

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUTH AND CRIME IN MALTA

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ABSTRACT : The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between youth and crime in Malta. The relationship between youth and crime is one of the most contentious relationships, both because it is enduring and because certain authors claim it is impervious to psychological and social explanations. Using a semi-structured interview format, this research engaged with five youth workers working with NGOs, state agencies and community organizations, and sought to understand how the social construction of youth crime occurs in Malta. The results were for the most part in line with international findings with education, broader social forces, and family playing key roles as protective or risk factors. Lacunae in praxis from various entities in the youth work field were identified and highlighted how such a fragmentary and piecemeal approach persists and may even contribute to the legitimization of negative systemic messages given to certain categories of youths.

Keywords -Relationship, Youth, Crime, Malta, Risk

I. INTRODUCTION

Unlike the words adult or child, the word youth is filled with a sense of uncertainty that conjures up a number of connotations, emotions and images [1] Ideas such as “uncontrolled freedom, violence, irresponsibility, vulgarity, rebellion, and dangerousness” [4, p. 2] are frequently associated with the term youth, seemingly indicating that youth is more defined by what it lacks than what it is [2].

Youth becomes a mirror to the current state of society, disordered social contexts are projected onto them, and the anxiety of the age is seen as the deficiency of youth or parenting [3]. Alternatively, youth are seen to be deprived as opposed to depraved; not necessarily of material wellbeing but of social and moral requirements that are important for society, such a lack in turn justifies tightened social control for their ‘protection’ [4]. Youth subsequently becomes a construct that embodies multiple contradictions [5]. The adult gaze transforms youth into something both desirable and threatening, inevitably leading the media dedicating much time and attention to the moments that youth become a danger to themselves and to others [4].

The media’s attention to youth and violent crime is in turn complemented in academic and policy circles by the pursuit of understanding on the relationship between youth and crime. Despite criticism, one might offer towards the social construction and commodification of the category of youth [4], the link between young age and crime is one of the most consistent relationships that can be seen in the field of criminology [6]. Trends indicate that crime increases throughout adolescence and then peaks at age 17 (slightly earlier for property crime than for violent crime) and then begins to decrease over the life course moving forward. The consistency of this relationship has been proved over multiple tests and remains so from the time of G. Stanley Hall’s [7] landmark treatise on adolescence, across time, social contexts, demographic groups, and crime types [8] [9]. Naturally, such a claim has attracted great criticism but as yet no study has effectively explained away all facets of the nature of this relationship [10].

Understanding the complex phenomena surrounding this relationship is imperative for both policy-makers and academia as this will ensure interventions and inquiry are based on solid theoretic and evidence based basis and will allow for a more coherent dialectic between academics and policy makers. Without such understanding interventions both before and after the committing of the crime run the risk of being based on unquestioned prejudices and taken for granted assumptions, which more often than not favour the privileges of the privileged at the expense of the under-privileged. For this reason, we have decided that in this paper we would attempted to discuss the relationship between these two variables by engaging with professionals who work with young people in diverse settings in Malta. In doing so we attempted to understand the various elements that influence this complex relationship with a view to gain a systemic understanding of how this relationship plays out in the Maltese context.

II. RISK FACTOR MODEL VS. PROTECTIVE FACTORS MODEL

In an attempt to discover elements to make the incidence of youth crime more predictable, two schools of thought currently dominate intellectual discourse in the field. One the one hand one can find the risk factor model which tries to assess the external and internal realities in the lives of young people which have a causal or highly correlative relationships with violent crime [11] Typically, this would consist of a list that would be divided into five separate categories: Neighbourhood and Community Factors, Socio-economic Deprivation, Family Background/Parenting, Individual Factors and Academic and School Factors [12]. The underlying thought behind the risk factor model is that identifying the causal factors in violent youth crimes will allow for targeted intervention that will prevent youth crime from occurring [12]. Such risk analysis however does not come unencumbered, as understanding which of the various variables mentioned in the literature and to what degree do these variables influence young people has not been proven conclusively [4]. Additionally, their potential to inform risk management and crime prevention programmes effectively has been debated greatly [12].

