

Giving Voice to ‘Youth of Today’: Young People’s Views and Perspectives on Youth Crime and its Prevention in Belgium

Ann Evenepoel, Jenneke Christiaens

Purpose:

The aim of this article is to present findings on a study into the field of prevention of youth crime and deviance in Belgium. This research took place within the framework of a European study *YouPrev* that involved six European countries.

Design/Methods/Approach:

On one hand, a school survey was conducted with youngsters aged between 14 and 17 years in three regions: an urban, a semi-rural/urban and a rural area. Based on the new ISRD-3, in addition to classic self-report questions, the instrument also focused on young people’s views and perceptions regarding practices and initiatives aimed at preventing youth delinquency. To enhance the richness of these results, group discussions and interviews with youngsters were organised in the same regions, addressing the same topic.

Findings:

The major finding was that the youngsters that participated in the study do not seem to be part of classical prevention target groups. They attach great importance to informal actors in controlling and preventing youth crime (while formal actors like police, social work and prevention services are the main professions involved in Belgium). When it comes to their possible deviant behaviour, the survey pointed out that the majority appear not to use alcohol and drugs in a problematic way, and they don’t seem to have much contact with police or other legal actors. Furthermore, the respondents have very limited experience with and knowledge about prevention activities in their area, not only about secondary and tertiary but also general prevention initiatives. This could imply that the ‘best’ prevention is the activity that is not brought forward and perceived as such, a new hypothesis that would be interesting for further research.

Research Limitations/Implications:

Conducting research in the field of prevention should move beyond the school and more into the field of prevention practices, from different epistemological

perspectives. This implies that the actual target groups of these practices should be included and be given a voice. If we want to find out more about 'best practices' in the prevention of youth crime, it is essential to question the views and perspectives of youngsters who were actually involved in prevention projects.

Practical Implications:

To take into account the views of the target groups in the study of the field of youth crime prevention may open up new, and maybe very different, directions for policy and practice on how to approach and react to youth delinquency and deviance. In an European Study regarding the prevention of youth deviance and violence ("*YouPrev: Youth deviance and youth violence: A European multi-agency perspective on best practices in prevention and control*"), Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain have conducted surveys among 13 to 17 year old students. Based on the new ISRD-3 instrument, in addition to the classic self-report questions, the survey also focused on their perceptions and views regarding practices and initiatives aimed at preventing youth delinquency. In this article, we will present the results collected in Belgium. The aim is to stimulate reflection and contribute to the international discussion regarding a very popular topic today by adding the perspective of the seemingly 'unpopular' key players.

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Keywords: prevention, youth crime, young people's perspective, Belgium

Prisluhniti glasu 'današnje mladine': pogledi in mnenja mladih o kriminaliteti mladih in njenem preprečevanju v Belgiji

Namen prispevka:

Namen članka je predstaviti ugotovitve raziskave na področju preprečevanja mladoletniškega prestopništva in odklonskosti v Belgiji. Raziskava je potekala v okviru evropske raziskave *YouPrev*, ki je vključevala šest evropskih držav.

Metode:

Raziskava je bila izvedena med učenci v starosti med 14 in 17 let v treh regijah: mestni, delno podeželski/delno mestni in podeželski regiji. Poleg klasičnih samonaznanitvenih vprašalnikov in novem ISRD-3 je raziskovalni instrumentarij vključeval tudi poglede in dožemanja mladih glede praks in pobud, katerih cilj je preprečevanje mladoletniškega prestopništva. Za povečanje uporabnosti teh rezultatov so bile organizirane skupinske razprave in intervjuji z mladimi v istih regijah, kjer je bila obravnavana ta tematika.

