YOUTH, VIOLENCE AND PUBLIC POLICIES IN LATIN AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this document is to make evident the situation of young people living at risk in Latin America and to propose policies to face this problem.

The importance of dealing with the problem of youth at risk comes from the high violence rates in the continent which ¨is equivalent to destroying a large part of the human capital that the educational system creates every day¨ (LONDOÑO, GAVIRIA, GUERRERO, 2000). It also comes from the fact that the region will have the largest number of young people in its history until 2020, and that the social cohesion of Latin American societies will depend on the capability to integrate young people as a main social actor and not as a marginal one.

First of all, this document describes the situation of young people at risk and it analyzes the institutional conditions for formulating and implementing adequate programs. Later, it concentrates on the different types of interventions.

1. Young People and Risk

Talking about young people in situation of risk is not an easy task. Firstly, because the concept of youth implies assuming a broad approach that on the one hand, it allows us to focus on some given groups but that it also considers that the meaning of juvenile goes way beyond an ethereal definition. Thus, any definition of youth implies acknowledging that the juvenile period is the time of life when the interaction between individual trends, the psycho-social acquisitions, the socially available goals and the strengths and disadvantages of the environment are produced with higher intensity (KRAUSKOPF, 1999). Therefore, without discussing the age limits of youth, which changes depending on the country and without having a discussion on who is young, here we assume that youth basically covers two periods.

The first period is the adolescence, that goes from puberty at around 12 years old and that it indicates the end of childhood, until the age when the person enters the world of the young adult. Adolescence is a period of physical, intellectual, affective and ethic formation and it is also a period of change and break away, characterized by searching for an identity. During the period of adolescence, the main socialization factors are the family, but in a lesser extent than in childhood, and on the other hand, school and above all peers. In fact, as the studies based on meta-analysis have shown, peer influence is predominant for engaging in violent acts or behavior against the law or uncivic attitudes, more than any other influence (BLATIER, 2002).

The second period is young adulthood, characterized by a double search: entering the labor market, both directly or through studies or training, and building their own family. It goes until approximately 25-29 years old (different countries have different age limits), that is to say, the approximate age to have a family. During this second period, although the original family keeps having a supporting role, it is mainly as a protection net allowing young people to have a house, to finance their studies or to support themselves during long periods looking for a job. School has a less important role in terms of education, it is mainly a professional qualification place and it is not as important for socialization. Peers in the training process, the use and the quality of free time and work have a more influencing role. However, the most important things that characterize

the life of a young adult are the perspectives for accessing the labor market and achieving an affective balance with potential partners.

Secondly, any definition of young people at risk should consider the structural presence of risk in modern society. Thus, due to the modernization process and the technological development, young people are currently more exposed to the redefinition of consumption standards which have worsen the differences in having access to opportunities and the living conditions between those groups which are ahead socially and economically and those which are not. Therefore, the benefits of technological development do not favor all young people from all social backgrounds the same way. There is a socio- economic polarization inside the national societies (BECK, 1998). Similarly, current societies face various risks as a consequence of the modernization processes, where ¨dangers decided and produced socially¨ exceed security and imply ¨a differential impact that makes the social gap more acute¨, due to wealth accumulation ¨at the higher classes, whereas risks pile up at the lower classes ¨ (BECK, 1998).

This implies considering that, although youth as a whole does not face the risks of modern society, there are groups that are more exposed than others to develop risk behaviors, due to different factors. That is why the differentiation made at the health field regarding the difference between risk behaviors and behaviors involving risks, is essential.

Risk behaviors are those which affect aspects of the psycho-social development or the survival of the young person. These behaviors are influenced by different factors present in society and in the closer environment (family, school, peers and neighborhood). On the other hand, behaviors involving risks are those when young people assume some level of risk (not very different form what adults do), aware of it and as part of their commitment and the construction of a richer and fuller development.

Thus, it is necessary to point out that it is dangerous to assume that youth itself means being in a situation of risk, because the generalization leads to considering risk behaviors as something normal at this age and therefore, to base them on the characterization of this period of life. Also, this does not differentiate those young people who really have a life style with behaviors based on real risk factors for their development and surroundings.

