weekly basis. The mechanics of the thing is that a prevention police man informs the municipality representatives about what youth, under 18, which is the age where you become an "adult" in the legal sense (and in some municipalities over 18 – up to 25/30), have been in contact with the police. This may be youth who have been charged or just youth that the police considered to be in a "risky" situation and therefore their name and identification number was noted. The meeting then decides what action to be taken. This could be social services, the SSP consultant or the police prevention officer. This means that we can work quite quickly on a weekly basis. At the heart of the SSP system is the idea of co-operation but since the beginning of the system in 1975, and through the following years it became apparent that just sticking teachers, social workers and police together, did not provide the synergy effect that was looked for. The ideas and approaches from these three professional worlds did not bide well for harmony and was not sufficient to meet the needs before them. Also a lot of time was used on fruitless discussion because there was no real common ground. Therefore in many municipalities consultants were employed to attend to this question. This has led to a professionalization of the SSP system. Now this can lead to

dangers about “over professionalization”, so that the three areas in SSP become an appendage to the SSP as an organization within the municipalities. However, in the main, this has not happened as the consultant does not have mandatory powers. Only the police and the social services have that. The typical SSP consultant was and is a public employee working for the municipality. They act as knowledge propagators, coordinators and consultants. They are visible, available to users and contribute with knowledge, supervision and ways of approaching youth to the adults who have direct contact with children. This mainly means teachers, free-time educationalists, policemen, voluntary organizations, local politicians and parents. In a phrase they are the “spiders” in the middle of a web, having the overall view and knowing how to get people to work together while respecting their different approaches to youth seen from a police, social service, school, free time education or parent position. No easy task but done correctly this can be very effective in keeping youth out of trouble and using alternative measures to guide them away from the penal system. Up until about 2000 the SSP system was very much a “personal” thing. The individual consultant was a sort of local “sheriff” who ruled is or her own little town. However as more and more knowledge about what works and doesn’t work in prevention emerged, it was clear that the system had to be based on knowledge and not on the whims of the individual consultant. Studies done at the time pointed to the fast turn-over of consultants (they lasted on average 3-5 years) and the great differences in approach between municipalities. Thus there was the need of greater education of the consultants and the networks they serviced. Diplomas in criminology were offered and the SSP national association started courses on the various aspects of the SSP cooperation. This has meant much more consensus on what is good practice in the area and a reduction in turn-over. At the same time the consultants coming into the field are generally more highly educated than before. So where do we stand today. The SSP system (see appendix 1 for a typical SSP system) engages all these interested parties in co-operation. This is the starting point for effective prevention work – to build a network that shares goals, methods and knowledge. What are these? Firstly it is important to take a holistic view of youth and of the individual child. The aim of the SSP co-operation is to include external and internal parties in a cross-function co-operation to find valid solutions for the individual youngster, groups of young people, the families, and the local area and so on. This cross-disciplinary function is in relation to crime and other risk behaviors that youth can be involved in. These risk behaviors can include bullying, drug use, alcohol misuse, early sexual debut and truancy as well as formal “criminal” acts. Legislatively the job of the SSP consultants is to ensure co-operation on the prevention of juvenile crime. However

studies have shown that ties crime and the other risk behaviors amongst youth as inseparable. They are related to each other and tend to be concentrate in a minority of children in any given year group².

