

RESIDENTS' PERCEPTION OF VIOLENCE ACTS - A LOCAL RESEARCH

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Abstract: *The community perception of violence acts committed in a neighbourhood space represents an important issue for the international project "SafeLand – Safe Living across European Cities". The interest for this issue represents a starting point for a partnership between schools and local community in order to prevent violence acts in the neighbourhood and in schools. It is also important to try to increase the safety level in those areas and found out the most effective ways to realize those objectives. This research was carried out during a two months period – August-September 2010 in Electroprecizia neighbourhood of Săcele, Braşov and the sample comprised 250 residents of this area. The main instrument was a questionnaire which was designed in order to reveal the residents opinion on violence acts committed in the neighbourhood. The research revealed that the residents know very little about their neighbourhood and its safety; that they want to see some real actions in order to increase safety level in those areas; that the main categories of those who commit violence acts are gypsies, teenagers and people who have been arrested many times before. It also revealed measures that can be taken in order to increase safety level in this neighbourhood such as police intervention, mediators' activity, informing the people on mediators' activity and police activity, a partnership between local police, community and schools and so on.*

Keywords: *community, violence, mediators, safety.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The violence in the neighbourhood or in the public space represents a research theme for many social and humanistic domains. The phenomenon of violence is studied from different points of view such as: psychological, sociological, anthropological, economic or educational. The acts of violence are also defined and sanctioned according to all regulations and norms of a society or community, at national or international level.

This research is a response to an interest of "Victor Jinga High School" from Săcele, county of Braşov for the perception of Electroprecizia's residents concerning the safety of their neighbourhood. This initiative is a great one because it's representing an interest of this High School for the local community, for the developing of a strong link between the local community and this

institution in order to create future directions of action for preventing violence in the neighbourhood and growth of safety degree.

"Victor Jinga High School" is involved in many national and European projects witch gather in different institutions from the local community. One of these is "SafeLand – Safe Living across European Cities", project that has been approved by the European Commission, Directorate-General Justice, Freedom and Security (project number JLS/2008/ISEC/AG/081, Call for proposal 2008 „Prevention and Fight against Crime"). The present research is one of the many activities of this project which is initiated and implemented by Metropolitan Agency for Sustainable Development of Brasov, in collaboration with local partners such as "Victor Jinga High School" and "School no. 9 of Brasov".

2. THE RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE IN THE ELECTROPRECIZIA NEIGHBORHOOD

2.1 The conceptual delimitation. The violence is defined as a deficiency, both at European level and at national level (studies elaborated by the Institute of Educational Sciences – “Violence in school”, Bucharest, 2005; by UNICEF Romania, “Violence, abuse, neglect”, “Our right to be protected against violence”, “Preventing and fighting against violence in school” and so on). Violence represents the use with intention of force against itself, against another human, group or community. This can have as effect a material, physical or moral prejudice, death, pain or deprivation of any kind. It also can be a physical or psychological constraint, of a human against another in order to impose his own will by oppression.

2.2 Methodology of the research. The main objectives of our research are: identification of residents' opinion towards the neighbourhood's safety, identification of the factors and causes of violence in the neighbourhood, identification of optimal strategies and measures against violence in the neighbourhood. For our purpose, we selected 250 participants, all residents of Electoprecizia neighbourhood of Săcele, county of Braşov. The distribution of the participants was according to three criteria: gender (123 men and 127 women), age (17 to 86 years old, the average – 38,56 years) and areas of the neighbourhood (100 participants from area “apartments buildings”, 50 from “School area”, 50 participants from one area with detached houses and 50 from one area with homes for singles). The participants filled out a questionnaire with 20 statements and questions about the concepts presented.

2.3 The presentation and interpretation of the results. First of all, we tried to identify the residents' opinion concerning the degree of safety in their neighbourhood. On a scale from 1 to 10 (10 – the highest level of degree), the average was 5.23 and the distribution of the results on the specific areas was a uniform one. Another question refers to the time when the violence acts are committed and the

perception of the residents is that there are more violent acts in the night (84% of participants), during the holidays (72.4%) and on weekends (60.2%).