From this point of view, youth at risk refers to young people who face factors that may affect their vital cycle and their psycho-social development, as for example, having anti-social attitudes, violence and delinquency from different situations of risk. In fact, at adolescence and youth specific behaviors that threaten some groups of youngsters are inter-related. When a young person gets into one of these groups, vulnerabilities with different origins are added up, explaining why young people participate in violent and delinquency acts (KRAUSKOPF, 2003).

2. Characterization of Violence in Latin America

High Violence Rates

Latin America is known as one of the most violent regions in the world and the use of violence as a way to solve conflicts has become a daily practice in the region. Thus, from the 80s, violence

and more specially, criminal violence has become a central issue even considered as one of the main handicaps for economic development (FAJNZYLBER; LEDERMAN Y LOAYZA, 2001). Similarly, it is possible to show that violence and criminality affect people daily life through ¨weakening the notion of belonging to the society and the idea that the State is unable to guarantee the security of citizens¨ (REGUILLO-CRUZ. R. 2003). Thus, cities are seen as places where violence is a daily experience, having a public perception (a wrong one) that identifies city with violence, making both words into synonyms[1] .

It is also known that, as it happens in other regions, almost 80% of regular crimes (except those related with intra-family violence, white-collar or organized crime) are committed by youngsters between 12-25 years old. However, several studies show that young people are also the main victims of violence in the region. When we analyze the figures of young deaths in the region, the so called ¨external causes¨ (including traffic accidents, homicides and suicides) are largely predominant in all cases, and in most of them, they are higher than 50% and until three quarters of all causes of death analyzed (OPS, 2000).

Homicides particularly affect mostly countries such as Colombia, Brazil and El Salvador, with percentages around 62.5 %, 42.0 % and 46.1 % respectively, in relation to the group of causes of death in young men, and in rates reaching 211.4 per thousand in the case of Colombia, and 107.2 per thousand in Venezuela, 96.6 per thousand in Brazil and 95.0 per thousand in El Salvador (OPS, 2000). In the case of young women, the most important figures in terms of their magnitude are those related to transmittable diseases in Dominican Republic, Panama and Ecuador, as well as the figures related to pregnancy and delivery in Nicaragua and Colombia, in a context where indicators not always reflect precisely the real consequences of these complex events (OPS,2000).The analysis of the context where these situations of violence for young people take place shows that being a woman, adolescent, living in a socially unfavorable environment and being a mother, are factors which determine the vulnerable situation of young women. Thus, a large portion of the biological reproduction in the region- 60% or more- happens with young people and especially at adolescence. It is during this period that the most important facts in the reproductive life of a person take place, because at this age they start being sexually active and they expose themselves to sexually transmittable diseases, including AIDS. According to surveys of demographics and health (RODRIGUEZ VIGNOLI, 2005), a large majority of adolescents in Latin America do not use condoms and more than 75% of women has been mothers before finishing their youth. Similarly, a significant amount of sexually active adolescents lack access to information, education and sexual and reproductive health services. Therefore, the acute differences regarding reproduction between adolescents in this region and in Western Europe are not in their sexual initiation but in the early age they start their reproduction: not less than 15% of Latin American and Caribbean girls at 18 and 19 years old has been mothers before turning 18 against 5% of European girls. (RODRIGUEZ VIGNOLI, 2005).

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[1] **Reguillo-Cruz, R.**, ¿Guerreros o ciudadanos? Violencia(s). Una cartografía de las interacciones urbanas, en Moraña, M. (edit), Espacio Urbano, comunicación y violencia en América Latina, Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, Pittsburg, 2003. (Warriors or citizens? A cartography of urban interactions, in Moraña, M. (publishing house) Urban Space, Communication and Violence in Latin America, International Institute for Latin- American Literature)

Violence in Socialization Institutions

On the other hand, when we analyze their involvement in violent situations, it is possible to identify that family and the State institutions are places – at a large extent- where Latin American boys, girls and adolescents live situations of violence. (HTTP://WWW.UNICEF.ORG). According to UNICEF both domestic violence (by relatives and people known by the victim) and institutional violence (committed by schools, work place and prisons, among others) are the main expressions of the phenomenon in almost every country of the region. There is also the fact that youth related violence is expressed unequally in territorial terms, affecting more severely poor communities living in extremely marginal conditions, mainly in the main cities of the region. Thus, the poverty belts at the different cities show indicators regarding victims and the origin of those committing violence, and these areas of extreme poverty warn of the situations that have been present in these processes for decades in almost every country of the region (RODRIGUEZ, 2005).

