2018-19 Background Guide Global Classrooms Madrid

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Juvenile Crime and Violence as an Effect
of Socio-economic Conditions

Description of the Committee

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is an agency of the United Nations (UN) that was created in 1946 due to the vital need for aid after World War II. UNICEF was created as a kind of effort to resolve the major health-care and food shortage issues for children in war-torn nations. When it was established, the organization was known as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund. In 1950, it extended its efforts and began concentrating on the long-term needs of women and children in developing countries. UNICEF became an enduring agency of the UN in 1954, and its name was shortened to United Nations Children's Fund. The original acronym "UNICEF" was kept. Currently, UNICEF works to help governments improve the health and education of women and children. UNICEF's work is carried out in 190 countries and territories.

History of the Topic

According to the World Health Organization, every year around 200,000 homicides occur among youth between 10 and 29 years of age; that is approximately 43% of homicides worldwide. Moreover, for each person killed from violence, around 20-40 more are severely injured and require hospitalization. Physical violence, bullying, and sexual violence are also common among youth. A survey conducted in 40 developing countries revealed that "exposure to bullying ranged from 8.6–45.2% in boys and from 4.8–35.8% in girls.

It is said, "Crime and violence are nourished by economic, social, political, and cultural exclusion and segregation." Analysts agree that youth violence is an effect of structural problems related to poverty and unemployment. Faced with high unemployment, individuals are more likely to develop psychological disorders and, as a result of their frustration, become affiliated with gangs and violence, even domestic violence. Youth unemployment, along with high food prices and taxes, can lead to civil unrest and political instability.

"Youth homicide and non-fatal violence not only contribute greatly to the global burden of premature death, injury and disability, but also have a serious, often lifelong, impact on a person's psychological and social functioning." Juvenile violence significantly increases the costs of health services, social welfare and criminal justice services. It decreases productivity, reduces the value of property, and generally "undermines the fabric of society."

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice aimed to protect the rights of children who come into conflict with the law and differentiated between them and adult trespassers. As a result, the international community has assumed the responsibility of protecting the rights of children, especially in times of economic or social unrest, which has been a strong feature of international development and humanitarian assistance for more than a century.

Detailed description

Effect of economic conditions on children and youth violence: Economic crises, usually accompanied with high fuel and food prices significantly diminish a family's purchasing power, threatening children's wellbeing since basic needs are often unmet. Moreover, in crises, governments suffer from an increase in debt, which results in a decrease in public services, notably health and education. With this decrease in public health and education budgets comes an increase in child mortality and morbidity. During crises, educational attendance usually regresses with some children never returning to school. "Evidences from Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States show that economic transition led to reductions in education enrollment, and increased school dropouts."

Economic crises often lead to youth unemployment. According to the International Labour Organization's report, "Global Employment Trend for Youth 2017", which describes the situation of the youth labor market around the world, the youth unemployment rate is 13.1 per cent globally. In 2009, more than 76.7 million of the 620 million economically active youth aged between 15 and 24 years were unemployed– the highest number ever. Since then, this number has decreased; in 2017, an estimated 70.9 million youths were estimated to be unemployed. Though this is an improvement, the youth unemployment rate is expected to rise in some countries.

Faced with limited opportunities for employment and financial insecurity, young people often resort to crime, typically theft, armed robbery, and drug dealing, as a source of income.

Effect of social conditions on youth violence

Disadvantaged adolescents in dire circumstances that include poverty, family breakdown, parental abuse and violations of their human rights, are more likely to trespass the law. Also more likely to come into conflict with the law are young people from disadvantaged groups, in relation with drug abuse and gangs. Group behavior plays an important role in determining the life choices of adolescents. Adolescents who belong to groups that see violence as a legitimate mean to solve a problem, such as territorial gangs, are more likely to engage in criminal activities, which often involve violence and extortion.

Additionally, family experience, such as divorce, death of a parent, parental neglect, domestic abuse, and rape, often have detrimental effects on a child pushing him towards violence as a means to vent his frustration. "While positive family relationships can contribute to a child's choice of not becoming involved in criminal activities, negative family relationships might have the opposite effect."

Finally, the media undoubtedly influences the behavior of young people. According to the 2003 World Youth Report, boys between the ages of 8 and 12 are particularly vulnerable. Television shows and songs are filled with unrealistic representations of violence while ignoring its consequences. These "indirectly lead children to view violence as a desirable and even courageous way of reestablishing justice."

Street Children

A street child is most commonly defined as "any girl or boy who has not reached adulthood, for whom the street (in the broadest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become her or his habitual home and/or sources of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults," in reference to the UN Children's Fund. Street children usually come from poor households in poor urban communities that lack of proper institutions (schools, day care options, or healthcare centers) and infrastructure, which increases the risk of abuse. In 2001, the number of street children in Egypt was estimated at 2 million boys and girls, according to a UNICEF report.

Street children are more likely to engage in violent and often illegal activities. In order to survive, and because they are exposed to abuse from adults or other children, street children often get involved in illegal

activities, such as producing, distributing and consuming drugs or joining gangs, voluntarily or through coercion, which threaten their wellbeing and impair their future. 86% of street children surveyed in Alexandria and Cairo "stressed that violence represents a major feature of their everyday life, and is a determining factor in developing their abilities to be able to cope with street life."