The well-being of children and youth is a crucial element in the prevention of crime and related issues and this is supported by current knowledge of the causes of crime and prevention strategies. Well-being and thus prevention of juvenile crime is inseparable from the existence of two vital aspects in children's lives. The first is the parent's ability and their possibility of giving their children a safe and emotional relevant upbringing³. The second (and probably marginally more important) the education systems' ability to create well-being within the class room, so the students are not excluded or don't thrive in classes which may be dominated by negative social processes.⁴ If these two conditions fail, risk behavior/juvenile crime can develop within the individual. Approximately 10-15% of youth in each year group can be defined as being at risk of getting into trouble because either one of these conditions (or both) are not met.⁵ A small proportion of this percentage then tries to find arenas where their needs are met. Some of them look outwards to the streets as conditions at home or at school are of such a character that they find only negative feelings there. There they find other youth that feel the same way and street hang around groups can be formed. We find that youth crime is typically not something you do alone but together with others in peer groups.⁶ "Hang out" groups are formed, either by individuals who have been excluded from social communities, mainly in school, or by groups from classes with failure to thrive. The norm in these "hang out" groups risk developing anti-social behavior and can develop further into criminal gangs. This leads to the conclusion that prevention work should focus on the family and the conditions there, and on the education system and the way it works to create losers. That is why prevention work done by the SSP targets three areas – 1. All children; 2. Groups of youth and; 3. Individuals who have actually got into trouble in one way or another.

² See Flemming Balvig, Lars Holmberg and Anne Stine Sørensen, "On prevention of risk behaviour – the experience of the Ringsted experiment", Crime Prevention - Imprisonment, Report from NSFK:s 47th Research Seminar (Scandinavian Research Council for Criminology, 2005) pp. 36-42.

³ Flemming Balvig, "That youth!", Det Kriminalpræventive Råd, 2006: " *The situation of young people and their families is one of the factors that show a clear and consistent coherence with how criminal the youngsters are ...*" p. 43 and p. 67-69

⁴ The bullying impact on well-being, see Due, Holstein and Jørgensen, "Bullying has serious consequences" and "Health on the seesaw", Hans Reitzels Forlag, 2001, p. 63-74.

⁵ See Per Schultz Jørgensen's, "Risk children – who are they – what do we do" Socialministeriet 1993. Since this pioneering work, to identify the young people who come in the risk area for a poor youth life, there have been repeated studies that support the analysis.

⁶ See Due & Holstein, Study on school children 2002" University of Copenhagen, Institute of Public Health 2003, p. 62-62

We will look at the question of how to approach general prevention for all children first. The general prevention of risk behavior amongst youth should be focused on their well-being. This is a pre-requisite for children and young people to be self-confident about themselves and capable of independence. A child, who is confident, knows itself and thrives with the outside world, the parents, the school and friends, will rarely commit crime. If they do stumble a bit then they have a good network and feel good about themselves, so they can quickly be guided back on track. In relation to exclusion, bullying, academic stigmatization and so on, then supportive and including adults in institutions and schools are an essential counterweight to these dangers. They can do that by focusing on relations between children and their parents. But also focusing on relations between themselves and the pupils and, even more effectively, between the pupils themselves. There are three factors that stick out when we talk about pupil's well-being in school. The first is that the pupil has a very good relationship with the other pupils in the class. That the pupil feels he is liked. Secondly the pupil thinks that the class is good and helping each other. That the pupil will help the others if they need it and the pupil will get help from the others if needed. Finally the pupil has a feeling of being successful at school.⁷

There is now a broad body of knowledge about the importance of the social capital in the classroom that points to this element as crucial for the prevalence of risk behavior in any particular school class. And this is not dependent on background.⁸ Generally a culture of prevention must be built, where both parents and the professional adults around the children, receive the relevant support and guidance.

Preventive measures through interventions at school are most effective when they involve a broad effort that supports social skills.⁹ Balvig and Holmberg (The flamingo effect: 2014) have, based on our existing knowledge, drawn up a model for the best approach in schools to broad prevention work. They identify five crucial areas where it is important that youth in middle schools have competences.

Firstly they must be able to understand the importance of social norms. This means an understanding of the social exaggerations that exist. This leads a lot of young people to believe that their peers drink more, take more drugs, go later to bed etc. than is actually the case. By reducing these social exaggerations then their own risk behavior is also reduced.

⁷ Flemming Balvig, "Lawfull youth" (The Criminal Prevention Council, 2011).

⁸ See Flemming Balvig, "Herning rapport" (Justice Ministry, 2005)

⁹ See Anne-Marie Sindballe, "Young people and drugs - evidence-based prevention in schools" Master in Public Health, University of Copenhagen, 2000 and Thorkild Thorsen, "Faith, hope and knowledge - information on alcohol and drugs" Bogforlaget HerogNu, 2002.