Ugotovitve:

Glavna ugotovitev je bila, da mladi, ki so sodelovali v raziskavi, ne predstavljajo del klasičnih ciljnih skupin za preventivne dejavnosti. Velik pomen pripisujejo neformalnim akterjem, ki nadzorujejo in preprečujejo mladoletniško prestopništvo (medtem ko so formalni akterji, kot so npr. policija, socialni delavci in preventivni delavci, glavni poklici, ki delujejo na področju preprečevanja v Belgiji). Ko gre za primere njihovega morebitnega deviantnega vedenja, je raziskava pokazala, da večina ne zlorablja alkohola ter drog in nimajo veliko stikov s policijo ali drugimi

formalnimi institucijami. Poleg tega imajo anketiranci zelo malo predhodnih izkušenj in znanja o preventivnih dejavnostih na svojem območju, ne samo o sekundarnih in terciarnih, ampak tudi o pobudah generalne prevencije. To bi lahko pomenilo, da je »najboljša« preventivna dejavnost tista, ki se je ne naznanja in ni zaznana kot taka, kar bi lahko bila nova hipoteza za nadaljnje raziskovanje.

Omejitve/uporabnost raziskave:

Izvajanje raziskave na področju preprečevanja mora preseči šolski prostor in stopiti na področje praks preventivnih dejavnosti, analiziranih iz različnih epistemoloških perspektiv. To pomeni, da je treba dejanske ciljne skupine teh pristopov vključiti in jim prisluhni. Če želimo izvedeti več o "najboljših pristopih" na področju preprečevanja mladostniškega prestopništva, je bistveno analiziranje pogledov in razmišljanj mladih, ki so bili dejansko vključeni v preventivne projekte.

Praktična uporabnost:

Upoštevanje stališč v raziskavi zajetih ciljnih skupin lahko odpira nove ter morda zelo drugačne poglede in poda smernice za oblikovanje politike in prakse o tem, kako pristopiti in se odzvati na mladostniško prestopništvo in odklonskost. V projektu v teku, tj. evropski raziskavi o preprečevanju mladostniške odklonskosti in nasilja ("*YouPrev: Youth deviance and youth violence: A European multi-agency perspective on best practices in prevention and control*"), so bile v Belgiji, Nemčiji, na Madžarskem, Portugalskem, v Sloveniji in Španiji izvedene ankete med 13–17 let starimi učenci. Poleg klasičnega anketiranja z metodo samonaznanitve je bil uporabljen ISDR-3 instrumentarij, raziskava pa se je osredotočila tudi na stališča in mnenja glede pristopov in pobud, katerih cilj je preprečevanje mladostniškega prestopništva. V tem članku so predstavljeni rezultati raziskave v Belgiji. Cilj je spodbuditi razmišljanje in prispevati k mednarodni razpravi o zelo priljubljeni temi na način, da vključujemo perspektivo "nepriljubljenih" ključnih akterjev.

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Ključne besede: preprečevanje, mladostniška kriminaliteta, pogledi mladih, Belgija

1 INTRODUCTION

'To prevent is better than to cure', a classic idiom that can count on a great deal of support within the field of crime control, especially when it comes to tackling youth crime. Youngsters are still in a process of full development so it seems very logical that when they display problematic behaviour or even commit offences, it is best to intervene as early as possible. That way they can be 'saved' from developing a criminal career.

The prevention-philosophy lies at the heart of Belgium's juvenile justice system. With the introduction of a separate juvenile justice system in 1912, the protection model replaced penal responses to juvenile offending for minors under the age of 16. Apart from children prosecuted for delinquency, the Belgian protection system also intervened with non-delinquent children. Children who

misbehaved or displayed socially undesirable behaviour (*status offences*) could also be subjected to an intervention by the children's judge (Christiaens, 1999). This reaction to pre-delinquent behaviour clearly stems from a preventive perspective. The reform in 1965 expanded the scope to young people 'in danger' and a few years later (between 1980 and 1990), this intervention towards non-delinquent minors (POS) was separated from the protection for young offenders (MOF). The interventions towards 'non-delinquent' minors or juveniles 'in a problematic situation' are often related to problems with family, school, environment, ... that are remarkably similar to the (in)famous risk factor paradigm. Deriving from the developmental criminology several factors were, through empirical research, identified as predictive for future offending" (Loeber & Farrington, 2000; West & Farrington, 1975).