The other reigning school of thought also acknowledges that the incidence of certain circumstances can lead to violent behaviour in young people, but concurrently acknowledges that within groups of young people who are exposed to multiple risks, a majority of the children still develop prosaically and most serious offence will decrease and stop as the young people age [13]. Those who actually commit crimes are in fact the minority of a cohort of persons facing the same circumstances. Such a shift has led research to move on from risk-based explanatory models to focus why individuals who have been exposed to multiple and significant factors that might promote risk and enticement towards crime have counterintuitively opted out of more antisocial behaviour resulting in crime [13][14]. The literature refers to turning points or protective factors [15]. Such factors allow prevention from engaging in crime or desistance at an early age where consequences are minimal. Just as in the case of the risk factor model the literature generally categorizes protective factors in five categories: social factors, community, family, school, and personal characteristics [16].

III. METHODOLOGY

One of the greatest problems in inquiry into young people and offending is that the true facts are unknowable since there are three imperfect sources for studies. These sources are recorded statistics, victim surveys and self-report studies. Changes in what counts as a crime, shifts in public tolerance will affect what is considered as crime [4]. This results in this kind of data being better placed to give valuable insight into the police and the criminal justice system than what is happening in the social world [17].

Following instructions received from the Ethics Committee within the University of Malta to protect the research subjects, discussions on youth crime with young people might lead to a scenario where they reveal self-incriminating information. To allay this concern we opted to speak to youth workers making it easier to talk about controversial subjects without entering into any legal and/or ethical dilemmas. This was especially the case since both the youth workers and the cases they would mention would be anonymized with any identifying detail being omitted by the youth worker and the researcher.

Given that the aim of this piece of research was not to quantify how and when youth crime is taking place but to start understanding how crime and youth are constructed and managed by different stakeholders ranging from youth, to local authorities and communities, it was felt that a qualitative approach would be better suited to the task at hand. Five youth workers were chosen based on the nature of their employment. Since in Malta licensed and accredited youth workers working as youth workers, work in the community, for non-governmental organizations or for state agencies, the sample was chosen as such. In fact, two youth workers worked for an NGO, two youth workers worked for different state agencies, and one youth worker worked in the community. All youth workers had a minimum of five years of experience.

The chosen method of data gathering was that of a semi-structured interview. This method was chosen since we wished to provide the experts with the flexibility to discuss and bring in topics that the interviewers weren't necessarily asking about but at the same time retain enough structure between one interview and another to ensure comparability.

Once the data was acquired through field notes and transcripts a phenomenological approach was chosen to codify and glean clusters of meaning [18].

IV. RESULTS

1.1 The Relationship between Age and Crime: A more nuanced approach required

When looking at the relationship between age and crime, certain professionals urged caution in the way that arguments depicting this correlation were to be formulated. This is because without an un-nuanced analysis of these two variables, it is easy to confirm biases that exist towards young people, which will not necessarily aid in understanding the real reasons why young people commit violent crime. This was seen to be

particularly the case when young people were involved with the police and the legal system, with young people especially if they are tattooed tending to bear the brunt of the biases against them. In these light professionals claimed that the age – crime relationship had to be open to other variables such as social capital and a more restricted definition of crime.

The latter, for instance, is important because it is easy to say that someone was engaged in a fight because they were the ones left standing but that does not necessarily mean that they were the initial aggressor. Another example of this is the classification of vandalism.

“A lot of times from my experience in detached, what is vandalism is normally a group of young people at the swings. They are having fun and they break a bench. This is not vandalism. Many times, what happens is that they are aware that society perceives them as a threat, so many times they stay in places which are not frequented by other people and these places are places without maintenance.” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

“If they sit on a bench in the wrong way and the wood broke. People see vandalism, but this bench has been in the sun for so long, sure maybe they shouldn’t have sat on the back rest or stood on the bench but the intention was not to break things. I sat down in a more non-formal way and the bench broke. The next day people complaining about young people.” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

Therefore, the kind of crimes and the stories behind them are important when trying to co-relate young people to crime.