On the one hand, domestic violence affects- directly and indirectly- adolescents and youngsters in many different ways. Young girls and boys witness the violence generated between the adults they live with, on a regular basis (especially within their parents relationships), and on the other hand, they are directly affected by the violence they suffered from adults, both physical and psychological violence. A very significant aspect of this situation is sexual violence. Although there are not compared measurements with equal standards (similar samples and types of questions, for example), the studies available indicate that ¨on average 22% of women and 15% of men report having experienced some episode of sexual violence before turning 17 years old¨ in the region. (RODRIGUEZ, 2005). These studies show that the prevalence is similar in different human groups, without significant differences regarding ethnic groups, educational level, socio-economic level, religion, etc…

On the other hand, violence is also expressed at institutional places, such as schools. There are some studies showing that in countries like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Dominican Republic and Uruguay, violence also reflects on the school, which also suffers the effects of legitimacy loss in institutions. At school, symbolic violence is given through lack of discipline, verbal aggressions and the precarious dialogues between students and teachers, among others. Similarly, the institutional practices that tend to reproduce inequalities, strengthening discriminations and exclusion mechanisms that harm society have an important role. Therefore, they are practices of institutional violence and symbolic violence that are also present in the school and that are characterized, for example, by the way the curriculum and the school are organized.

Thus, the theoretical and empiric evidence show that the criminal environment in marginal sectors goes beyond the school limits and the violence of the surroundings is replicated in the educational environment. Also, very often, the deficient conditions of public education do not make possible to stop the problems of adolescents and youngsters at risk. Thus, school violence shows the internal environment and the crisis of its socialization role. In addition, we must consider that although education is seen as the main instrument of a society to promote wellbeing and to integrate adolescents and young people, in this region education shows great differences in quality and significant relevance among social classes. Thus, the options for social mobility largely depend on the quality of the education received and if it is poor for those youngsters in an unfavorable social position, it can be stated that for an important segment of young people there

is a vulnerability factor syndrome that weakens their ability to adapt themselves to the demands of the contemporaneous world (LUNECKE-EISSMANN, 2005).

Also, in the region not only the quality of education is a factor for inequality, but in many countries still nowadays there are problems in terms of coverage – mainly for secondary and further education- (Technical professional and University studies). Therefore, in many cases the problem is not only a question of a quantitative offer but also a demand that faces restrictions: especially for those young people who frequently drop-out of school. It is calculated that 30% of children in Latin America do not finish their primary education when they turn 14 years old and at that age, many of them have to work. (RODRIGUEZ VIGNOLI, 2005). In the long run this means that future income will be less for these young people who drop out of school, which at the same time, it may suggest to choose other ways (such as crime) to have faster and safer incomes. Therefore, school drop-out seems one of the consequences of inequality structures present at Latin American societies, as well as a possible risk factor.

Together with this type of school violence, young people participate in violence relationships that take place in the school space and that are determined by the logic and codes present in the environment. Violent games, bullying associated with groups are the expressions of school violence.

Other institutional places where young people live situations of violence are custody institutions and prisons. Although there are several studies that have shown evidence on these institutions, there is not much documentation on prisons. (CISALVA 2005a). In addition, there has been an increased number of accusations against police, due to evident processes of abuse of authority, with episodes varying from abuse of adolescents and youngsters who are found in the street ¨in suspicious attitudes¨(gathered in street corners, listening to music or drinking alcohol, with typical ¨signs¨ such as earrings and tattoos, etc.) to the murder of those who resist to police requirements or simply cannot prove their innocence (changing the legal principle that every one is innocent until proven guilty) (RODRIGUEZ, 2005).

Violence Generating Environments

In addition, it is important to say that violence is also expressed very strongly at the community, especially in those affected by acute poverty and marginality. Thus, poor communities have to face several situations of severe violence every day. Violence is used to ¨solve¨ any conflict produced in precarious contexts where the peaceful resolution of conflicts does not belong to the most deep rooted customs. This is worse when young groups are involved with the style of gangs that with different names (*maras, gangues,etc* in Spanish) appear very frequently in the different cities of the region. Generally, gangs go from the association of youngsters who gather to share their free time in collective activities, not necessarily homogenous or criminal activities to the Central American *maras* whose main activity seems to be related to the organized crime. Different from what it is believed, gangs are not necessarily related to drug dealing. Drug dealing can be an element that encourages violence in gangs, but most of them are not involved with drug dealing. We have to state that for many youngsters, the idea of gangs is not seen negatively but it is a normal and collective expression to search for their identity as young people.(VANDERSCHUEREN, 2004).

