

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Urban areas and youth violence'

(2009/C 317/06)

Rapporteur: **Mr ZUFIAUR NARVAIZA**

On 10 July 2008 the European Economic and Social Committee decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, on

Urban areas and youth violence.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 25 June 2009. The rapporteur was Mr Zufiaur Narvaiza.

At its 455th plenary session, held on 15 and 16 July 2009 (meeting of 15 July), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 174 votes to 3, with 7 abstentions.

1. Summary and recommendations

1.1 European society today is concerned at the phenomenon of violence and crime committed by minors and young adults. At the same time, however, Europe also wants to promote the full development of its young people and encourage their integration into society and the world of employment. Whilst youth violence is a subject that receives wide coverage in the media, it should be stated that, on the whole, statistics ⁽¹⁾ do not point to a significant increase in juvenile crime. In fact, it can even be said to be stabilising. The aim of this own-initiative opinion is to shed some light on youth violence and make some recommendations on the matter without seeking to incriminate young people or tar them all with the same brush.

1.2 Historically, each European State's legal system has developed its own model of youth justice, thus providing different legal standards and responses to violence carried out by minors and young people. This means that the youth justice systems in the EU Member States differ considerably in aspects such as social protection and prevention policies, the age of criminal responsibility, the procedures that can be used, the measures or penalties that can be imposed, the resources available, etc. It should be pointed out, however, that these differences occur in societies that are all committed to European integration but which have been hard-hit by the crisis, and consequently have even fewer resources to fund policies promoting youth integration.

1.3 The recommendations made in this opinion adhere to two guidelines. Firstly, a preventive approach to such violence. The causes of violent or antisocial behaviour often lie in issues such as urban design and structure, and poverty and marginalisation. Furthermore, whilst young people are undoubtedly the main culprits in this type of violence, they are also the victims of the world around them. All of these factors suggest that any discussion of collective violence perpetrated by minors and young people and

its prevention must provide more of a response than mere crack-downs and punishment. Secondly, in an area as closely inter-linked as Europe, not only economically but also in terms of values, social behaviour and communication, this is a phenomenon that should not be addressed from a purely national standpoint.

1.4 Youth violence and juvenile delinquency have existed in European countries for a number of years and in recurring forms. Initially, they were viewed broadly as a social pathology, whereas they are now more commonly defined as aspects of insecurity, as stated in the Peyrefitte report ⁽²⁾, which drew a distinction between crime and the fear of crime.

1.5 At a time when the issue of youth violence was particularly topical in Europe, the **European Economic and Social Committee** adopted an opinion on 15 March 2006 entitled *The prevention of juvenile delinquency. Ways of dealing with juvenile delinquency and the role of the juvenile justice system in the European Union* ⁽³⁾. That opinion, which highlighted the importance of the preventive approach, was taken up by the European institutions ⁽⁴⁾ and has also been referred to in a number of European and international fora dealing with the legal, criminal justice and social aspects of youth crime.

1.6 The opinion argued that it would be useful to carry out a study of the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency. The phenomenon of violence committed by minors and young people (including adolescents aged 13–18 and young adults aged 18–21 or even 25, depending on the country, which is still sometimes dealt with

⁽¹⁾ As demonstrated in the report by the Crown Prosecution Service in Spain, for example, where crime in 2007 was nearly 2 % down on the 2006 figures.

⁽²⁾ Report by the French Comité d'Etudes sur la Violence, la Criminalité et la Délinquance, [Committee for the Study of Violence, Crime and Delinquency], entitled *Réponses à la Violence* [Responses to Violence], Paris, Presse Pocket 1977, p. 41.

⁽³⁾ EESC opinion of 15 March 2006 on 'The prevention of juvenile delinquency. Ways of dealing with juvenile delinquency and the role of the juvenile justice system in the European Union'; rapporteur: Mr Zufiaur Narvaiza (OJ C 110, 9.5.2006).