Not only has developmental criminology but also rational choice theories (such as *broken window theory* by Wilson & Kelling, 1982) and social ecological approaches (such as *the defensible space* by Newman, 1978) contributed significantly to the so called '*reinvention*' of prevention (O'Malley & Hutchinson, 2007). Related to the a great emphasize on (urban) safety and security, crime preventions techniques are no longer solely used as an instrument to prevent crime but also to inform other aspects of social control and to exclude 'risky' populations (Evans, 2011: 186). This consequently led to the extension of judicial intervention to non-delinquent minors (Cartuyvels, Christiaens, De Fraene, & Dumortier, 2010). In the past decades, prevention has clearly become the new core principal, the 'defining logic' (Groenemeyer & Rousseaux, 2007: 69) and is often referred to as 'the preventive turn' (Crawford, 2009; Edwards & Hughes, 2005).

The Belgian prevention field can be characterized as very chaotic and scattered (Melis & Goris, 1996; Vettenburg et al., 2003). This is partially a consequence of the Belgian state structure and the complex division (and overlap) of competencies between the Federal government and the Communities. An important development, contributing to the scattered Belgian prevention landscape, was the creation of federal strategic prevention and safety plans in Belgium, which were introduced in 1999. In short, these contracts implied that local authorities receive financial resources to establish preventive projects that are more often aimed at young people (Swinen, Hoste, & De Gruijter, 2006). The underlying philosophy clearly stems from the assumption that local authorities are the most appropriate actors in tackling crime specific for the region or area. There was a growing awareness of the fact that crime prevention should encounter structural and urban social factors, especially at the local level, with a focus on disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the Belgian cities (Hebberecht, 2012). This (decentralisation) trend can also be observed on an international level. The UK policies in the 1990's are illustrative of this development, introducing more responsibility to local authorities to prevent youth delinquency (Muncie & Hughes, 2002: 4) and incivilities. This was part of the new strategy of tackling crime, as famously announced by Tony Blair: "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime" which was reflected in the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) where these causes ought to be found in anti-social behaviour. Turning to the situation in Belgium again, a similar move can be observed. With legislation on municipal administrative sanctions, the enforcement authority of local governments

expanded to include incivilities (De Hert, 2005). The local government also became primarily responsible for tackling this phenomenon and were allowed to impose a fine for breaches of municipal regulations (Meerschaut, De Hert, Gutwirth, & Vander Steene, 2008). In both countries, we can see the emergence of incivilities as a new field of intervention at the local level. New measures to deal with incivilities and the target groups are installed, merging with already existing crime prevention initiatives. The result is the establishment of numerous projects to tackle anti social truant youth who hang around in public spaces and present a risk. Not only a risk to engage in criminal behaviour, but also for society, its civilians and their feelings of security and safety. The vast majority of local crime prevention initiatives are targeted at risk groups (Hörnqvist, 2004).

However little is known about these prevention projects and initiatives. Which youngsters are parts of these risk groups? Do these practices actually work? And how do the target groups perceive them?

Within the framework of our European *YouPrev* study, a self-report school survey was conducted in each country among 13 to 17 year olds, including a section on their views of prevention. Furthermore, we conducted several group interviews with minors where we focused on their perception of possible problems in the area and how they view and experience prevention activities.

This article aims to shed some explorative light on the youth crime prevention domain in Belgium seen through the eyes of the most important actors involved: young people. By touching upon some interesting results deriving from the group discussions and the school surveys, we will attempt to reflect on possible theoretical and methodological consequences for scientific research into the field of the youth crime prevention.

Before elaborating in detail our research results, we will first provide a brief overview of the research framework related to the school survey and group discussions.¹

2 RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 Background

One phase of the research project focused on the study of youth problem behaviour as a local phenomenon. We studied the reaction of involved local actors, institutions and the community. In Belgium, this local study was performed in three regions.² Due to the bilingual context, we deemed it necessary to represent both the Flemish and French speaking area of Belgium. Therefore, we chose bilingual Brussels as an urban area, Hasselt as a Flemish semi-rural/urban area, and Dinant as a French speaking rural region.