Secondly it is important that there are “contracts” between the pupils, between the teachers and the pupils and between the parents and the pupils about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. Schools, where social norms are clear and everybody involved adheres to them, have much less bullying, fewer conflicts and a greater general well-being amongst pupils than those schools that have not.

Thirdly there have to be efforts to work with cooperation and team building between pupils in the classroom so that they all feel that they are part of an entity where everybody looks after each other so they feel safe and secure and not alone and insecure.

These three elements together create clear norms that allow the individual pupil to see themselves as part of a whole in which they have a part to play.

Fourthly it is important that pupils have competences in conflict management and conflict mediation. This allows for a reduction in the conflict level and where conflict accrues then there are methods to deal with the conflicts.

Fifthly and finally it is important to work with what you might call “relations of assistance”. We human beings have a deep rooted instinct for helping others because we were dependent upon it in a violent world where our very existence was dependent on the other members of the tribe. Today we still have this instinct. Indeed many researchers believe we have only got this far as homo sapiens by helping each other in cooperation. Thus developing and extending this natural instinct to the classroom is very potent.

In Balvig and Holmberg’s model teambuilding, conflict management and mediation, and relations of assistance together create the other main protection against risk behavior – the social capital of the class involved. They believe that clear norms combined with a strong social capital in the classroom make for less risk behavior, inclusion in society and greater well-being for the individual. Thus the general prevention in schools and free time education should be concentrated on these elements.¹⁰

Regarding the unfortunate group formation, unfortunate behavior and criminal acts committed by individual youngsters, it doesn’t help solely to focus on the individual; hence he or she is more concerned about what friends are thinking than what an adult might think. Therefore it is important to involve parents, the school and the after-school institutions in solving the problems.

Mainly one should see this behavior as a possible sign of lack of well-being and thereby avoid seeing the youngster as a sum of its behavior. The young person has many sides and only one of

¹⁰ Flemming Balvig and Lars Holmberg, “The flamingo effect” (DJØF, 2014)

them is the part where things go wrong. By focusing on the “wrong” doing then we are just supporting the young person’s view of himself as a loser. It is much more important do see all of the individual and particularly the parts which are advantageous for him. Those things that go well in his life are the things we should concentrate on.

However as it were mentioned before, young people rarely get into trouble alone. It is usually in combination with others and thus if you want to influence the individual, you must influence the group. This can be done in various ways depending on the group’s constitution and age. However one of the elements in a young person’s life that is nearly always important is the parents. By involving the parents as a group and/or focus on the class from which the group mainly comes from. Here the SSP consultants plays a significant role by providing advice and guidance to the class teacher, the school management, the parents and sometimes undertake specific initiatives that affects the group and its norms through the involvement of the adults.¹¹ The contribution of the SSP consultants in relation to difficult school classes and “hang around” youth groups are therefore wide spread. They can range from guidance for parents in how to tackle their kids. For example the SSP co-operation national has developed evidence based methods in best practice towards difficult teenages.¹² It can also involve guidance as to how to tackle difficult classes (see above). If the question is one of youth involved in street hanging about then we can provide process management in the creation and implementation of parent’s network. Individual guidance of parents can also be one of the elements in this process. Finally organizing outreaching work to young people in public spaces can be a way in which estranged youth find their way back to normality. This can involve street workers who approach and engage young people in the public space. This can be both related to social work, but also in a broader context of creating a bridge between the arena of the youth territory and normal everyday life.¹³ Finally there is evidence to suggest that when we are talking about 12-14 years old’s, with a not serious crime record, then engaging them in intensive activities, combined with mentoring by adults who see them at least once a week or more has an effect on their future crime and risk behavior.¹⁴

11 Examples on these are: Parent Network” see Pedersen, Tverskov and Jensen, ”Practical Parent Network – empowerment and social group project”, Systime Academic, 2003, which form the basis for further progress in SSP Værløse 2004-5, see “Status reports from 2005 and 2006”, SSP Værløse. For work in classes with negative social processes see Lywood , "Evaluation of a process in 8th grade in Værløse " , Memo , SSP Værløse , 2005.