⁽⁴⁾ European Parliament resolution of 21 June 2007, on juvenile delinquency, the role of women, the family and society.
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/DownloadSP.do?id=13705&num_rep=6729&language=en.

by the system of criminal responsibility for minors) is attracting increasing attention in European society. Nevertheless, juvenile violence takes a number of quite different forms. In urban areas, it can occur at school, particularly in the form of bullying, in a domestic setting, in gangs, at sporting events, or through the new communications technologies such as the Internet etc. Although all of these forms of violence are worthy of study, the present own-initiative opinion confines itself to the collective violence perpetrated by young people in urban areas.

1.7 For around 20 years, the issue of collective violence has dominated the headlines and the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods have been observed and studied by researchers (sociologists, ethnologists, geographers, legal experts, political scientists, etc.). The factors underpinning this urban unrest are well known: unemployment, job instability, family breakdown, dropping out of school, failure at school, discrimination. However, the situation has grown more serious in recent years and the responses adopted have hardened. The crisis has aggravated economic and social problems and disadvantaged young people in comparison to their parents, with the breakdown of the 'social lift' and the rise of individualism. This results in situations of keenly-felt injustice and withdrawal which, when expressed collectively, become the most visible form of opposition to the authorities.

1.8 The term 'collective violence' has no official or legal definition but is often applied to different types of violent event that take place in public in the form either of clashes based on issues of ethnic or racial discrimination between communities, also involving conflicts between rival gangs, or which arise from communities' relations with the institutions, typified by relations between young people and the police.

1.9 Whilst these phenomena have worsened in recent years in Europe, occurring in France, the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, Greece, etc., they have never been viewed or addressed as a global problem by national governments or by the European institutions. Instead, they have been treated as individual and isolated epiphenomena.

1.10 This opinion therefore recommends that measures be coordinated at the local, national and European levels, thus requiring Community responses in the form of specific programmes in the fields of family and youth policy, education and training, employment, crime prevention and judicial coordination. These practical responses should strive to complement strategies for urban renewal, improving public services, combating all forms of discrimination and giving a new boost to relations between the State and its citizens, especially as regards the police, by teaching civic-mindedness, ethical and social values and use of the media, and providing parents with educational support.

2. Characteristics and causes of collective youth violence in urban areas

2.1 **Proposed definition:** no generally accepted definition of collective violence perpetrated by minors and young adults in urban areas currently exists. Belgian legislation contains the concept of the urban 'riot', while others view it as a series of crimes committed by criminals who are known and identified. In order to sketch out a broad initial definition, the remainder of this document will address such violence as a concentration of violent behaviour in an urban setting that also serves as a means of expression for certain categories of the population. Participants' motives vary: social discrimination, conflict with the police, racial hatred, religious conflict, etc. thus in some way highlighting the shortcomings and inadequacies of the social services which are supposed, through their welfare work, to prevent this type of violence. The definition used in this opinion focuses on collective violence perpetrated in public spaces, taking the form of attacks against local inhabitants belonging to a particular ethnic group or against the police, as well as the destruction that accompanies looting, such as setting fire to public buildings, cars, etc.

2.2 It should be pointed out that the increase in violent acts (destruction and vandalism, physical attacks and aggression, violent robberies, rape, etc.) are not perpetrated exclusively by young people: violence in general is on the increase. Nevertheless the age of individuals perpetrating urban violence is an important factor in understanding the phenomenon and any solution should take account of the proportion of minors involved in urban criminal activity. Thus in the events that took place in France in 2005, police statistics show that out of 640 people arrested, 100 were minors. As part of a preventive approach, particular attention should be paid to permanent solutions targeting the younger generations, who are the driving force of change and development.

2.3 **Current studies and classification:** Each Member State has developed its own methodology for assessing and classifying collective violence in urban areas. Complex systems, such as the Bui-Trong scale ⁽⁵⁾, which grades the degrees of intensity of the different forms of collective violence according to the number of people involved, the degree of organisation, its aims, etc. help to conceptualise the phenomenon. For a number of years and most notably in the wake of the 2005 events, France has been developing Urban Violence Indicators (UVI) based on an assessment of the levels of violence in sensitive neighbourhoods, making use of quantitative and qualitative surveys and victim statements. These indicators, and their equivalents in other European countries, are still too recent to give a clear picture of the intensity of urban violence and can also always be skewed by problems relating to data sources and data collection methods.