The next issue is that of over-emphasizing young people as correlative variable with crime. Youth normally presents persons within that age bracket with a unique opportunity to have relatively low attachments and responsibilities while having the most amount of time. This means that the determinant factor is the constructed experience of young people as it is lived out within the Maltese Islands that gives young people access to opportunities that might get them into criminal trouble, which other age groups do not necessarily possess. Additionally, other factors such as poverty, and socio-economic familial status might have larger impacts and are better predictors of crime than the mere age of the person.

“If we look at certain young people, if you have less things to lose you will do more crazy things. If we look at young people the ones that do the riskiest things will be those who have the least to lose. If i come from an area or a family that has social capital I won’t take certain risks.” – (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

“Social class and social capital are better predictors of crime than age.” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

With these two caveats firmly in mind, professionals however did observe that certain decision-making abilities and understanding of consequences tended to be lacking in young people as opposed to adults. This is not to say that the ways in which crimes were committed was simplistic or not requiring thought but that the thrill of the moment and lack of foresight prevailed over better judgement. It was noted that young people between the ages of 13-17 were often trying to prove themselves in order to be accepted by their peer group. In certain cases, this process could lead to violent acts in order to show superiority. This was positively correlated with cases where persons had lower self-esteem and therefore required violence to assert their position within the group.

“Young people do crimes to make them feel superior, that I am capable of doing something. They do it to stand out. They have a certain inferiority complex and want to look cool with their peers.” (Community Youth Worker)

“The age of youth between 13-17, you are trying to prove yourself. Violence is a ritual to be accepted in the group. To be accepted in the group you need to fight.” (NGO Youth Worker 1)

Another factor is the different approaches to anger management within the young people sub-group. Those who are more impulsive were more likely to in the heat of the moment to consider less the consequences of violent acts whereas those with better self-control, were not necessarily less violent but chose to express that violence in more legal ways.

“You either go with instinct or impulsive. At the time i just decided to buy it, I hit the policeman. At that time i stopped seeing reason. It could be from the upbringing, if you always got what you wanted as a child that kind of shoot now think later mentality. This could lead to losing your employment for example.” (NGO Youth Worker 2)

1.2 Individual factors

“Sometimes there is an issue of height. Then one tries to compensate in young people. They need to prove themselves, it can be this but it can also be educational attainment, I’m not doing well in school but at least i can beat someone up.” (NGO Youth Worker 1)

Throughout the interviews, several professionals mentioned the fact that young people tended to commit crimes to make themselves feel superior due to their often-low self-esteem. This was often expressed in a number of ways but frequently resorted to machismo and excessive displays of violence to compensate for the lack of self-esteem that the young people seem to suffer from.

When asked about the reason why they suffered from low self-esteem, the professionals could not give one direct answer and surmised that it was probably a mixture of causes including a wish and a desire to fit in with peers as well as due to possible physical reasons such as short height. The effect of this lack of self-esteem and created in the young people a strong desire to prove themselves. This impulse, especially when mixed in with substance abuse, was appropriated by a patriarchal culture wherein the domination of others through brute strength and violence was seen as an important way of asserting oneself within the group.

“Substance abuse and patriarchal society based on machoism and particularly young people but not just young people who feel that their greatest asset is their physical strength. They use it to get their way.” (NGO Youth Worker 1)

1.3 Role of the Family

The family of young people that commit violent crimes play an important, albeit nebulous, role in the lives of the young people. In some cases, the professionals found that even supportive families could lead to young people engaging with violent crime. Even when parental support towards educational attainment was there, certain young people nonetheless engaged in violent crime.

