

This fact-sheet provides a summary of group-specific findings from the working groups with children in conflict with the law in: Ireland (5), Belgium (4) and the United Kingdom (2). Young people ranged in age from 15 to 17 years, and 7 were male and 4 were female.

The working groups with young people in conflict with the law took place in three different countries. In these contexts the young people who participated had different experiences of contact with the criminal justice system, ranging from contact with the police through to detention.

Failure to Disclose Violence

It was evident from the working groups conducted with young people in conflict with the law that they were unlikely to disclose violence to professionals. In their view the onus lay on them to address the situation, although they provided some indication that they would be willing to seek support from family, extended family and friends. The reasons they were unlikely to disclose situations of violence to professionals was because they would be perceived as a “rat”. There was also the perception that there was nothing professionals could do for them:

“There’s nothing they can do. And you’re just going to make things ten times worse on top of yourself. That’s why I think brothers or cousins, be smart about it but do it your own way”. (Ireland)

Some of young people differentiated between different professionals:

“People can’t help you unless they know what it’s like to have been through something. Youth workers would know way more, they have been through it.” (United Kingdom)

There was the concern too that they would not be taken seriously. Speaking about a situation of disclosing cyberbullying one participant said:

“They might laugh at us or just say something like, Oh ignore them you gobshite”. (Ireland)

Understanding violence

Youngsters in conflict with the law understood violence meanly in a physical way.

“Beating with a saucepan, verbally aggressive, threatening, knife, hair pulling, grab throat, boxing, shouting, cursing, kicking, hitting.” (Belgium)

A dual attitude towards (cyber)bullying is noticed. It’s not clear if it’s understood as violence. At least, they distinguished acts as considered teasing (e.g. verbally) and acts which is bullying (e.g. physical). Moreover, cyberbullying is seen as somehow less 'bad', as that you can ignore.

“This is even more stupid, don't answer, just block it. There are so many ways to just avoid it. People always make it such a drama, but there are so many ways to avoid it. Then block it. Do not answer, why do you let yourself be so snubbed?” (Belgium)

Issues

Lack of trust in professionals

The working groups conducted with people who were in conflict with the law found that they did not trust professionals. There was a perception that professionals didn't understand their situations:

“You [the professional] don't know where I'm coming from, you don't know my situation, just fuck off.” (Ireland)

“I don't trust much people. Trust is a huge thing, it takes years to get it but seconds to lose it.” (United Kingdom)

“I just wouldn't feel comfortable saying this, this and this happened”. (Ireland)

“The supervisor, we don't choose him/her. How can we trust him/her? I think we should be able to choose something like that ourselves. Everything will be passed on. Stories start to live their own life.” (Belgium)

However, they did trust youth work professionals and indicated that they were more comfortable in their presence and better able to connect with them:

“They know how to talk to us” (Ireland)

“They're not formal like, proper formal like”. (Ireland)

Being in closed detention makes it difficult to gain trust. Life in the institution itself is not evident. They often adopt a 'survival attitude', which means that what they think and/or feel does not always correspond to their behaviour.

“Of course, as you see here, everyone here is two-face, everyone here makes those weird talk and I don't know what, then you are so insecure of yourself, you don't know what to do. But you can't talk neither because you can't trust anybody, do you understand?” (Belgium)

Friends were often mentioned as important persons they would go to first for help and support.

“If you tell them, then the friends can help to go to court.” (Belgium)

“If you go to your friends, they will help you anyway.” (Belgium)

Need of a support figure

Young people spoke about the need of a support figure who stands next to them, believes in them and supports them no matter what happens. They feel that every detail of what they do is monitored. They want to be able to make mistakes, without being judged or punished immediately.

“All we need is just people who are out there at that moment when we are having a hard time. That we can fall, that we can lean back and say ‘okay now it’s just a break’ and five minutes later, we stand up again, we have to be strong, in the future what will we do?” (Belgium)

“Yeah actually, there has to be someone next to you when you fall, someone who supports you and give you things...” (Belgium)

“Don’t turn on this person” (Belgium)

Focussing on the future

Many young people spoke about not wanting to dwell in the past. The focus must also be in the present and the future.

“By default, you end up here. Well-deserved on the one hand, but on the other hand forget the past, focus on the person himself/herself and the present and don’t take those old cows out of the canal as they say in [place where participant comes from]” (Belgium).

Take action and be transparent

If professionals takes action to support children and young people “in the best interests of the child”, the young people required transparency in intentions and actions. Professionals have to make sure nothing happens without the child being informed. They asked to be voiced and to be informed regularly (possible outcomes, feedback of token actions, what worked well or not...).

“Yes, just say it. Say what you want. (...) I think they should discuss that and if they have a solution, they have to go for it. (...) If solutions are not possible, they have to feedback what is possible and what is not, and why.” (Belgium)

“Yes and they have to help. And for example; if he/she can't go home, then let him/her go to other people, so this child doesn't remain all the time in the community institution.” (Belgium)

“That if they promise something, that they really do, that they don't change all the time. If they promise and then don't do it, then...” (Belgium)

Advice from young people in conflict with the law to professionals

Being Treated with Respect

When offering advice to professionals, a common theme within the working group conducted with young males in Ireland was that professionals needed to treat them with respect. Speaking about professionals, it was said:

“They need to have respect for us too”. (Ireland)

“No lies... That they promise something like this and that and then they don't do it.” (Belgium)

“Don't look down on kids.” (United Kingdom)

They were keen to point out that wearing a uniform does not exempt them from treating young people with respect. In their view respect could be as simple as saying hello and calling them by name:

“They won't call you your name, you're either a traveller or a gypsy, that's the way everyone sees it” (Ireland)

“ya know now if you see a soldier on the street, I can guarantee ya they'd say hello to you first, before you say hello to them”. (Ireland)

Talk and look for alternatives

Young people wanted to be taken seriously and they wanted to be heard. They were aware that not everything they want is possible, but at least they asked to be listened to and provided with feedback:

“People start saying things and then she starts thinking about this. She's not just going to say 'no', she's not going to do that, she's going to think about it and then maybe she will do it, because of what all the people told her.” (Belgium)

“Talk; this surely will help 😊” (Belgium)

“It's a two-way system.” (United Kingdom)