⁽⁵⁾ *Résurgence de la violence en France* [Resurgence of violence in France], Lucienne Bui-Trong, Futuribles February 1996 p. 17-18.

2.4 As already pointed out in the definition of the phenomenon, whilst the expression of collective violence reflects a specific national situation, it nevertheless has common features in Europe. In light of the events that have taken place in a number of European countries in recent years, therefore, it is possible to classify the way in which events unfold.

- **Social and political conflicts:** these forms of collective violence occur as a reaction to discrimination and social, economic and geographical exclusion and take the form of violent reactions to the police or the representatives of the State deemed responsible for these social ills. The aspect of fighting the system and protesting against situations perceived to be unfair leads the people involved to clash with the police and public institutions representing the State and a society labelled as 'repressive'; France has been hit particularly hard by social conflict, in what has been called the 'crisis of the suburbs' where the lack of any social mixing and several decades of fruitless town-planning policies have led to these urban areas being stigmatised. These popular uprisings ⁽⁶⁾ consist of a three-stage cycle, comprising a starting point, often linked to a tragic or unfair event, euphoria combined with the group effect and lastly, exhaustion ⁽⁷⁾.
- **Breakdown of public order:** this concerns mass events of a political, sporting or cultural nature that degenerate into a loss of control of public order, not only on the part of the event's organisers but also the police. Examples include violence at football matches or 'raves' or the breakdown of public order at a political demonstration. Another factor that should be added to the general breakdown of order is the involvement of 'rioters', who bring people together for the purpose of causing even more material damage. The EU must not forget that in some cases, this uncontrollable violence can in turn provoke more organised violence, representing an even more serious threat to democracy.
- **Disputes between gangs:** far from being by definition violent, gangs form a substitute for young people's family and close community, providing a sense of belonging to a group and to a certain extent, a practical response to the insecurities arising in adolescence. In the specific case of violent gangs, this type of activity is characterised by its criminal nature related to the grouping together of adolescents or young adults quick to use force and intimidation and who orchestrate, with a degree of frequency, clashes or violent criminal acts. Such gangs confront each other in urban areas, on the street or in shopping centres, to exert control over a territory or illegal business, or the authorities, through their representatives: the police and security guards or night watchmen, as happens in North Paris or South London, where regular clashes pit rival gangs against one another. Spain has witnessed the emergence of Latino gangs (known as 'maras' or 'pandillas' such as the Latin Kings and the Ñetas). The gang phenomenon enables young people to protect themselves in a hostile world, against 'other' youths from the next

street or neighbourhood. These gangs today represent some of the most disenfranchised members of society in certain suburbs and their violence can be linked to failure, lack of job security, etc. An appropriate response to violent gangs is also crucial to avoid their being taken over by organised crime.

- **Ethnic and religious clashes:** this type of violence is characterised firstly by its ethnic nature; in other words, the perpetrators or victims of the violent acts have their origins in a particular ethnic, religious or similar community. A number of European countries, such as the United Kingdom, Spain (the Alcorcón riots of October 2007 between young Spaniards and Latinos), Italy, the Netherlands (October 2007 in Amsterdam), Denmark (February 2008), Belgium (Anderlecht in May 2008), etc. have experienced this type of clash, in which issues of migration and religion, in addition to a wide range of other factors, play a major role.