We also want to identify the types of violent acts that are perceived by the residents to be more frequent in their neighbourhood. We offered them a list with 14 types of crimes and we asked them to say if they know that in their neighbourhood are committed those crimes. The list included: theft from homes, theft from cars, theft of cars, robbery, vandalism, threatening, assault on police, disturbing public, traffic with drugs, physical violence, rape, and homicide.

The most frequent answers were those implying theft from cars, threatening, disturbing public and physical injury (Fig.1).

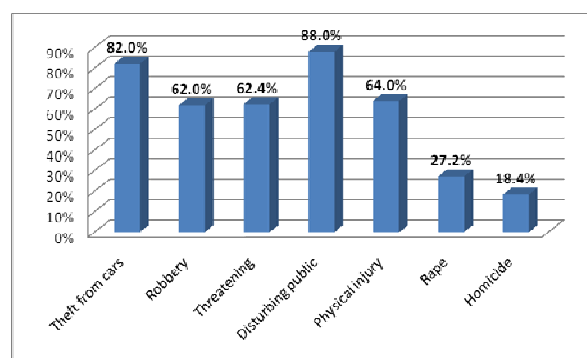


Fig.1 Types of crimes

The residents of the Electoprecizia neighbourhood (58.8% of participants of this research) think that the persons with ages between 18-25 years are making the numerous crimes in this area. The participants also identified the main social and economic categories from which are those who commit such crimes. The most frequent categories are: gypsy (96.4% of participants of this research think that the gypsies are committing the most numerous crimes in their neighbourhood), street gangs (68.8%), recidivists (65.6%) and those who are members of dysfunctional families (56.4%). The social category of gypsy is the most frequent category mentioned by the participants to this research, no matter from which area the participants are. There are no significant differences between areas concerning the social categories that are committing the most frequent crimes.

The next information obtained from this research was the residents' opinion concerning the safety in the school of this neighbourhood. The participants were asked to choose from a list those crimes that are more frequent in the schools of Electroprecizia neighbourhood. The list includes behaviours such as: beating, truancy, shoved, stealing, calling by nicknames, swearing, verbal threat, injuries, rejecting, screaming, breaking rules and so on. In residents' opinion, the most frequent behaviours in schools are: swearing (77.2% of the answers on this topic), screaming (70.8%) and truancy (70.4%).

Regarding the causes and factors that are fostering the violence in the neighbourhood the participants think that the main causes of violence were: poverty and the lack of jobs in this area (35.24% of participants who answered to this question), the behaviour of the gypsy (19.05%), alcohol (17.15%) and a lack of education (13.34%). They also mentioned the poor intervention of police's forces and indifference, social neglect, domestic violence, the bad examples presented on television.

The residents' opinion is that the number of the crimes remains constant despite of all interventions of Police or other community institutions. There are few residents who think that the number of the crimes committed in their neighbourhood is smaller (7.60% of the participants who answered to this question). 78.8 % of the participants think that the sanctions for the crimes are too small relative to the degree of these crimes.

In order to identify the secondary opinion of the participants regarding the causes of violence, the last question of our questionnaire was a complex of seven statements with a strong value of prejudices. The seven statements were: (1) Men commit more violent acts than women; (2) The most numerous acts of violence are committed by young people; (3) The most numerous acts of violence are committed under the influence of alcohol; (4) The girls are raped because they are acting provocative; (5) The children learn violence at home; (6) The child must know "fear"; (7) In the marginal neighbourhoods are committed more violent acts than in the central ones. The

participants were asked to say the degree of agreement regarding those statements.