1 For a more in-depth overview of the Belgian study we would like to refer to the specific reports available on www.youprev.eu

2 The other participating countries selected two areas.

The local study consisted of qualitative and quantitative parts. On the one hand, a school survey based on the ISRD-3 (international self-report delinquency) questionnaire was conducted among 14 to 17 year olds in schools of the selected regions. On the other hand we conducted interviews with local actors and organized group discussions with youngsters.

For this contribution, we can only briefly focus on the results of the school survey and our findings based on group discussions with young people.

2.2 Self-Report School Survey

Self-report studies have become widely acknowledged as a useful instrument to measure delinquent behaviour. Official statistics reproduce a highly distorted image of crime rates and are more likely to be the product of selectiveness of police activity and the justice system. It should be noted that non-reported crime (dark number) remains absent in these figures. Self-report studies have significantly contributed to resolve these problems (Van Kerckvoorde, 1995). However, self-reports as a method and technique to measure (juvenile) delinquency are not without important critiques themselves (Moriau & Van Praet, 2011).

In general, the International Self-Report Delinquency Survey aims to describe and explain juvenile delinquency cross-nationally. Its key objectives are primarily to compare trends in (youth) offending and victimization between countries, and secondly to explain delinquent behaviour and test criminological theories (Junger-Tas et al., 2010). The self-report study is helpful in finding out more about young people's experiences as perpetrators and victims of deviance, crime and violence. According to lifestyle approaches, delinquent behaviour and victimization was tested with lifestyle aspects via statistical analysis. Considering the aim of the *YouPrev* project, namely a broad perspective on successful prevention practices of youth deviance and violence, questions were also included about young people's views, experiences, and opinions on prevention activities and strategies. The questionnaire was generally built around the following domains: demographic background, family, school, victimization, leisure and peers, attitudes, offending, substance use and prevention.

As mentioned above, three regions were selected in Belgium for the local study. We began by listing up all the schools in these areas that offer the different types of education. In Belgium, education is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 18. The primary school takes 6 years and is divided in 3 cycles. From the age of 12 until 18, youngsters usually go to secondary school. In general, there are public sector schools and privately run schools (more often by the church). These privately run schools are subsidized like the public schools. Secondary school consists of different options. There is general secondary education, technical secondary education, vocational secondary education, art secondary education and special schools for children and youngsters with antisocial behaviour, personality or psychological problems.

In total, 82 schools were contacted: 12 schools in Hasselt, 60 in Brussels³ and 9 in Dinant. To increase the response rate and to counterbalance the high number of urban schools, we also contacted institutions in other rural areas besides Dinant. Unfortunately, only one additional school was willing to participate. It is clear that the number of schools was disproportionate across our 3 areas, and therefore this variable was excluded in the major part of the analysis.

In the end, 15 schools participated in the survey. Several reasons can explain this low response rate. First of all, the timing of our research was problematic. Requests to participate were distributed in the middle of the school year. However, many schools had already decided in September in which research they would participate, so our request to participate came much too late. On the other hand Belgian schools are 'over demanded', due to high amount of research in collaboration with schools. But also several institutions would not cooperate because they didn't want their pupils to be stigmatised again by classic 'results' and prejudices regarding the relation between delinquency and a certain type of (professional) education (see also Moriau & Van Praet, 2011).

The participants in our original sample were between 13 and 25 years of age. Initially, we planned to focus on youth between 14 and 17. On the basis of an *Independent samples t-test*, we concluded that in our sample, respondents aged 18 and older significantly differ from the ones under 18 in terms of self-reported delinquency. For this reason, ideally we would have deleted all respondents older than 17 from our sample. However, this sample resembles well Belgian school population. Moreover, in that case our sample size would diminish dramatically from 1172 to 900. Therefore, we decided to include 18 year old respondents in our sample, as well as 13 year olds which led to a final sample of pupils aged 13–18. Respondents who did not respond with their age ($n = 8$) were deleted. The final sample contained 1058 respondents with an average age of 15.9 and 48.1% males and 51.9% females.