¹² <http://www.foraeldrefiduser.dk/>

¹³ See Balvig and Holmberg “The flamingo effect” op cit.

¹⁴ See Henriette Nobili Christiansen, “Mentor and free time interventions” (The criminal prevention Council, 2012).

In relation to the individual child, the SSP consultant can also support the social workers and parents in proposing the best possible solutions for the individual child as well as offering other possible efforts. It could be through conflict mediation for young people involved in crime or in relation to conflicts in school. It is also essential with “victim advice”. The evidence suggests that youth who have been victims are much more likely to be victims again in the future. This is the question of “re-victimization”. The SSP can contribute in a number of ways on the question of prevention of individuals who are in trouble or have broken the law. This could be a question of advising social workers about young people including suggestions of which action/sanction to take. It could take the form of advising parents about the importance of the relationship between child and adults.

It is increasingly becoming apparent that the traditional ways of dealing with the problem of youth behavior do not meet the needs of either the youth or their victims. Therefore many municipalities have begun to operate with the ideas of restorative justice and practices. This can be on a very low key level. The youth who has stolen at a local mall can be followed by his parents to say sorry to the owners or the cashier who they confronted and to make amends by cleaning up or helping in another way. But in more serious crimes the needs of the victim to ask questions about “why me?” and “what did I do wrong to make you do what you did to me?” can be addressed directly to the perpetrator. In the same way the young person can atone for his/her actions directly to the person who has been harmed. In other words bringing the feelings of the partners in “conflict” into play and thus opening up a much more fruitful prevention course. There is much to suggest that this way of dealing with youth crime is much more effective than the retributive system.¹⁵

On all three levels – general prevention, the specific group prevention methods and the specific prevention towards the individual youngster, the SSP work must be built on knowledge. A culture of prevention has to be based on updated and relevant evidence of usefulness and evidence of effect. Otherwise we have only “common sense” to relate to. And one person’s “common sense” is another person’s “bad practice”.

One of the biggest enemies of the SSP co-operation is “the anxiety level” created by the media and local individual cases and quick fix solutions to satisfy the pressure from the society. For example, if you continuously claim that “the violence is sky rocketing” despite the fact that it is not true, then it can give the youngsters the impression that what they do is “normal”. The majority of young

¹⁵ See in particular the Northern Irish experience. Lyness, D. and Tate, S. (2011) *Northern Ireland Youth Re-offending: Results from the 2007 Cohort Statistical Bulletin 2/2011 Belfast*. Statistics & Research Branch, Youth Justice Agency

people are law-abiding and do not participate in “risk behavior”.¹⁶ Some young people feel pressured “to do what others do” regarding alcohol, smoking, and petty crime. But the main pressure is the pressure of what they feel is the norm. This is because most young people want to be normal, they want to fit in, they don’t want to be losers, they want to be part of the main stream, culture and be accepted. These are their hopes and dreams. It is therefore essential that any co-operation system like the SSP must have a network of professionals who have the facts at their fingertips and can ensure that this knowledge is used where they work. Be it the schools, free time education, social service or the police.

The same applies to rumors that typically occur around “youth groups” that create fear in local areas or “the pushers at school”. Typically the anxiety of these conceptions is greater than the actual problem. The role of the SSP co-operation in relation to this matter is to obtain knowledge so that we can inform the policy and decision makers. At the same time in relation to concrete problems suggest relevant measures that contribute to solving the problem rather than over-dramatize them. Anxiety and fear are not very good companions when making decisions about action towards a problem.

Our major conclusion, based on our knowledge and experience, is that penal systems tend to exacerbate the problems while less interventions into the lives of individuals by the system and more prevention which addresses the well-being of young people tend to reduce the problems.

¹⁶Balvig op cit. The book has the subtitle”- on the still more all-embracing lawfulness of young people in Denmark”