

Victimization of Youth and its Prevention

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Abstract

In this article we pose the importance of prevention in order to try to reduce the levels of victimization in all spheres of an individual's socialization: home, school, among friends or members of the community. However, in matters of prevention it is impossible to start from a deterministic position and affirm that a person will become a delinquent due to the simple fact that he/she has been exposed to one of the risk factors during his childhood or youth, even when referring to episodes of reiterated victimization. The propensity to repeat patterns of violence or incur in acts of delinquency in the future is a result of exposition to a large variety of risk factors throughout various stages in a person's lifetime.

We will address various theories on the relationship between victimization, violence and delinquency. Then we shall provide data on the situation of victimization in Mexico today, above all based on the recently published Survey of Social Cohesion for the Prevention of Violence and Delinquency and the National Survey of Victimization, 2015. Finally, we will discuss the various ways in which the matter of victimization has been approached from the policy of social prevention of violence and delinquency, identifying challenges and opportunities for the future.

Keywords: victimization, prevention, violence, delinquency.

Introduction

Violence and delinquency are complex phenomenon whose occurrence and persistence are associated with the convergence of various risk factors which are present in the main spheres of socialization of persons: individual, family, school, community and social. In the case of risk factors at the individual level various there are factors such as uninhibited or explosive temperament and impulsiveness.

In the category of family we find a lack of suitable supervision of children is found together with little time spent with the parents or the presence of inconsistent disciplinary measures. The risk factors at the school level include elements such as low levels of academic performance, not feeling a part of the school community or dropping out of school (including dropping out due to economic reasons). By risk factors in relations with friends we refer to

using drugs originated by peer pressure, absence from school or participation in vandalism with close friends. On the other hand, the risk factors in the community include the lack of a feeling of belonging and cohesion among members of the community, the presence of groups of delinquents, the sale of drugs on the street and the availability of weapons, among others. Finally, the social risk factors refer to structural matters such as the quality of incomes and access to goods and services of homes.

Regardless of the sphere we are referring to, one of the most important risk factors of violence and delinquency is victimization. Those people who have been the victims of violence or delinquency in their homes, school, among friends or at the community level tend to be victims two or more times. However, at the same time those who are victimized in the present time tend to be more likely to be involved in acts of violence or delinquency in the future.

For this reason, any preventive strategy should have among its main objectives the reducing of levels of victimization in all spheres of an individual's socialization. However, when we talk about prevention, it is incorrect to begin from a deterministic position and affirm that a person will become a delinquent due to the fact of being exposed to a single risk factor during his childhood or youth, even when referring to reiterated episodes of victimization. The propensity to repeat patterns of violence or engage in acts of delinquency in the future is the result of exposure to a great variety of risk factors throughout various stages of a person's life.

In other words, if we want to prevent victimization and prevent this from being translated into more violence and delinquency, it is necessary to have a multi-disciplinary and integral basis. It is not enough to interrupt the cycles of violence inside the home or prevent harassment or bullying at school, we must also offer alternatives of personal and professional development within legality and assure that boys and girls and adolescents have enough spaces and time for recreation and artistic expression.

The present article exemplifies these matters. To this end, we shall first look at evidence available at the international level on the relationship between victimization, violence and delinquency. Then we will provide data on the situation of victimization today in Mexico, above all based on the data of the recently published Survey of Social Cohesion for the prevention of Violence and Delinquency (ECPOPRED) and of the National Survey of Victimization (ENVIPE). Finally, we will discuss the various ways in which the subject of victimization has been approached from the policy of social prevention of violence and delinquency.

Victimization, violence and delinquency

According to the UN Manual of Victimization Surveys, a victim is a person who, individually or collectively, has suffered harm, including physical and mental harm or whose fundamental rights have undergone a general affectation. Said manual also says that victimization witnessed or undergone at an early age is associated with violent, antisocial, aggressive, defiant and

delinquent behavior later in life (ECOPRED, 2014; Lamm, 2005).

In this sense, a study on reiterated victimization carried out by Deborah Lamm Weisel of North Carolina State University shows the main predictor of victimization of people is that they have been exposed to episodes of victimization in the past (Lamm, 2005). Moreover, and consistent with the theory of prevention, victimization, especially victimization which affects children, adolescents and young people, is more frequent in high risk environments: that is to say, those with the greatest deficiencies in their homes, at school and in places where young people are exposed to people who frequently incur in risky behaviors (Lamm, 2005).

According to Lamm Weisel, re-victimization occurs in practically all kinds of violence and delinquency. However, domestic violence in where the phenomenon is concentrated at the international level (Lamm, 2005). With respect to the timing of episodes, Lamm Weisel's study shows that re-victimization usually occurs within a week of the referred incident. However, there are cases in which this may occur within 24 hours. That is why immediate attention to victims is crucial in interrupting the cycles of victimization.