2.3 Group Discussions

In addition to the school survey, young people's perspectives were also included in this research through group discussions. We opted deliberately to organize these discussions with youngsters only, since they would feel more comfortable to express their opinions and experiences in the presence of peers instead of in discussions including (adult) professionals.

A semi-structured instrument served as a guideline for the discussions. A first discussion was organised during a lunch break at a school participating in the school survey. We asked in several classes who would be willing to participate, and eventually 4 youngsters aged between 15 and 17 volunteered. The two other group discussions were held during class in a school located in the centre of Brussels. The

3 For Brussels we selected all schools in the Brussels Capital Region in order to reach as many schools as possible.

youngsters taking part were between 16 and 20 years of age. In the first discussion 10 students participated, 15 in the second one.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Youth Offending and Deviance in Belgium

3.1.1 Results from the School Survey: 'The Kids are Alright?'

The school study revealed some interesting, yet rather classic findings on young people's criminal or deviant behaviour. The Figure 1 displays the lifetime prevalence for the different offenses. It is immediately clear that the rates for illegal downloading stand out. This can be explained by the fact that many participants are not aware or don't perceive downloading from the internet (e.g. music or movies) as illegal. Furthermore, it seems that a majority of the respondents commit rather adolescent-related offenses. Only a small group covers the more serious acts like the use of a weapon or motorbike and car theft. This confers with previous Belgian self-report research (SRDBEL, 2013).

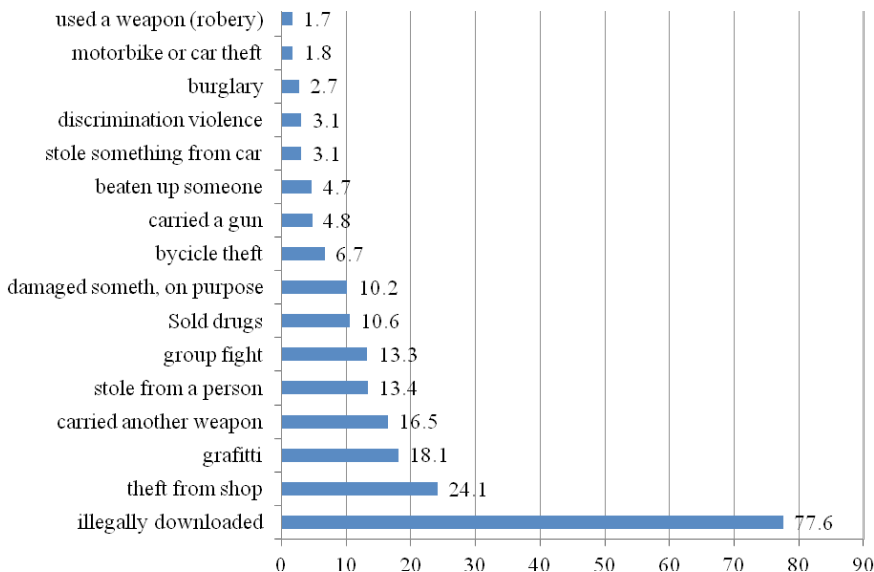


Figure 1:
Lifetime
percentages of
respondents
who ever
committed a
criminal offense

Note that the offense type 'carried another weapon' is very broad described. This can vary from possessing scissors to a penknife or a chain to lock a bicycle. In the course of conducting the surveys, several students asked whether carrying a knife for art class comes under this category.

Our research pointed out that the number of participants indicating never having committed any of the given offenses in their lifetime is quasi equal to the percentage of respondents who did (Table 1). Moreover, the self-reported frequencies show a very modest/low delinquent activity on the latter. Once more, a finding that clearly corresponds with previous Belgian self-reported studies (Pauwels & Pleysier, 2009).