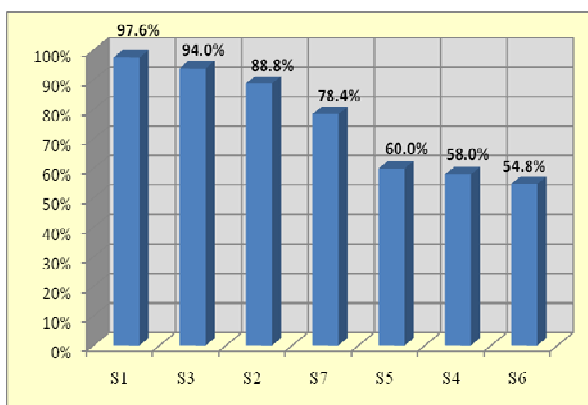


Fig. 2 The classification of the statements

On the first statement, 97.6% of the participants were totally agreed with the fact that men are committing more violent acts than women. The participants were also agreed with the third statement because 94% of them think that the most numerous acts of violence are committed under the influence of alcohol (fig. 2).

Based on those seven statements, it was calculated a prejudice parameter (index) and compared with some variables such as: age and level of education. We concluded that it is a significant correlation between this index and age – the strength of the prejudice is higher on those who are older (Pearson Correlation is .141, significant at the 0.05 level). We also found that it is a strong connection between the prejudice index and the level of the participants' education – the prejudice are stronger when the level of educational studies is lower (Pearson Correlation is -.191, significant at the 0.01 level).

The third part of our research had the main objective the identification of possible measures that could be taken in order to increase de safety level in this area. We tried to identify the residents' perception regarding the measures that have been taken in their neighbourhood in order to decrease the number of violent acts. It was an open question that has provided answers from 209 participants from a total of 250. The answers were analysed and categorised on different sections as follows: an increased number of

police forces (33.6%), public illumination (9.2%) and the safety of every house or apartment (4%). There were a significant number of participants (37.6%) who said that there was taken no action in order to increase the level of safety in their neighbourhood.

The residents were also asked to identify possible measures that can be taken in order to increase the level of safety. 38.7% of the participants who answered to this question thought that is very important to increase the number of police actions, 23.21% thought that it should be necessary the application of the law with no exceptions as can be seen from the chart no. 3. The police implication involves, in participants' opinion, activities such as: reinforcement of public order (12 answers), increasing the number of active police officers (30 answers), the increase of night patrols (39 answers), a larger implication of police (29 answers) and so on.

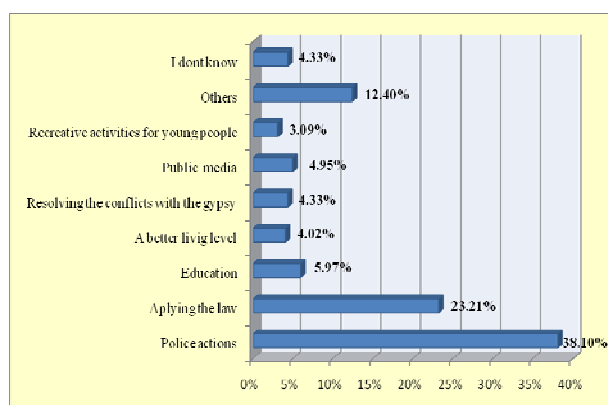


Fig. 3 Possible measures in order to increase the safety level in the neighbourhood

“Resolving the conflicts with gypsy” was another answer of this research’s participants. They think that is necessary to take some action in order to limit the access of gypsy in this neighbourhood, even the “interdiction” for them or “a definitive elimination”. The answers were very drastic and involve a general perception of Electroprecizia neighbourhood of this ethnic category.

We also proposed to the participants a list of possible persons that can help to increase the level of safety in this area. The list contain persons such as: the community police officers, local police officer (a profession

which is no longer active), the neighbourhood residents, the police officers, the protection and security officers and proximity cop. The participants chose the police officers (47.2%) and the community police officers (32.8%).

The residents were also asked if they are willing to involve themselves in some actions to prevent violent acts. A number of 91 of 250 respondents (36.4%) answered “yes” to this question and 84 (33.6%) said “I don’t know”. Their involvement in these actions is presented in several categories: direct involvement (8.63% of the participants who answered to this question – “announcing the police in case of violent acts”, “patrolling with the police officers”, “the participation on different actions of police officers in order to prevent violent acts”), indirect involvement (6.90% - “involvement in implementation of different projects”), partnership with local police (13.79%) and implementation of different projects (13.79%). There were some undefined answers (20.68% - “it depends”, “if I can”, “even personal”, “I would do anything”) and some answers included in the category “others” (17.25% - “to spy”, “counselling”, “volunteering”).

