

RJ Nord Expert Seminar: Restorative Justice and Practice in the Nordic Region 12–14.5.2025

Country-specific overview on the theme: Contemporary societal trends such as polarization and increased crime – potential and role for restorative justice?

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Finland has been a society with the strong rule of law principle, protected by strong democracy, independent judiciary and a high level of trust in society. By international standards Finland is a safe country where citizens' wellbeing and everyday life is very stable and safe.

When discussing here on contemporary societal trends, Finland still wants to keep herself as a country where people can enjoy their rights and freedoms guaranteed by the legal system without fear or insecurity arising from crime, and other national and international disturbances. We all know global challenges, but here I will only concentrate on Finnish situation and especially on children and youth and the prevention of youth criminality.

Increasing polarization and violent crimes among youth in Finland

Despite these aims I just mentioned, the research indicates that there is a visible polarization going on already.

It is important to remember that most children and young people living in Finland are doing well and are content with their life. However, anxiety, bullying, fear of social situations and lack of prospects and trust on the future are some of the causes which are threatening the wellbeing of youth.

Even though young people's trust in institutions and their faith in the future is still at a good level Finland has recognized worrying and negative trends.

There is a visible polarization in the wellbeing of and criminal activities of young people.

According to various data and statistics, criminal behavior among children and youth) in Finland has decreased over the long term. However, in recent years, the number of young people suspected of crimes, especially those under the age of 15, has increased significantly in several types of crime. The number of offences is accumulated, as is the number of victims of offences. Crimes are concentrated especially on a small group of young people (mostly men) who repeatedly commit serious crimes.

Crime also affects those in a weak socio-economic position more and more, and it has been proven that exclusion from work and education at a young age increases the risk of criminal behavior. Youth with foreign background living in Finland are relatively more often suspected of an offence than Finnish citizens.

For the Finnish government two phenomena have given special cause for the new action plan for preventing and combatting youth and gang related crime.

Serious *Violent crimes* by young people that has come to known by police has increased in recent years. In 2024, nearly half of serious violent crimes took place in public places. Clearly most offences were committed in the largest towns. Around 30 per cent of suspects were aged under 18.

Robberies with knives and humiliation of the victim are typical phenomena of these violent crimes.

Secondly during the last years, police has identified approximately ten local *street gangs* of young adult men mainly concentrated in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and Southwest Finland, often in specific residential areas.

RJ-strategies

As I just mentioned, Finnish government of Prime Minister Orpo was recognizing the increasing trend of violent crimes and street gangs as a serious problem. Government published a year ago (April 2024) the government resolution and an action plan for preventing and combatting youth and gang related crime. The action plan which could also be named as a strategical document includes variety of measures (so called harder ones) for hardening punishments, enhancing criminal procedures, increasing training for investigating gang related crimes more effectively, just to name

some examples. The action plan also has measures for increasing support for youth trying to break the cycle of crime and addiction, as well as effective prevention of youth crime.

The action plan is not only focusing on RJ or mediation but luckily it recognizes the role of mediation in the prevention of youth crime. The action plan includes four measures to the use of mediation in various contexts and environments, like increase schools, neighborhoods, public places and social media – just to mention some examples.

Our government regards important that in victim-offender mediation, the young persons is given the opportunity to take responsibility for the damage they have caused and to understand the consequences of their actions by meeting their victim. At the same time, the young persons actively participate in the resolution of their cases. The idea is to prevent reoffending but also to enhance the idea that if you cause harms to somebody, you should compensate the harms. I would say that mediation has a future-oriented approach.

The action plan also wants to pilot the use of so-called conferencing method which is a form of mediation in which the young person's networks and relatives can be more widely and actively involved. We would like to follow and study the possibilities of using mediation (also conferencing method) to prevent the spiral of violence between young people in communities and regions.

National council for crime prevention is having an important role in the implementation of the action plan. As a chair of the NC, I am very happy that this strategy and our government has also acknowledged the role of the restorative justice and victim-offender mediation as a measure for preventing crimes and conflicts at an early stage. The earlier we support children with problems and criminal behavior, the more we are saving costs and the more human it is.

The action plan regards very important to address young people's suspected crimes quickly alongside criminal procedure. The same goes with children under criminal responsibility age. Multidisciplinary cooperation between authorities plays a key role in this. The local level – mediation offices, NGOs, social workers, schools and police is having the most important role in directing cases to mediation. Mediation is one of the measures which is also giving an opportunity to stop and talk with the parents, children and youth – and a good change to direct them to other services. Mediation is one

measure which should be more used in FIN and taken to multidisciplinary networks.

Enhancing the role of mediation in the prevention of crime is one of the key issues in our current council. It is important to increase the use of it, and at the same time we remember that it is always voluntary for parties to attend, and the mediation offices are evaluating if it possible to mediate.