A longitudinal study made by the ISIS Study Center at Oxford, England which analyzed the psycho-social behavior of girls, boys, adolescents and young people for 20 years in the school environment, found that childhood victimization not only increased the risk of criminal and violent behavior in the future, but also has a profound impact on people's mental development and behavior.

Victimization plays a central role on the development of depression and other kinds of mental imbalance, such as loneliness, anxiety and low self-esteem, which have been associated with problems such as social submission or isolation from classmates (Hawker, 2000). In this sense, the theory of childhood trauma and abuse elaborated by John Briere, Director of the Adolescent Trauma Training Center (USC-ATTC), explains that abuse increases the risk of attempted suicides, increases the probability of the manifestation of cognitive and intellectual deficits, as well as the probability of acquiring personality disorders (Briere, 1992). The victims of physical, sexual abuse and abandonment are more prone to undergoing episodes of re-victimization or becoming abusive and violent spouses or parents (Hawker, 2000: 441).

Finally, besides victimization in the home and school environment, it is important to identify the patterns of victimization within criminal groups themselves from the perspective of social prevention. According to a report of Violent Victimization as a Risk Factor in Young Delinquents made by the United States Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, in general terms, the reproduction of crimes is more common than the reproduction of victimization, but the risk factors are the same: drug and alcohol use, conditions like depression, lack of job opportunities, low incomes in the home, social stigmatization and a history of crime or violence in the family (Ruback, Shaffer and Barry, 2002).

In keeping with this logic, besides paying attention to the victimization suffered by common people, it would be necessary to explore various options of attention to

victims of violence and delinquency in criminal environments, above all in the cases of minors younger than 17 years old whose participation in groups of delinquents may be understood to be the result of a process of victimization.

To sum up, there is enough evidence to conclude that preventing victimization in the family, school, community and even high risk social environs such as groups of gangs or delinquents, is a more efficient strategy in matters of prevention. To this end, it is important to identify what kind of victimization our young people are exposed to and where it is concentrated, so that the programs of prevention can be strategically oriented where they are most needed.

Victimization at early ages in Mexico

In July 2015 the Secretariat of the Interior and the National Institute of Statistics and Geography made public the results of the *Survey on Social Cohesion for the Prevention of Violence and Delinquency*. As stated in their technical documents, ECOPRED's objective is

to measure in young people between 12 and 29 years of age risk factors and exposure to situations of violence and delinquency which increase the possibility of this sector of the population, the object of the study, repeating similar situation in society later on (ECOPRED, 2014).

To this end, the survey was carried out in the last months of 2014 with young people between 12 and 29 years old and heads of households from 97,754 homes in 47 urban areas of interest distributed in

the 32 federal entities of the country. Thus, ECOPRED became the first survey at the national level to measure risk factors associated with the occurrence and persistence of violence and delinquency on a large scale.

As part of these factors, the survey included questions on the kind and level of victimization faced by young people in the most important environments of socialization based on two perspectives: criminal (*i.e.*, young people who have been or are the victims of crimes punishable under the law) and everyday (*i.e.*, young people who have been or are victims of violence or abuse in their daily live).

In general terms, using ECOPRED it was possible to estimate that during 2014, 19,800,000 crimes or acts of abuse were committed, associated with 4,500,000 victims between 12 and 29 years old in the 47 cities of the study. Of these, 28.4% suffered harassment due to the attributes of the young person, 23.5% of the young people were the victims of robbery free of violence, 16.7% harassment through young person's belongings, 9.3% physical abuse, 8.2% robbery with violence, 6.3% threats, 3.5% sexual aggressions (*i.e.*, fondling, harassment or rape), 2.1% extortion and 2.0% slander.

According to the estimates of the survey, the urban areas which registered the highest percentages of young people who said they had been the victims of a crime or abuse were: Nezahualcóyotl with 58%, Ecatepec with 57.3%, León with 54.1%, the metropolitan area of Veracruz with 51.3%, the metropolitan area of Cuernavaca with 52.9% and the metropolitan area of Querétaro with 50.8%.



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Of these cases, 57% of the young people victimized knew their aggressor. In 43.6% of the cases there were fellow students from school involved as aggressors; 18.4% were acquaintances; 18.1% were relatives; friends or close acquaintances; 12.4% were colleagues from work; in 70% of the cases they were members of the household and in 4.7% they were emotional partners.

Analyzing victimization based on the main areas of socialization, we can see that half of the households with young people of between 12 and 29 years of age were identified as having conflicts. Of these, 24.4% said that members of the household criticize each other because of their physical appearance, aptitudes, tastes, among other aspects; 22.5% shout and insult each other, 6.8% pinch, push or pull each other and 6.5% beat each other.