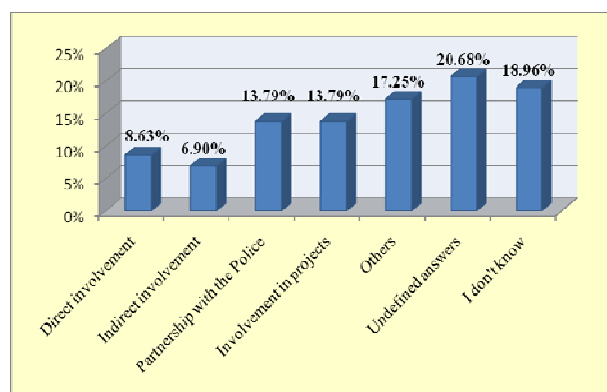


Fig. 4 How you plane to involve yourself in order to increase the safety level in your neighbourhood?

Another important domain was the one of mediators and their role in preventing violent acts and increasing the safety level in the neighbourhood.

We wanted to find out the residents' perception of the right persons who can be mediators and who can make a difference regarding the neighbourhood safety. A number of 116 respondents (46.4%) think that the

police officer is the best option for a mediator in this area. He was followed by a residents' official with 98 choices (39.2%). The participants also identify the community police officer (31.6%), the teachers from the neighbourhood schools (22.8%), the priest (19.6%) and the principal of the school (16%).

Regarding the role of the mediator in this area the participants thought that is imperative that he has to have an important contribution to education and information of residents concerning the violent acts, prevention strategies, community partnership and so on.

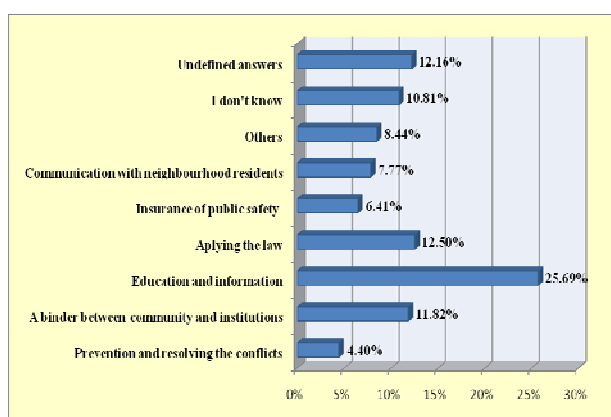


Fig. 5 What a mediator should do?

Mediators' activities should imply: extracurricular activities with student and pupils, activities in order to show the destructive effects of smoking or taking drugs, meetings with police officials, information activities regarding the crimes in the neighbourhood and prevention strategies, pointing out the bad examples, educational programmes on local television, counselling and church involvement. The last topic concerns the changes that the residents want to be made in their neighbourhood. Their answers refer to the infrastructure of the neighbourhood (29.7% of the respondents), places of entertainment (15.07%), public safety (12.32%), the conflicts with the gypsy, stray dogs and changes in the structure of Police department.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions that can be made based on the research results are pointing out the fact

that safety and the prevention of violent acts represents a very important topic both for different institutions and for residents of the neighbourhood. In this particular case, the residents of Electroprecizia neighbourhood are not very pleased with the safety level in their area. The main factors that contribute to the violent acts are, in residents' opinion, poverty and the lack of jobs in this area, the behaviour of the gypsy, alcohol and a lack of education.

The possible measure in order to increase the safety level could be: increase the number of police actions, the application of the law with no exceptions, reinforcement of public order, increasing the number of active police officers, the increase of night patrols, a larger implication of police and resolving the conflicts with gypsy people.

The mediator has an important role in this strategy because he has to be involved in activities such as: education and information of residents concerning the violent acts, prevention strategies, community partnership, extracurricular activities in schools, information activities regarding the crimes in the neighbourhood and prevention strategies, pointing out the bad examples, educational programmes on local television, counselling and church involvement.

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