“There were many cases where the upbringing was good and the contact with parents was good but when you place them in the peer group, there you can see symptoms of low self-esteem.” (Community Youth Worker)

Most professionals however agreed that when young people engaged in violence this was somehow influenced by the family. Certain families identified with violence and used it as a trademark to gain social status within their local communities. This would mean that young people would claim violence was their birthright and that they need to or justify their use of violence by means of their family history. This was at times exacerbated by the attitude that the family takes towards instrumental violence. When families model violence as the only or the most effective means of conflict resolution, it is unsurprising that the children and young people adopt similar patterns of behavior when dealing with conflict. An offshoot of this behavior is the normalization and the rationalization of violence, such as when violence is announced on the news in some case or another, parents explain it away by saying she/he must have deserved it. This creates a culture of normalization and desensitization towards violence which promotes violent crime in young people.

“Parents should not justify violence, you have to change not, this behaviour is not acceptable and I am going to take my child home and we are going to tackle it and I promise you this wont happen again, no instead they tell you no don't challenge him because he is violent, as if he is genetically that way and there is no way to change it. You have to change around his needs.” (NGO Youth Worker 1)

“Sometimes between brothers where one is more violent and the other is less. Sometimes the order of birth within the family. The one who had to be more responsible for the other is less violent. There are elements of the attention they had in the family. Maybe there were times the parents could give more attention in the family.” (NGO Youth Worker 1)

“Lack of supervision and presence will affect.” (NGO Youth Worker 2)

Things become much more complex when children are abused in whatever form. Apart from creating long-lasting psychological and possibly physical damage, children in abusive households have a strong chance of turning on their parents or weaker parties the moment they are physically stronger. Equally damaging is when the children are neglected, as this results in children roaming the streets and possibly engaging in illegal and illicit violent behavior which goes undisciplined, and therefore creates a certain abhorrence for authority once this is encountered in society-at-large.

“When violence is threatened in the family such as my mother or father uses violence to discipline me, for now I take it because my father is stronger, but when I find someone who is less strong I beat you up to take what I want. Even violence against parents themselves because when they were young they beat us up and now i beat you up.” (NGO Youth Worker 1)

“They don't want rules. Even in football he wants to challenge the referee. He is not ready to accept authority. They always feel superior to everyone else and all the regulations. They are not ready to accept criticism or that someone commands them.” – (Community Youth Worker)

“Sometimes it is even the identity of the family, because my family is like that. It is not true of all people in the area I work in, but sometimes its a popular culture in certain areas. My father went to prison and even my uncle and if he gets to know he will come and break everything.” (NGO Youth Worker 2)

1.4 Relationship to Education

Many of the professionals interviewed felt that the relationship that the young person had towards the school impacted their propensity towards crime. In many cases young people who engaged in violent crime were not high achievers and did not enjoy the formal schooling situation, which resulted in a big number of early school leavers with the subsequent problem of unemployment and unemployability.

“They need to prove themselves, it can be this but it can also be educational attainment, im not doing well in school but at least i can beat someone up.” (NGO Youth Worker 2)

“Education level has a high impact, most of them did not even finish form 5 and many of them are unemployed. There are the most common traits that I saw in these young people.” (Community Youth Worker)

Formal educational institutions, it is felt, do not cater for the diverse needs that extend beyond the mere academic that these young people have. Their innate sense of distrust and resistance towards authority and towards formal structures did not help their sense of being left out. Consequently, those young people who have challenging behavior; particularly if they had touched with the institute of care; did not find a welcoming environment in school. From the start they are quick to be labelled as having ADHD and the presence of a learning support educator assigned to them, even when this was not necessarily required. Such a rocky start meant that schools easily ended up expelling the student as soon as there was a minor infraction. Teachers were afraid to deal with these students because they were afraid of being injured but on occasion used this as an excuse to avoid dealing with the young people. The problem of stigmatization and subsequent rejection of the most challenging young people meant that these young people internalized the messages that were being told to them which facilitated the acting on violent impulses tremendously. The need to set up adequate alternatives for these kinds of young people was strongly felt.

“Formal [Educational] institution was not individual, tailored for these kind of young people and therefore he fell out of the system but the parents did try...they were very supportive. He fell into a net where he did not find the formal system to help him.” (State Agency Youth Worker 2)

1.5 Broader Societal Factors

The professionals confirmed the socio-economic dimension of youth crime, while certain areas within Malta were seen as having a more prevalent violent youth crime element, they were quick to point out that a more nuanced approach is also needed to identify different crimes predominant in different localities and regions.