Street children might choose to engage in criminal activities freely to meet their economic needs or as members of a gang. However, they might be forced to engage in criminal activities by adult criminals, who view them as a means to an end that is "expendable and easily sacrificed." The children's physical characteristics, as well as, the fact that they are under the age of criminal responsibility, make them useful accessories for larger criminals.

Child Soldiers

Although most states fight against juvenile crime, a few states recruit children as combatants, forcing them to dedicate their lives to violence and exposing them to the psychological and physical dangers of combat. Those living in poor communities where social dislocation and conflict are frequent have few alternatives to, or defenses against, joining armed groups, making them extremely vulnerable to recruitment.

According to the Optional Protocol of 2007 from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, "military values are often inculcated in the educational and recreational settings where children's physical and intellectual formation takes place". In some countries, such as China and Kuwait, military training is compulsory for schoolchildren. Even the United States and United Kingdom have introduced military training in schools through cadet corps. Aside from countries in conflict, developed countries also use children for violence under the label of "voluntary recruitment", which allows adolescents to enroll themselves in the army. "In the USA, following a dramatic fall in the number of under-18's joining the military and general recruitment shortfalls, increased enlistment bonuses were introduced, and minimum educational standards for recruits lowered."

In order to reintegrate child soldiers into society and help them lead a "normal" life, programs that include counseling, education, recreational activities and vocational training have been developed to "treat" children that have grown so accustomed to violence. An example would be the UNICEF-supported Commission for Demobilization, which is helping

former child soldiers in Rwanda reintegrate into society. "Together with the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RDRC), more than 2,000 ex-child soldiers were demobilized from former Rwandan Patriotic Army (in Uganda and Northern of Rwanda), as well as more than 9,000 adult and child members of ex-Armed Groups from the Democratic Republic of the Congo".

Previous Actions

The Charter of the United Nations and the Convention on the Rights of the Child entitle children to special care and assistance in the fight for people's dignity and for the respect of human rights. "All children should be protected and efforts should be made to grow a full and harmonious development of their personality, a family environment, and an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding."

The UN has also released several documents related to juvenile justice that follow an approach that is based on "prevention, the well- being of juvenile offenders, and the use of methods alternative to imprisonment."

The first of these documents was the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice, also known as the Beijing Rules. This document contained guidelines for states concerning juvenile justice. The UN approach was clearly represented in rules 1 and 5.1, which state: "Member States shall seek, in conformity with their respective general interests, to further the well-being of the juvenile and her or his family;" and "the juvenile justice system shall emphasize the well-being of the juvenile and shall ensure that any reaction to juvenile offenders shall always be in proportion to the circumstances of both the offenders and the offence." While life imprisonment and death sentences are prohibited under the Beijing rules, temporary detention should be considered a last resort. States must focus their efforts on preventing juvenile delinquency and supporting child development. States are required to provide "specialized, units within the police, the judiciary, the court system, the prosecutor's office, as well as specialized defenders or other representatives who provide legal or other appropriate assistance to the child." Knowing that limited resources do prevent some states from doing so, the Committee on the Rights of the Child advises State Parties to "seek technical assistance from, among other institutions, the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UNICEF, through the Interagency Coordination Panel in Technical Advice and Assistance in Juvenile Justice."

The UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency, commonly known as the Riyadh Guidelines, urges states to implement "comprehensive prevention plans ... at every level of government." These guidelines focus on the "successful socialization and integration of all children and young persons, in particular through the family, the community, peer groups, schools, vocational training and the world of work, as well as through voluntary organizations."

Among the several other documents released concerning juvenile justice are the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (Havana Rules) and the Guidelines for Action on Children in the Criminal Justice System (Vienna Guidelines).

The World Health organization (WHO) has also partnered up with other states and non-state actors to fight juvenile crime through "initiatives that help to identify, quantify and respond to the problem, which include: drawing attention to the magnitude of youth violence and the need for prevention; building evidence on the scope and types of violence in different settings, which is important for understanding the magnitude and nature of the problem at a global level; developing guidance for Member States and all relevant sectors to prevent youth violence and strengthen responses to it; supporting national efforts to prevent youth violence; collaborating with international agencies and organizations to prevent youth violence globally."

Recommendations

According to the WHO, prevention programs that have been proved effective are:

- life skills and social development programs designed to help children and adolescents manage anger, resolve conflict, and develop the necessary social skills to solve problems

- Schools- based bullying prevention programs

- Positive parenting skills programs for parents

- Programs that provide preschool children with social and academic skills

- Programs aimed to improve the school environment

- Restrictions on the purchasing and licensing of firearms, as well as, prohibiting carrying firearms in public places

- Tax increases on alcohol to reduce access

- Programs that aim to reduce poverty "through the provision of housing vouchers to help families move out of economically deprived neighborhoods"

In order to ensure that children are distant from violent environments, states must prioritize child development, prevention of youth violence and the provision of education, health services, prosperity and peace, giving more attention to disadvantaged sectors. States also should take measures to solve the financial crisis and its consequences on juveniles. States may want to consider measures that go beyond their boundaries to fight juvenile justice worldwide.

Questions

1. Is juvenile crime and violence a problem in your country? If so, what is your country doing to alleviate the problem?
2. Does your country have any widespread cultural practices that might be harmful to youth, such as military training in schools? How does/has your country's economic conditions affect(ed) your youth population? Has your country addressed bullying?
3. How has/does your country respond to the global problem of juvenile crime and violence? For example, does your country accept refugees who are fleeing juvenile violence? Does your country provide assistance to or support initiatives to assist victims of juvenile violence?

Citations:

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