Experts on this topic agree that there are not specific factors that determine the creation of these groups, however there are some conditions which influence its likelihood (GILLER, HAGGEL; RUTTER, 2000), as for example, the partial or total failure of family, school or neighborhood socialization. The more or less violent character translates the level of social and urban marginalization of the environment. ¨Socio-economic privation conditions around young people who enter gangs are better reflected on the environmental conditions of the community where they live. The social and economic exclusion suffered by these young people is not only expressed in the difficulties of their own families to give them an education of quality and to create labor opportunities for their future, but it is also expressed more evidently in the conditions of social neglect of the communities and neighborhoods where the youngsters of gangs live (...) *maras* thrive in districts and places where poverty is expressed in nonexistent social services or when they do exist, their quality is very bad. They are marginal and neglected communities at the vulnerable limits of the city and that are outside the benefits produced by the urban economic development" (CRUZ, 2005). Therefore, when young people face a system that denies their opportunities and their access to resources, they can build up their own ¨anti-system¨ reference groups as a way to obtain those things. When there are some given risk factors, gangs substitute families, schools and even the labor market which appears to them as dysfunctional. Although it is true that many young groups can be generated from the same condition, gangs have a more hierarchical organization characterized by a confrontation activity, to get economic resources and the domain of a given territory, with some shares of power within the neighborhood where they are situated. In general, juvenile gangs are partially linked to drug consumption and small-scale drug dealing and they are normally financed through illegal activities, such as theft and robbery. The gang phenomenon has special relevance, mainly in Central American countries such as Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, and countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, but they are also present in all countries with different features.

It is also within the community – where it is possible to identify juvenile violence related to drug consumption and dealing, especially in poor neighborhoods excluded from development. It is in these cases where drug and violence represent problems associated and related to violence as part of the culture, validation of illegal acts and stigmatization. The main expression of this phenomenon is the presence of a local drug dealing activity, some times describes as ¨disorganized crime¨ (LUNECKE; EISSMANN, 2005). In the Latin American context some studies based on the Brazilian reality relate juvenile violence to the high death rates among youngsters – both as victims and as victimizers – and to the increase of drug dealing networks associated with an increased consumption of drugs. In addition, studies on the Colombian reality show that violence is more directly linked to the drug dealing problem. These studies show that in Colombia, since 1985 and within the context of foreign debt, social policies produced a deficit of services and coverage to most part of the population. It is in this context that social movements – and not political ones- appear, with social claim actions largely associated with violence and crime (drug dealing) (ABAD, 2003). Therefore, we have to state that social problems related to drug and violence are not generated by poverty. The deeper causes of this phenomenon must be explained from the idea of multi-dimensional and multi-causes processes. That is to say, social problems start from the coincidence in a given context that is depressed due to social exclusion processes which have affected large sectors of population, mainly young people, where one can see violent facts related to drug consumption and drug dealing. In these cases, drug dealing (closely linked to youngsters who use drugs) offers survival and sometimes, relative enrichment alternatives for those youngsters who have few chances of entering labor market in a satisfactory manner. Due to social exclusion processes their life conditions lack the effective capability to

react in front of the events of the surroundings. It is in this reality that violence and drug appear very strongly. The first one, as a product of social exclusion and other individual and collective processes, and assuming a strong link with committing crimes. On the other hand, drug appears independently from social exclusion processes, and it is mainly associated with its consumption and illegal trade, not necessarily, at the beginning with an organized network for this activity. The way these expressions relate, reproduces the duality violence-drug, and it generates its transmission through street socialization, mainly through the group of peers, easy victims of local drug dealers who put them in charge of controlling their own business in the neighborhoods by paying these young people regularly and giving them arms. They take advantage of the fact that many of ¨these youngsters who control the corners of the vicinity, do not study or work and therefore they spend their time together in the street, talking, fighting, drinking alcohol or taking some drugs, and some times getting involved in small criminal activities¨ (SARAVI, 2004). The main expressions of this duality are first given by the action of local drug dealing business, where the highest expression of the culture of the illegal and the practice of violence is found. Similarly, they are an important reference of the characteristics that start stigmatization. In addition, the high levels of drug consumption reflect the high existing supply and the normality that prevails in its trade and consumption in the public space, both illegal activities. Finally, violence as ¨conflict solving mechanism¨ shows that violence articulates the different alternatives to overcome situations of poverty and social exclusion, as well as those of daily relationships. Thus, they are seen as daily practices that enjoy the legitimacy of the environment. (LUNECKE; EISSMAN, 2005).

