Introduction to a Special Issue on the YouPrev Project: Expanding Self-reports to Include Adolescents’ Views on Prevention of Youth Deviance

Internationally, self-report studies represent a key tool in research on delinquency among adolescents (see e.g. Enzmann et al., 2010; Junger-Tas, Marshall, & Ribeaud, 2003; Junger-Tas et al., 2010). The papers in this volume are connected by their common origin in a European study on youth crime and its prevention. While this study stands in the tradition of self-reported delinquency studies, it goes beyond student survey data on rule-breaking and victimization regarding topics covered as well as methods employed. Being able to make use of the freshly developed ISRD-3 instrument, it supplemented self-reports on delinquency and victimization with questions on students’ experiences with and views on preventive actors and approaches. Under the acronym YouPrev, the study also included qualitative approaches, such as interviews with experts and practitioners from a multitude of fields relevant for youth crime and its prevention. The consortium comprised partners from Western Europe (Belgium, Germany), Southern Europe (Portugal, Spain) and from Central and Eastern Europe (Hungary, Slovenia).

The paper by Ann Evenepoel and Jenneke Christiaens is titled: “Giving voice to ‘youth of today’: Young people’s views and perspectives on youth crime and its prevention in Belgium”. The authors point to the fact that the respondents reached in the Belgian school-based survey have relatively limited experience both with crime and with its prevention. While this may suggest a closer research focus on groups of juveniles with a higher involvement in delinquency, it also raises questions with regard to the appropriateness of approaching low-level delinquency youth with activities running under the heading of “crime prevention”.

Based on a survey among more than 2000 German youngsters, Anabel Taefi, Thomas Görgen and Benjamin Kraus draw a picture of widespread, although mostly not very severe, involvement in delinquency and deviant behaviour. In their paper “Adolescents as delinquent actors and as targets of preventive measures”,

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they show connections between involvement by young people in delinquency and the way in which prevention is perceived. While both delinquent and non-delinquent adolescents ascribe more preventive potential to parents and peers than to formal agents of social control, skeptical attitudes towards potential preventive impact increase with involvement in delinquency; the authors also point at possible unintended effects of prevention measures on highly delinquent youths.

Reporting on the basis of the Hungarian YouPrev study, Fruzsina Albert and Olga Tóth in “Youth drug and crime prevention practices in Hungary as reflected in the opinions of students and professionals”, compare the perspectives of those who conceptualize preventive approaches and put them into action and of those who are targeted by them. They show that while prevention of substance abuse is broadly implemented in Hungary, the prevalence of intoxication, especially with alcohol, is high among young people. While professionals consider teachers as important and potentially influential actors in substance abuse prevention, youngsters’ views on this are much more reluctant.

In their paper “Self-control and morality in Slovenian primary and secondary school sample: The results of YouPrev study”, Eva Bertok and Gorazd Meško use the data from the Slovenian school survey to test the concept of crime propensity as suggested by Situational Action Theory (see e.g. Wikström, 2009; Wikström & Svensson, 2010; Wikström & Treiber, 2009). Measuring crime propensity as a variable composed of low self-control and weak moral values, they found that it explains a substantial amount of self-reported delinquency.

While most of the research from the YouPrev project presented in this issue has its main focus on quantitative data from school surveys, María José Bernuz Beneitez and Daniel Jiménez Franco in “Juvenile violence prevention: The gap between ideals and practices” draw mostly upon expert interviews and group discussions. The authors point to conceptual limitations to prevention and intervention in the Spanish context and discuss the impact of the economic crisis on current and future perspectives.

Writing from the perspective of another Southern European country hit hard by the current economic crisis, Ana Cardoso, Heloisa Perista, Paula Carrilho and Mário Jorge Silva in “Juvenile delinquency, school failure and dropout in Portugal: Drafting a picture in different voices” display and discuss connections between high level involvement in violent offending and the circumstances in which the most delinquent adolescents live their daily life. They point to the key role of the school and the importance of measures addressing school dropout and school failure.

In “Prevention of juvenile crime and deviance: Adolescents’ and experts’ views in an international perspective”, combining data from different countries, Thomas Görgen, Ann Evenepoel, Benjamin Kraus and Anabel Taefi put a special focus on findings on prevention. Across countries, students have more often been targeted by drug abuse prevention measures than by approaches addressing violence. Internationally, they regard peers and parents as more influential in prevention than professional agents such as teachers, social workers, or police. Experts point to the significance of socioeconomic factors and of social policies.

The focus both on delinquency and on its prevention constitutes a key characteristic and a distinct feature of the YouPrev study. While young people’s
views on prevention cannot be regarded as matter-of-fact knowledge but should be considered as lay theories (Furnham, 1988), they are instructive both regarding involvement in delinquency and young persons’ accessibility for prevention measures.

References