2.5 Outbreaks of violence in urban areas have inter-related causes that play a smaller or greater role, depending on the type of event:

- Poverty, lack of job security, unemployment: the expressions of collective violence in Europe have taken place primarily in the most deprived neighbourhoods, appearing to be a consequence of marginalisation and social exclusion. Family breakdown, youth unemployment and lack of job security, combined with poor education and the consequent difficulty of achieving socio-economic integration, make these neighbourhoods particularly vulnerable to economic change, especially financial crises, as demonstrated by the current situation.
- Access to weapons and illegal substances: In most of Europe's national and regional capitals, trafficking in hard drugs is largely the domain of adults rather than minors, and encourages violence linked to the illegal trade in these substances and to the spread of guns. Children and adolescents, who feel at the mercy of a world beyond their grasp, can be targeted by dealers, who exploit some young people for their own ends.
- Town planning: the neighbourhoods of European towns deemed to be at risk share a number of features and are often viewed as suburban ghettos that no longer meet the criteria of social mix and current urban planning. Whether they are located in city centres (the United Kingdom, Belgium) or on the outskirts (France, Germany, etc.), these neighbourhoods and buildings have been poorly maintained and have gradually become so run-down that they are becoming unhealthy and dangerous.

⁽⁶⁾ Le Goaziou(V.), Mucchielli (L.) 2006, *Quand les banlieues brûlent. Retour sur les émeutes de 2005* [The suburbs on fire: the 2005 riots revisited], Paris, La Découverte.

⁽⁷⁾ Bachmann(C.), Le Guennec (N.), 1997, *Autopsie d'une émeute. Histoire exemplaire du soulèvement d'un quartier* [Autopsy of a riot: the exemplary tale of a neighbourhood uprising], Paris, Albin Michel.

- Relations with the police: much collective violence is fuelled by resentment towards the perceived targeting of visible minorities or excessive use of force by the police ⁽⁸⁾. To quote the French Strategic Analysis Centre, *'The inhabitants' hostility towards the presence of the police in their neighbourhood is palpable, as is their lack of confidence in the State and the authorities generally'* ⁽⁹⁾.
- The media: the media frequently focus on the negative aspects, which are likely to further stigmatise the residents of 'sensitive' neighbourhoods and to fuel violence by sensationalising events. In France in 2005 the media provided daily coverage of events, whilst in Belgium and Germany the governments endeavoured to limit public information in order to avoid copycat crimes.
- Increasing police presence and video surveillance in sensitive areas such as schools or recreational spaces. Such measures cannot be effective on their own, and at the same time may stigmatise the areas in question and make young people feel that they are being constantly monitored and clamped down on.
- Urban renewal policies, the scale of which varies from country to country. In France, inter alia through the creation of the Urban Renewal Agency ⁽¹¹⁾; in Germany, through the urban renewal carried out during the country's reunification.

3. Different types of response to a transnational problem

3.1 Whether sporadic or ongoing, urban violence in Europe is particularly serious. It is serious from the political point of view, because it calls into question the State's ability to ensure that the social pact is respected and to protect its citizens, and it is serious from the social point of view, because such violence reflects social divisions and integration problems. Against this backdrop, States should provide clear responses to the problem of collective urban violence. It should be borne in mind, however, that these responses differ considerably from one country to another; in some cases they take a more punitive form and in others focus more on prevention. This means that there is a need in Europe for the ongoing assessment of public policies aimed at finding solutions to this phenomenon and an attempt to make statistics on the matter more efficient and comparable (crime figures cannot be analysed solely on the basis of the number of incidents reported but should also include the clear-up rate). Common indications should be developed to encourage the national use of police and court records rather than somewhat subjective studies of the impact on victims.

3.2 Broadly speaking, State responses take the following forms:

- Positive discrimination schemes for sensitive neighbourhoods, such as those in France with its Priority Education Areas and initial job preparation, or in Berlin, where young volunteers and police officers regularly patrol together to prevent situations that might lead to urban violence. Since these joint police patrols have been in place (having persuaded former street gang leaders to become involved), crime has fallen by some 20 % in the areas where police and volunteers patrol together ⁽¹⁰⁾.