The geographical community in which the young person lives plays a big role in both facilitating violent youth crime and conversely in stigmatizing it. The community allows the propagation of crime by not reporting adequately crimes it knows are occurring. The secrecy that ensues means that a culture of fear is created and stops concerned residents from reporting crime.

Conversely the community is very scared of young people in particular because due to stigmatization and due to the fact that young people are not as predictable as older ones, they are seen as a threat. This is made worse by the fact that community bonds in Malta, with some notable exceptions, are becoming less strong and therefore persons are becoming more anonymous. Where before everyone knew a person and could place them in their family and in a community, the breaking down of community bonds has resulted in the emboldening of more criminal acts because persons are more anonymous.

“Sometimes I am at the square and in the street and I see drugs being sold, someone selling and someone paying...and I say if I am a man in the street going about normally and I am realizing, how is it that justice doesn't do the same” (Community Youth Worker)

“Today we cannot call communities, communities, everyone knew each other. Within the community there was a hierarchy. To day there is no community. There are more divisions today. They know each other and therefore if I do something others will get to know. In certain areas however this still exists.” (NGO Youth Worker 2)

1.6 Protective Factors

The professionals identified several protective factors that helped potentially at-risk young people either not to engage in crime in the first place or to refrain from becoming into career criminals. One of the main protective factors identified is the establishment of a serious relationship with a partner. This became particularly stronger when the young people had children of their own. The new mix of responsibilities in addition with the lack of time and opportunities led to greater desistance from crime. This analysis tied in well with the perspective of other professionals who claimed that the young people who were most at risk were those who had nothing to lose and therefore could easily afford to live in the moment and engage in acts without necessarily thinking through the consequences. It therefore seems that the greater the social capital a young person has the more reticent they will be to engage in violent crime.

“If we look at certain young people, if you have less things to lose you will do more crazy things. If we look at young people, the ones that do the riskiest things will be those who have the least to lose. If i come from an area or a family that has social capital I wont take certain risks.” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

“One of them had a baby and this brought him into his senses, and now has a partner. This helps, a partner maybe. This person came from a single parentship and was a very challenging case.” (Community Youth Worker)

The concept of social capital is a multi-faceted concept which includes the relationship to school, relationship with peers, status in the community, and relationships within the family. The professionals interviewed however highlighted one particular asset that was deemed crucial by namely that of a support system. The particular professional mentioned a case of two siblings who had a particular family situation that caused them stress and anger.

The issue of violence depends on the support system they have at that moment. If for example my mother separated from my dad and we are two brothers and now she is pregnant from her new partner and has just given birth, one of the brothers can take it in a certain way. It can depend on the environment they are in to help them control their anger. – (State Agency Youth Worker 2)

The support structure available to a young person will have a big impact on their responses to stressors in their life, and can consequently affect young people participating in violent crime. This seems to be in line with the idea put forward by Putnam [19] wherein social capital is a resource leveraged from the community using networks that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Putnam sees social capital as a distinctively social phenomenon and is reflected in relationships [19].

“I don’t do crazy things because I am aware of the things I can lose like my job, my family. When you are young you do not have ties, you do it for the buzz of the moment and the experience.” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

Other protective factors within the family also included less intentional factors such as the position of birth with one family, with certain siblings being more responsible for other siblings which therefore acts as a protective factor.

“Sometimes between brothers where one is more violent and the other is less. Sometimes the order of birth within the family. The one who had to be more responsible for the other is less violent. There are elements of the attention they had in the family. Maybe there were times the parents could give more attention in the family.” (NGO Youth Worker 2)

Another factor which was mentioned as having positive effects on young people are youth groups which can have varying levels of organization. Even informal youth groups could have protective properties, but it was recommended that these are given recognition and formality by inclusion in community decisions, because they could easily lose their protective properties if they degenerate into negative peer pressure hubs.