Together with everything above, it is also possible to see violence at the working environment (as for example related to the worse ways of child labor (as slavery and child sexual abuse). ILO has been working intensively against these practices. There is also the problem of large amount of children and adolescents being recruited for armed conflicts (as ¨child soldiers ¨ in countries such as Colombia). This should also be contextualized in a region where young unemployment is very high and where even those young people who are employed have to face lower working and salary conditions than adults. (BID, 2003). Therefore, for most young people labor market and their inclusion in the labor market, both as unemployed and working at precarious or badly paid jobs, are a sever source of vulnerability in social and criminal terms. Studies by the Inter-American Development Bank show that in some countries of the region, unemployment rates among young people triple those of the adults. This trend currently reaches very high levels in absolute terms, limiting the economic opportunities of this group, and possibly having significant consequences in terms of discrimination, violence and juvenile delinquency (BID, 2003).

Sub-Regional Differences

This summarized and general overview of the main issues related to juvenile violence in the region, is framed on sub-regional contexts that, characterized by common social and political processes, (even with national differences), allow us to deeper understand the inter-relation between violence and youth in the region. Thus, it is clarifying the typology prepared by Ernesto Rodríguez to describe the phenomenon in the region. According to this analyst, ¨it is possible to distinguish at least three sets of specific situations that despite having some common features, are clearly different in their central points and are characterized by realities of the several sub-regions of the continent, in generic terms.¨ (RODRÍGUEZ, 2005).

First of all, it is possible to identify the reality of Southern Cone countries, where violence and delinquency would be associated with the consequences of *deindustrialization* processes of the last decades of the XX century which produced an increased process of exclusion of large groups of the population. In this context, young people, specially those from popular urban and rural classes, in countries like Uruguay, Argentina and Chile suffer a high risk of social exclusion, derived from some determinations that, from the market, the State and the society, tend to concentrate poverty and to encourage the following isolation of young people in relation to the mainstream social system, that is to say, people and institutions that adjust their functioning to the modal standards of society. This isolation, together with the deterioration of the basic institutions of socialization, favors the exposure and susceptibility of the group of peers of the immediate social environment.

On the other hand, the Central American region presents, although with significant national features, a determinant incidence of war and peace processes in the events more specifically related to youth associated violence (VELA, 2001). In these cases, violence related to young people is closely linked to post-conflict perverse episodes. In some countries, this situation produced that many arms that were in the hands of guerrilla and subversive groups went to private users and to regular delinquency. (ENCUESTA ACTIVA) (ACTIVE SURVEY) 1998). With the demobilization of regular and irregular armies in each national context in particular, there are large groups of youngsters who know how to use lethal weapons, and since they are not able to enter the educational system and the labor market (due to the limitations of the development model and the absence of social security), these youngsters start entering other mechanisms to enable the generation of their own income, associated with several ways of crime and violence. One of the most frequent types is the creation of juvenile gangs (*maras*), which offer contention spaces and mutual support to their members, within the context of severe social exclusion in Central American countries like El Salvador and Guatemala. Thus, for example in El Salvador and Nicaragua, they tend to associate gangs with high levels of injuries and murders.[2] Similarly, in Guatemala, the appearance of organized criminal groups over the last 10 years, is considered to be associated with the distribution activity, in the local market, of the drug that stays in the country and the relation of these groups with the arms market, after the post-conflict situation (CHINCHILLA , RICO 2002).

Finally, there is a third group of situations which are in progress at the moment in the largest countries of the region (Brazil, Mexico and specially Colombia). This group of situations are based on the development of parallel powers to those legally established, in the context of deep rooted conflicts with large ethnic and racial components, with different events in each particular context, that does not allow us, to a large extent, to talk about common features applicable to the