Table 1:
Frequencies
offences
except illegal
downloading

| Number of offences | Frequency | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|--------------------|-----------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 0 | 538 | 50.9 | 50.9 |
| 1.00 | 218 | 20.6 | 71.5 |
| 2.00 | 124 | 11.7 | 83.2 |
| 3.00 | 54 | 5.1 | 88.3 |
| 4.00 | 28 | 2.6 | 90.9 |
| 5.00 | 38 | 3.6 | 94.5 |
| 6.00 | 19 | 1.8 | 96.3 |
| 7.00 | 11 | 1.0 | 97.4 |
| 8.00 | 9 | .9 | 98.2 |
| 9.00 | 8 | .8 | 99.0 |
| 10.00 | 1 | .1 | 99.1 |
| 11.00 | 1 | .1 | 99.1 |
| 12.00 | 4 | .4 | 99.5 |
| 13.00 | 3 | .3 | 99.8 |
| 14.00 | 1 | .1 | 99.9 |
| 15.00 | 1 | .1 | 100.0 |
| Total | 1058 | 100.0 | |

Regarding truancy, it appears that 69% of our participants never skipped classes during the last 12 months; the remaining 31% reported an average of 4 times being absent at school in the last year. It should be noted that these findings can be a result of the applied method. Self-report school surveys do not reach the so-called 'persistent truant' or 'dropout'. They are significantly absent in these samples, which is one of the basic critiques of self-report studies.

Police contact appeared to remain scarce as well, with only 11.9% of the participants. The respondents were also asked which event led to this contact and what consequences it entailed. A majority claimed that theft, vandalism or violence triggered an involvement with the police. The consequences for the majority contained a notification to the parents. This may mean that the 'unlawful' youngsters (reached by this survey) have very limited experience with legal actors or measures aimed at problematic or delinquent youth.

Finally, the rates for alcohol and drug use show that we cannot detect problematic alcohol and drug use among the students in our sample. The majority has not been drunk in the last 30 days and almost half of them (49.3%) were never drunk during their lifetime. With regards to soft drug use, similar results could be

found: 74.6% said they never used cannabis in the course of their young lives, even a majority never used it in the last 30 days.

3.1.2 Young People's Perception of Problems

The group discussions were also organised with pupils. However, the approach is qualitative. Therefore, the findings of these discussions have an important added value since more room is provided to discuss youngster's views on delinquent behaviour. The interviewer can get more in-depth information on what delinquent behaviour (and prevention) mean for youngsters.

In the discussions youngsters were asked which problems they think occur in their area. Apparently they perceive theft, alcohol and drug use as the most important juvenile problems. This observation rather contradicts the findings from the school survey, where no problematic alcohol and drug use could be detected.

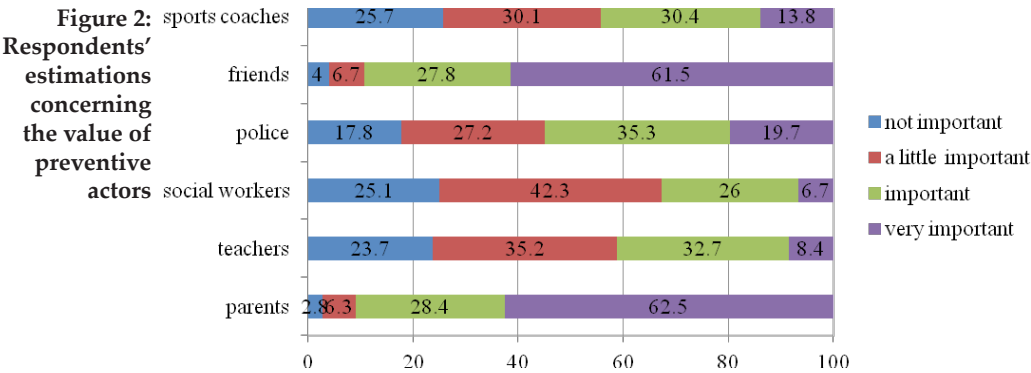
Furthermore, harassing people and hanging around in public space is viewed as highly present. Finally in each group discussion the problematic relation with police was addressed several times. Many participants stressed the negative approach of the police and the way of communication with youngsters, stop-and-search action and racist attitudes (in the urban area) that in general lead to frustrations. However the self-report study showed a very low rate of police contact (11.9%). This contradiction could be attributed to the way respondents interpreted 'police contact'. The question was formulated as follows: **"Have you ever had contact with the police because you yourself did something illegal like one of the things listed above?"** Therefore, it could be that in the survey participants only reported police contact if it was related to an offense. While during the group discussions students mainly talked about 'regular' contact with police (not restricted to the occurrence of a specific illegal act).

