A Randomised Field Experiment to Prevent Violence

The Zurich Intervention and Prevention Project at Schools, ZIPPS

1. INTRODUCTION

The Zurich Intervention and Prevention Project at Schools ZIPPS is a research project aimed at contributing to more effective violence prevention in the multicultural urban context of a European city. It combines a longitudinal study of approximately 1100 children that entered primary school in 2004 with a randomised field experiment whereby two general prevention programmes at the parent and the school levels are being introduced.

The project is guided by developmental theory positing that influences at different levels interact throughout the life-course in promoting or inhibiting pro-social skills of children and adolescents. Among these, risk factors associated with the family (i.e., erratic parenting, harsh discipline, low parental bonds, partner conflict) and the child’s personality (i.e., impulsivity, risk-seeking, attention deficits) are among the empirically best established antecedents of later problem behaviour. The study hence experimentally introduces a programme aimed at promoting parenting skills and a school-based curriculum to improve pro-social competencies skills among children. Their effectiveness will be tested by means of a longitudinal study including three consecutive waves of interviews. At each wave, interviews will be carried out with the children, their primary caregivers and their teachers.

Although randomised field experiments are commonly seen as the best possible way to promote knowledge about effective prevention, respective studies continue to be rare in Europe. This is partly due to an array of political, financial, organisational,
and practical challenges that researchers face when considering a large-scale study of this kind. It hence seems worthwhile to present an overview of the wider background, the development and the design of the Zurich Intervention and Prevention Project, probably the largest ongoing randomised field experiment on developmental violence prevention in Europe.

2. THE WIDER BACKGROUND: YOUTH VIOLENCE AND ITS PREVENTION IN EUROPE

For about two decades youth violence has continued to be an important issue of public concern in many Western European countries. This is apparently due to notable similarities, across countries, in the trend and structure of youth violence. In particular, many countries including France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Italy have experienced a significant and continuous increase in police recorded non-lethal violent offences since the early 1990s. Most probably police data overestimate the extent of the real increase in youth aggressive behaviour. But political concern was fuelled by the seemingly unstoppable upward trend these data suggested, especially amongst the youngest age-groups. Also, research consistently identified disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Europe’s urban centres as the most affected territories. Accordingly, many initiatives to introduce new intervention and prevention programmes originated in cities, often with local authorities playing an important role in triggering innovative departures. Finally, in many European countries youth violence appeared to be increasingly concentrated amongst juveniles of ethnic minority backgrounds who also had low educational resources. Hence the question of how to develop and implement effective policies in a culturally heterogeneous context characterised by a lack of social integration became increasingly perceived as pivotal to effective violence prevention.

As a result of these developments Europe has seen an unprecedented proliferation of violence prevention activities over the past two decades. However, knowledge about their effectiveness is extremely limited as hardly any of the new initiatives and programmes are ever evaluated by means of randomised or quasi-randomised trials. This situation is much more acute in Europe than in the United States, where high-quality outcome evaluation has a notably longer tradition. Consider, for example, the

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4 See, for example, the collection of national reviews in 25 Déviance et Société (2001) No. 4.