⁽⁸⁾ The Politics of Protest. Extra-Parliamentary Politics in Britain since 1970. Peter Joyce. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

⁽⁹⁾ French Strategic Analysis Centre. *Les violences urbaines: une exception française? Enseignements d'une comparaison internationale, note de veille n° 31*, [Urban violence: a French exception? Lessons from an international comparison], Newsletter No. 31, 23 October 2006 (<http://www.strategie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/NoteExterneDeVeille31.pdf>).

⁽¹⁰⁾ Jeunes et policiers font cause commune à Berlin [Young people and police work together in Berlin] http://www.oijj.org/news_ficha.php?cod=54117&home=SI&idioma=es.

3.3 An effective **territorial cohesion policy** can also help prevent the build-up in urban areas of factors that can foster violent attitudes amongst young people. This would require renovating urban areas and making them decent places to live. Renovating urban areas requires a long-term discussion of urban renewal work as part of a strategic and comprehensive land-use planning scheme, in consultation with all of the parties concerned, including young people. The aim is to reintegrate certain neighbourhoods into cities and regenerate them in order to help the local community develop and to promote the social, economic and cultural functions of these public spaces. In turn, the concept of making neighbourhoods better places to live, which is a specific method of urban regeneration, aims to solve the specific problems of residential areas by making the city a place of integration and crime prevention, in order to combat contemporary urban problems such as drug-dealing, squatters, violence and damage to the environment. The basic aim is to avert the phenomenon of exclusion in relation to the rest of the population by prioritising transport, to enable these neighbourhoods to open up to the city, thus raising the profile of the urban population as a whole and helping them to integrate. This urban renewal should, however, go hand in hand with solid strategies for education, vocational training and access to jobs, without which sustainable improvements will not be achieved.

3.4 At the root of youth violence is a lack of social cohesion linked to a crisis of citizenship in cities. Public spaces, the main feature of which is to enable very different people to live together, require adherence to common rules in order to ensure that individual freedoms are protected. Cities also have to address the delicate balance that exists between communities that are unfamiliar with one another as a result of having a multitude of codes and cultures, which can lead to a weakening of social bonds and solidarity ⁽¹²⁾. An interinstitutional and multi-faceted approach is needed, to provide effective crime prevention measures that are useful to all direct or indirect stakeholders such as the police, the courts, the social services, housing authorities, employers and schools. Nevertheless, local authorities have a particularly important role to play, since they are responsible for defining urban areas and public services.

⁽¹¹⁾ ANRU.fr.

⁽¹²⁾ 'La dynamique de la disqualification sociale' [The dynamics of social exclusion] in Sciences Humaines No 28, May 1993.

3.5 In Europe, although urban violence perpetrated by the young varies in context and intensity, the process of analysing it and studying the responses to it forms part of a broader legal framework - that of the European Union. Currently, studies and assessments of juvenile crime prevention require multi-disciplinary and inter-institutional cooperation between government agencies and, at a more grassroots level, between the professionals most directly involved (social workers, police, courts, employers, etc.). European countries, regions and cities that have experienced episodes of collective violence are finding it hard to restore social harmony between communities and to win back respect for institutions. Urban violence also entails very high material, social and political costs ⁽¹³⁾.

3.6 In a climate in which youth crime in Europe is largely stable, but in which crimes are becoming increasingly violent, a number of **local programmes** set up in different EU countries demonstrate the importance of prevention as well as integrated social strategies for young people in urban areas ⁽¹⁴⁾. The basic aims of the *Safer Neighbourhood* programme in Birmingham (winner of the 2004 European Crime Prevention Award), were to reduce the different forms of violence and crime, improve people's quality of life and actively promote communities' involvement in ensuring their own social integration ⁽¹⁵⁾.

3.7 Strengthening an organised and mutually supportive European society through EU support for innovative social and integration-based projects will guarantee improvements in security and sustainable urban development. By way of example, the Urban Programmes are a Community initiative set up under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to promote the sustainable development of cities and neighbourhoods in crisis, thereby helping to prevent youth violence and crime in general.