If we take a moment to reflect upon these results, we could ask ourselves the question whether our sample is part of the target groups of the youth prevention field in Belgium. It seems that our respondents do not commit offenses very often, show no problematic drug and alcohol use, and are rarely in contact with the police or even with other legal actors in case they did actually something wrong. It seems up until now that our respondents may not have much experience with prevention actors, institutions or measures. Therefore we will, in the following section, take a closer look at their views and experiences regarding prevention practices.

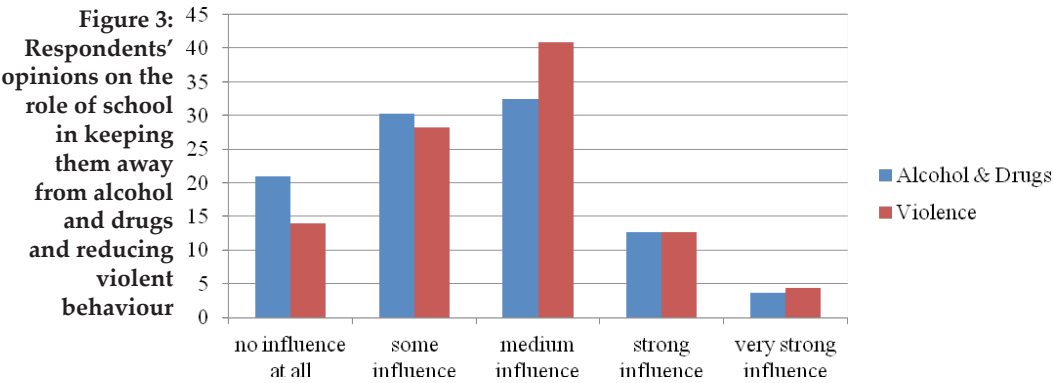
3.2 Views and Experiences with Prevention

A first interesting fact resulting from the self-report survey deals with the students' opinions on possible effective strategies in preventing youth delinquency. The survey pointed out that youngsters think that listening to their sorrows and problems is *the* most effective strategy. Secondly, the survey provided the opportunity to evaluate preventive actors. Figure 2 shows that a majority of them attach rather much value to informal actors like parents and friends. Formal actors such as social

workers are perceived as of little importance. These are precisely the formal actors in Belgium that have a central role in the field of youth crime prevention.



When we turn to the school as a preventive actor, it appears that 58.9% of the youngsters indicated teachers are not so important. The respondents were also asked to estimate the influence of school on violence and/or drug abuse (Figure 3). Apparently youngsters perceive school as not very influential, as well. However, 60% answered affirmative when questioned about information on drugs and alcohol during the last 12 months. Youngsters indicated that it was in general the school and/or a teacher offering this information. So although they do not estimate the school as very important in the prevention of drug and alcohol use, they do receive information in that context. Perhaps young people do not perceive this information as part of 'real' prevention of youth delinquency.



Finally, when we take a look at the experiences of the respondents with prevention activities aimed at reducing violence, it seems that these remain scarce for the majority. On this specific question, we faced a great deal of missing values.