In this respect, it is important to point out that the survey showed that 44% of the households with young people between 12 and 29 years old in which there

was a situation of conflict, the members of the family opted for mutually avoiding each other in order not to fight and 34.3% did not speak to each other after a fight or argument. In other words in 50% of the homes with conflicts present, people preferred to avoid disputes without mediating and without talking to each other.

In this regard, the urban areas with the highest percentage of households with young people who said that in their homes there were conflictive situations were the metropolitan area of La Laguna with 60.7%, the metropolitan area of Guadalajara with 60.6%, Nezahualc6yotl with 59.4%, Aguascalientes with 57.4%, Tepic with 57.1%, Gustavo A. Madero with 57% and Ecatepec with 56.9%.

On the other hand, in the school environment, ECOPRED tells us that 32.2% of young people between 12 and 18 years old who attend school were victims of harassment or bullying during 2014 and 15.1% underwent some other kind of victimization. In absolute terms, we are talking

about nearly 1,360,000 young people who are victims of bullying, specifically.

The urban areas with the highest levels of harassment or bullying, according to ECOPRED, were the metropolitan areas of Veracruz with 42.6%, Manzanillo with 41.9%, Nezahualcóyotl with 40.1% and Tepic with 38.4%.

How to respond in the face of the victimization of young people

The data from ECOPRED is revealing; it provides us with a lot of information on the present day state of juvenile victimization in the country and while it does not allow us to reach conclusions on the evolution of this phenomenon throughout time, it does allow us to identify that in urban areas certain kinds of policies are needed and tells us how urgent the enactment of these policies is.

In keeping with this logic, we can observe that the strategies for prevention of juvenile victimization must be directed with greater intensity at the urban areas in the center and western part of the country. That is where, according to the data, the highest levels of victimization occur.

This does not mean that no action should be taken in other regions. Other entities such as Laguna, Veracruz, Cancun and the main urban centers on the Pacific coast deserve attention, but in scenarios with fewer cases, focalization allows for faster and maximum impact of strategies.

As shown by the data, most victimization experiences by young people are the result of: a) committing property crimes of which young people are the constant target, and b) abuse related to physical attributes, the dynamics of living in different

spheres of socialization and the behavior of young people themselves.

In the first case, based on estimates of the *National Survey of Victimization* (ENVIPE 2015), it is possible to understand that most of the crimes of which young people were victims in urban areas of the central-western region such as Guanajuato or Guadalajara are robberies in the street or on public transportation.¹

The preceding information demands the implementation of projects of safe mobility which incorporate situational elements such as improved infrastructure of transport, the installation of cameras in the vehicles and logistics centers along the most important routes, increasing the number of units on overcrowded routes, segmentation of transport by gender, among others. It is also important to spread information on the correct way to take care of oneself when using public transport or walking in the street. But above all, establishing mechanisms of direct, real time links between citizens and authorities is essential, as in mobile applications which denounce and trace a person's route. Of course, none of these mechanisms will work if there is not a guarantee of quick and efficient response by the authorities.

¹ Estimates based on ENVIPE show that the most common crime in the city of Guanajuato (there is no information on León) is robbery or assault in the street or on public transportation (24% of the people surveyed said they had been the victim of this kind of crime in this city). In the metropolitan area of Guadalajara this crime is the second most frequent only following the total or partial stealing of vehicles, in 20% of the cases (INEGI).

Prevention in the home

In the case of victimization due to abuse, the strategies to follow should depend on the sphere of socialization. In the family sphere, ECOPRED indicates that a large number of conflicts are related to economic matters and the finances of the household, as well as matters of iron-fisted discipline or inconsistency. In order to respond to these problems, the strategies of prevention should be aimed at schemes of economic reactivation, training and labor ties of the heads of households, training for the correct handling of family finances, opportunities to access programs and services of food, scholarships and school supplies which help alleviate the economic burden of families, psycho-social attention and workshops on positive up-bringing and family mediation for the guardians, as well as building coalitions of help among parents in the area. Equally important is implementing programs for the prevention and treatment of addictions, especially alcoholism, since this addiction is also associated with the presence of violence within households.

All of these primary interventions make up a support network to be used to avoid deterioration in the family environ. However, from the point of view of secondary prevention, it might be necessary to implement said actions strategically following a scheme of focalized dissuasion as proposed by Professor David Kennedy (2004). This scheme involves identifying (through community networks and mechanisms of reports by telephone and others) potential offenders and communication by the community or authority that violence in the home shall not be tolerated, with the

consequence of the corresponding legal sanction, or, enrollment in supervised recovery programs which involve programs or actions mentioned earlier.