3.8 Furthermore, increasing public participation in the local decision-making process and in exchanging experiences and good practice promotes the concept of 'urban governance', which is defined by conducting studies on reorganising and improving public services, designing and establishing new urban management bodies, introducing reliable indicators for assessing local management and running information campaigns and improving access to public information, without resorting to stigmatisation or excessive pessimism.

⁽¹³⁾ For Clichy Sous-Bois in France, material costs in 2005 totalled EUR 150 million.

⁽¹⁴⁾ 'Urban Crime Prevention and Youth at Risk: Compendium of Promising Strategies and Programmes from around the World'. International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, 2005 (www.crime-prevention-intl.org/publications/pub_113_1.pdf).

⁽¹⁵⁾ The result was to reduce youth crime by an average of 29 %, as opposed to 12 % in other comparable areas.

3.9 There are also other initiatives, such as the European Pact for Youth, aimed at improving young Europeans' education/training, mobility, career development and social inclusion, whilst at the same time making it easier to reconcile working life and home life.

3.10 In more general terms, young people's active civic involvement is boosted by the magnificent work done by youth organisations, which day after day carry out their work on the ground, supporting European, national or local strategies to boost development and combat social exclusion.

4. Some proposals for a European policy on youth violence in urban areas

4.1 The above points in this own-initiative opinion lead on to the following guidelines or suggestions:

- There needs to be a variety of responses to collective violence involving delinquency and anti-social and offensive behaviour by young people. These responses should be assessed on an ongoing basis in order to constantly improve them, continually developing the educational aspects and boosting young people's involvement in their own development and future.
- The different preventive and alternative strategies should be promoted through a clear and sustainable European policy based on priorities set at EU level and which help to solve the problems of youth violence in urban areas, obviating where possible the need for judicial measures.
- Young people's organisations must be given special recognition at both the European and national levels. Many of these institutions, whether private or public, play a major role in young people's lives, in particular by offering activities that keep young people busy and thus prevent them from potentially falling into crime. The role of schools and youth organisations, therefore, warrants particular attention and support in terms of public funding.
- European and international principles concerning youth violence and delinquency should be harmonised through minimum standards to be respected in national legislation and used as indicators to ensure respect for minors' rights. Given the multidisciplinary nature of the government agencies and bodies involved in managing urban areas in Europe, initiatives must be developed and standards for good practice set - which could be assessed and analysed by a European Youth Justice Monitoring Centre, for example. This will ensure that statistical data on youth violence in urban areas are reliable and comparable.

- The penalties and measures imposed by national courts should be based on the greater interest of the adolescent, in line with his age, psychological maturity, physical condition, level of development and abilities ⁽¹⁶⁾, whilst matching his personal circumstances (the principle of tailoring a measure to individual needs).
- The European institutions should encourage urban renewal strategies, in conjunction with sustainable social policies, with a view to improving land-use and planning, in order to prevent exclusion and make it easier for the most vulnerable members of society to integrate into city life.
- The authorities should provide the bodies working to protect and rehabilitate young people with sufficient resources, giving them adequate funding and staff, to ensure that their work has a real impact on young people's lives.
- The appropriate choices and specific training, if possible in line with European benchmarks, of the social, legal and police stakeholders, should be ensured and continually updated on the basis of multi-institutional and multidisciplinary cooperation against a background of exchanges between countries, especially with a view to establishing dialogue and relations between the police and young people.
- The European institutions and the Member States should view the 2010 European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion as an opportunity to show their commitment to making the protection of the rights of young people in trouble with the law and preventing violence in urban areas priorities for combating social exclusion.
- The European institutions should establish a funding line to protect young people from social exclusion in the most marginalised urban areas in order to support innovative schemes to improve social cohesion in civil society, and thus even boost young people's initiative and entrepreneurship.
- Common criteria and good practices should be implemented with a view to preventing young people from committing crime and dealing with those that have and rehabilitating them.

Brussels, 15 July 2009.

*The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee*
Mario SEPI

⁽¹⁶⁾ See the Valencia Joint Declaration of the International Juvenile Justice Observatory.