While conducting the survey, many students asked for additional explanation. This could imply that they did not understand what “their experience with” meant, or that they have very limited knowledge about prevention practices in Belgium. In our analysis, we also compared the answers of students who reported at least one offense with the ones who reported none. It appeared that the ‘delinquent group’ attaches less importance to teachers, social workers and police, and more to friends. They are in general also less positive about all kinds of preventive strategies (like e.g.: good general education, training for better social behaviour, information on possible consequences, counselling for parents).

The group discussions mainly focussed on their experiences and views of prevention practices organised in their neighbourhood. This part of the discussion confirms our survey findings that a majority of our participants seem to have very little knowledge about existing prevention initiatives. Many stressed the lack of activities and available space where they can spend their time as challenges for prevention. Finally, several students mentioned an important contribution of structural factors to (youth) crime. Youngsters stressed the influence of the neighbourhood where one grows up in as well as poverty as important factors influencing youth problems.

4 CONCLUSION

Besides the classic (methodological) pitfalls of the use of self-report studies, our analysis entails some other problems as well. The survey sample was rather small and not equally divided across the different school types in Belgium, and the group discussions were only conducted in two areas. Therefore, the results discussed in this article have a merely explorative character. Therefore, from a scientific and epistemological perspective the views and perspectives of young people may have some consequences for researching youth crime prevention.

The Belgian youth crime prevention field classically aims at ‘typical’ risk groups. A lot of prevention projects focus on preventing drug and alcohol use, truancy, problematic behaviour at school, hanging around in public space and anti-social behaviour in general. Also the actors involved in the prevention of youth crime are more the classic ones like social workers, schools, police, etc.

One interesting result of our research is that our participants attach great value to informal actors in reducing or preventing youth delinquency. Furthermore, they appear not to use alcohol and drugs in a problematic way, they don’t have much contact with police or other legal actors, and have very limited experiences with and knowledge about prevention initiatives. These findings all seem to point in one direction: our sample is not part of the classical prevention target group.

Therefore, to study the prevention of youth delinquency we have to move beyond the school. Researching the prevention of youth delinquency needs to move into the field of prevention projects and activities. Hence, giving a voice to “targeted” youngsters implies also that we have to move beyond the school. ‘Clients’ or participants in prevention activities or projects should be included in

researching prevention practices; especially when focussing on the 'best' practices issue.

What entails 'best' in best practices? Scientific evaluation of practices is not common in Belgium. Usually projects need to define their objectives beforehand and afterwards prove the achieved results in order to receive future funding. Evaluation comes down to verifying if a certain activity achieved its predefined goal and result. We are dealing with practices that take place in society, where it is impossible to control all potential influencing factors or variables. When can we be absolutely sure that a certain intervention led to a change in a youngster's behaviour? The answer is simple, we can't. What we can do is study the prevention field from a whole different epistemological angle. We need to listen to young people, as they indicated it themselves. What are the experiences and views of youngsters who were actual subject of a prevention project? What are their views on 'best' practices? This could provide a whole different perspective on how to approach and react to youth crime and deviance.

Finally, more research is necessary on primary prevention. Our participants have not only limited experience with secondary and tertiary (targeted) prevention, they also have very little knowledge about general (primary) prevention. This could mean (hypothesis!) that the 'best' prevention is an approach or practice that is not labelled and therefore perceived as such.

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About the Authors:

Ann Evenepoel, M.Sc., received her Master degree in Criminological Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in the year 2009. In March 2011 she started as a researcher at the Department of Criminology at the VUB, where she worked on

this policy supporting study (*YouPrev*) financed by the European Commission. She is currently working on her Ph.D. research into the field of the prevention of youth crime and incivilities in the public space. Finally she is also a member of the research group Crime & Society at the VUB.

Jenneke Christiaens, Ph.D., is professor at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel since 1998. She is a criminologist and a member of the Crime and Society Research Group. She has been doing research on youth crime and justice since 1993. Her Ph.D. was a historical-criminological analysis of the Belgian 'birth' of the juvenile delinquent (between 1830 and 1930). Her research expertise is focused on the domain of youth crime, youth justice and urban studies. She teaches introduction to criminology, Youth justice and crime, Youth criminology and Crime and the city.