“We are now working with a group to organize some restructuring the skate ramp and they will be provided some designs, they will be involved in the manual labour. They are not attached in a group but at least they can do something that they do like. It doesn’t mean that they won’t do any crime but it can also be a deterrent, listen I care about what you like so let’s work together.” (Community Youth Worker)

1.7 Inadequacies of Policing

Many of the professionals commented on the inadequacy of the policing system in Malta. The professionals claimed firsthand experience of seeing drug deals being undertaken meters from a police station. The causes for this kind of lawlessness were multiple but primarily included a lack of policing resources. Too few members of the police force were present in certain divisions and localities which meant that the work force needed to be stretched in ways that allowed many things to happen.

Another inadequacy of the policing system in Malta was due to the fact that the police were seen only as authority figures who were there once something went wrong. It was recommended that a community policing approach be introduced to all localities in Malta with police taking on a strong role of engagement and becoming role-models within the community. It was also recommended that police spend less time in the police station and more time outside interacting with people.

Comments were made on the design and the function of police stations. These were claimed to be inconducive to adequate reporting due to the fact that they are not confidential. In communities where a certain fear already exists, it is highly unlikely that further reporting will occur if the reports are made in a semi-public area where all awaiting in line can hear the nature of the report. Additionally, the need for a juvenile court in Gozo and a diverting program to tackle youth crime from its beginnings were important additions that the system needed.

“Whenever I go to the police they say we don’t have enough time and resources. I disagree that when you go to a police station you see seven police persons all sitting. The community is outside and not in the police station.” (Community Youth Worker)

“It is easy to pinpoint where the youth crime takes place and the time so why don’t they go?” (Community Youth Worker)

“Even I have a certain fear of reporting. Not because they would reveal who I am, but even if you go to submit a report you must do it outside in the reception. There is not that element of confidentiality. Another person might come in to do a report and overhear me.” (Community Youth Worker)

1.8 Problems with services to young people

A common problem that many professionals identified is not necessarily the lack of services in place to help young people, particularly those who are at-risk, but the quality of these services. A critique that was forwarded was that the aim of these services, is not to help develop the young person develop according to their specific needs and contexts but to create conforming citizens. When this occurs, the mark of success is often

quantitative and looks like the amount of young people in gainful employment. However, this is only one measure and more nuanced measures are needed for the evaluation of effectiveness of different services.

“Sometimes we measure success of the transition to adulthood as having a job or being stable, but that should not be the only measure of success”. (State Agency Youth Worker 2)

“We do not try to understand the young person. We are too focused on our targets. I have to see a young person for three months, then at the end I have to write a report for my manager or the court and I only see up to there. I am not looking at the person, not necessarily to help him or change him but to offer him different possibilities.” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

“These are no easy characters, we are not going to solve these problems overnight. We think we have a formula and we are going to change them overnight.” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

Frequently, the professionals interacting with young people do not try to understand the story behind the behavior of the young people in their care, resorting instead to pithy categories that allow them to do their paperwork instead of engaging with the real issues and persons. Many of the professionals expressed frustration when discussing how key service providers shrugged off the most challenging cases by either rejecting to give them a service outrightly or doing so within the comfortable confines of their office. This meant that young people could meet a large number of professionals and over time learn to say what the professionals want to hear rather than engage meaningfully with services. In this field, formulas do not work and each young person required a tailored approach that would work for them, with similar set up goals that work for the young person not statistics and parliamentary questions.