One of the most promising actions in matters of reconstruction of the family environment is the Project for Integral Attention to Women Victims of Violence and Heads of Households in Situations of Vulnerability developed by the National Program for Prevention in the town of Apatzingán, Michoacán. This project, besides redressing the damage caused by violence, has two main objectives: a) to promote, through steady, well-paid employment, that heads of households have enough time and resources to assure the positive and integral upbringing of their children which keeps them away from delinquency, and b) to strengthen ties of confidence between citizens and the government, so that agendas of common work may be established to promote the wellbeing of the community. To this end, a group of 66 women was formed and they were trained and given resources for building and managing a factory for dehydrating fruit. At the same time, they were provided with psycho-social attention and took workshops on mediation in order to promote teamwork. Today, the project is in the phase of sanitation tests and the development of products, as well as in negotiation with channels of commercialization for the products. Although the project up to now has not provided steady income for the families, it has fully complied with its second objection: trust of the participants and those around them in the institutions at the three levels of government has been strengthened. Moreover, true integration

has been reached among the participants, who, at the same time have learned to solve their conflicts through mechanisms of mediation and by establishing clear norms for peaceful co-existence. Within a few months the economic component of the project will be consolidated and the evaluation of its first objective will begin. If the results are what they are hoped to be, the model will be repeated in other areas with high levels of victimization.

Prevention at school

At school the problem that needs to be solved is harassment or bullying. Interventions using *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*² proves especially relevant.

This therapy should go hand in hand with programs aimed at integrally improving the school environment and infrastructure with long-term investment, and more and better opportunities for studying, above all for those young people at the most risk of dropping out. This not only involves giving the students scholarships, but also giving vocational backing and offering alternatives in technical training and job links for young people who have finished secondary or high school, as well as guiding them and providing psychological support for their integration.

In Mexico, perhaps one of the best examples of preventive intervention in this sphere is the "I'm with my Neighborhood" (or "My School Moves me to Co-exist Peacefully") project promoted by

the National Program for the Social Prevention of Violence and Delinquency in Tele-secondary School 91 in the Cuauhtémoc neighborhood of Mexico City. The objective of this program is to prevent girls, boys and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 16 from becoming involved with or recruited by organized crime. At the same time it aims to give the students something to do after they leave school, bringing them productive workshops and the attention of specialists.

In this program the following activities are offered: sports workshops (boxing, basketball and soccer), plastic arts, dance, theater, repairing cell phones, cooking, among others. These are carried out by an inter-disciplinary team made up of specialists in psychology, mediation, and social workers who monitor and give personalized attention to the group of children who have been selected.

The results up to now indicate that the project has a lot of potential. Among other achievements is that 188 young people voluntarily participate in the after school workshops. These young people have replaced violence and indifference with positive attitudes when interacting with their peers. Their professors say that the participants have more commitment and better performance in their studies. These children's parents have been more involved in the school community and have asked members of the technical inter-disciplinary team to have advisors teach them techniques of mediation for using with their children. In order to verify the impact of this intervention and obtain elements for evaluating the program, the project will be evaluated by the

² Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is talk therapy which helps the person manage his/her problems by changing the way he thinks and acts when faced with them (Clark, no date: 265).



Foto: Vimeo

Inter-American Development Bank using experimental methodology.

Whatever the environment we are talking about is and as was mentioned previously, the prevention of victimization requires efficient communication with authorities and opportune response by the latter. This makes it necessary to work on schemes of permanent communication and coordination between the authorities and citizens, using various techniques ranging from establishing citizen observatories based on a technologic platform like the Centers of Citizen Integration in Monterrey and Puebla (CIC, 2015), neighborhood committees with panic buttons and deliberative schemes and more complex coordination such as Tables of Security and Justice (Mexico, 2015).

All of the above-mentioned are part of the initiatives promoted by the National Program for the Social Prevention of Violence and Delinquency.

Conclusions

To prevent is to reduce the probability not only of a crime or violence taking place today, but also long term. Literature on juvenile victimization continuously shows that victims of violence are disproportionately more likely to be violent delinquents than those who have not been victims, and victimization at an early age increases the probabilities of delinquency, committing crimes as adults and violent criminal behavior.

Violence and delinquency, being multi-causal phenomena, must be prevented integrally, paying attention to the various factors in the various environments in which a young person grows up: the young person as an individual, his family, his school and his community. This is why the national policy has centered its efforts of prevention on girls, boys, adolescents and young people, as well as on those who have undergone violence as

victims or perpetrators, responding to different environs of action and having social cohesion as the pillar through citizen participation, which in turn strengthens the ties and confidence between citizens and authorities.

Efforts to achieve citizens' well-being and security are reached by working to increase the co-responsibility of citizen participation with special emphasis on

young people, reducing their vulnerability through measures which pay attention to the factors which intensify the occurrence of victimization, creating safe environments for harmonious peaceful coexistence, continually strengthening institutional capacities to attend to these prerequisites and assuring effective coordination between institutions and public policies.

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