“Sometimes management does not understand that change takes time to see progress. Everyone wants results now, politicians want results of the investment they are doing. They send a parliamentary question and you have to give statistics on how many young people you are working with and what kind of interventions. It could be that you are working with 5 but they want you to work with 200, but if you work with these 5 you bring more results as opposed to working with 200.” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

“So we see 3 or 4 professionals working with this young person, but then we see that the professionals all look at their part only. The Social worker meets up with them once a month in the office, the probation officer meets up with them once a month in the office, the social worker of the school meets up with them once a month in the office. Everyone sees their part, no one links together, and no one is seeing the young person in his environment or in his family.” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

“Professionals need to work more together and not just see your own niche and that’s it, you need to go out of your comfort zone. You cannot understand the young person by meeting them in an office. Young persons are not stupid, they meet with us, they tell us what we want to hear and they know how to behave when they are here, then you write a report that everything is ok.” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

“I work in a particular area, with social problems and such. When you go into the stories, there are two or three families that have these issues. When we started the detached services, we did a meeting with the existing entities, the police for example told us don’t go to this area or with these people. Hello? Isn’t this the whole scope of my job, what is the use of me going to work with someone who goes to scouts and goes to religious weekly lessons. Youth workers need to work with other young people as well, but mostly you need to go where the problems are.” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

Professionals also need to collaborate more and avoid replication of efforts as this would mean that young people are unnecessarily prejudiced during turf wars. Additionally, interventions and working with these young people requires the benefits of extended periods of time as the cases are not easy and there are complex factors intertwining to create the difficult behavior observed in the young people. To this end, the professionals reiterated the need for politicians not to use the social field as a political chess piece, and to leave the formulation of policy and the management of institutions in the hands of trained professionals.

Professionals working the youth work field sometimes felt afraid to use their professional judgement, instead of cowering behind management to make each and every decision. In their analysis, professionals claimed that this was due to the fact that management did not support front line workers to take decisions and created highly hierarchical structures that infused front liners with a lack of self-belief in their jobs. This resulted in detrimental effects on the young people in their care as decisions were taken by persons removed from the day-to-day reality of the young people.

“Professionals should not be afraid to evaluate our own work. Sometimes professionals create certain barriers because we are not ready to face our managers. I pass the work to someone else because I go to speak to my manager and he disagrees with me but I need to remain there and argue the case. It is an issue of professional judgement. Everyone is a professional, but can we take a decision?” (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

“Maybe we do not believe in our profession, maybe the way we are taught we do not believe we are able to take a decision and we are not able to lead.” – (State Agency Youth Worker 1)

When professionals are not empowered to intervene or shy away from their responsibilities the result is that the internalized messages that these young people have been receiving all their lives from the various institutions that they have encountered is translated into violent action. It is for this reason that it is important

that services perform as they are required to, to ensure that these messages are neutralized and that safe spaces are created for these young people to act out the violence and aggression accumulated over the many experiences they have encountered including from close members of the family.

“If you have been told all your life you are rubbish, by your family, foster family, school and society, chances are you will internalize this belief? What do you then, you lash out and you respond by doing crimes to reenact the self-hatred and rejection you experience” - (State Agency Youth Worker 2)

V. DISCUSSION

The underlying theme that emerges from a bigger picture reading of the findings is that there are massive structural forces at play in the phenomenon of youth crime. Constructions of youth by community and other agents may stultify attempts at conversations on shared spaces and practices that may act as a deterrent to crime. This is reinforced by services provided to young people that are aimed at providing quantitative reassurances that young people are ‘settling’ rather than help young people in their actual contexts and needs. Additionally, families and cultures of violence keep reinforcing and modelling violent methods of conflict resolution that finds avenue in criminal behavior. Such behavior allows for young people with low self-esteem to find confidence in such manner as the attention and status they attract they may feel is otherwise unobtainable, particularly when their relationship to schooling is very poor.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, professionals working with young people were asked to discuss the relationship between youth and violent crime. The resulting discourses point towards a number of situations which heighten the risk of young people engaging in violent crime; such as negligent or violent families, inadequate policing, and fearful communities. Conversely, they highlighted interesting protective factors such as youth groups and education which are in line with the international literature. The key takeaway is that more nuanced discourse is needed to describe the phenomenon of violent youth crime within Malta, and it is clear that such nuance can only be achieved with further studies using a mixed-methods approach to understand further the construction of youth crime as well as find ways and manners to quantify better these constructed meanings. A further study should discuss the subject with both policy-makers and young people in an ethical matter that does not cause detriment especially to young people.

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