

Young people are not the problem - we are the solution

Policy Paper: Prevention of Youth Crime and Street Violence in Finland and Sweden

Points by: Finnish-Swedish Youth Forum, an exchange on Street Violence and Youth Crime

Organized by: Save the Children, Hanaholmen, Nordic Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security

Summary

Youth crime and street violence are increasing concerns in both Finland and Sweden and it is a topic of worry for many children, youth and young adults. The Finnish-Swedish Youth Forum, a project including a youth-exchange on the topic, brought together young voices from both countries to share experiences, analyze causes and develop solutions. This policy paper outlines some of the forum's key points and presents recommendations for decision-makers to prevent youth crime through early intervention, community-based support and meaningful youth inclusion. The message is clear, whatever the path forward entails it should include youth and youth perspectives every step of the way. Nothing about youth, without youth.

Problem Definition

Street violence and youth crime pose a serious threat to the rights and well-being of children and young people in both Finland and Sweden. The growing prevalence of violence and criminality not only endangers individuals but also undermines the safety and cohesion of entire communities. In recent years, both countries have seen an increase in violent offences committed by minors. This development has sparked an intense and politically charged debate in national media.

At the heart of this issue are children and young people who are insufficiently protected by the adult world. In severe cases, they can become targets of exploitation by violent criminal actors or be harmed as victims of the violence. The absence of key protective factors such as personal safety, family support, positive role models, and hope for the future can exacerbate vulnerability. Every child has the right to grow up free from violence, crime and fear. Ensuring this requires coordinated and sustained efforts to strengthen protective structures and uphold the rights of all children and young people.

Key Insights from the Youth Forum

1. Criminal recruitment is strategic and well-resourced

Criminal groups offer attention, power, and a sense of belonging, sometimes more effectively than schools or other established social structures. These networks are enabled and sustained by individuals and systems that finance, facilitate, and benefit from their operations. More crime prevention efforts must target not only the vulnerable youth being recruited, but also the buyers, financiers and enablers who make exploitation possible.

2. Early prevention, based on individual needs and community-strengthening initiatives, is an effective route.

Investment in youth well-being, tailored to individual needs and community strengths, reduces vulnerability.

3. Labeling youth or communities as "problems", and treating them as such, is counterproductive.

Stigmatization can deepen exclusion. Punitive measures such as harsher sentencing or lowering the age of criminal responsibility do not address the root causes of youth crime and risk further marginalizing vulnerable young people. Sustainable solutions must be grounded in prevention, support, and inclusion.

4. Youth want to be part of the solution.

Youth have valuable insights into causes and prevention strategies yet are often excluded from decision-making processes.

Policy Recommendations

1. Engage Youth in Policy and Practice

- **Ensure the meaningful participation of young people in all stages of policy development, implementation, and evaluation.** Young people are experts in their own experiences and youth should not only be consulted but empowered as co-creators of solutions that affect their lives and communities.
- **Facilitate dialogue in environments where youth can feel safe and engaged** such as schools, community centers, digital platforms, and informal social settings.
- **Move beyond listening, towards genuine learning and shared decision-making.** Youth voices must not only be heard, but actively inform the direction, priorities, and design of prevention strategies. Our lived experiences offer critical insights that can enhance relevance, legitimacy, and impact.

2. Invest in Prevention

- **Provide comprehensive support to families** by offering accessible resources and early intervention services.
- **Guarantee equitable access to free hobbies and safe spaces** for young people
- **Multiply their numbers and strengthen youth workers and teachers** with skills in children's rights, trauma-informed care and evidence-based positive youth development approaches.

3. Build Youth Resilience

- Foster and promote environments that actively focus on **self-esteem, hope, and belonging** by supporting environments where young people are, and feel, seen and heard.
- Support, encourage and fund **peer-led initiatives** and the engagement of positive **youth role models** to counteract the allure of criminal lifestyles.

4. Respond with Empathy, Not Punishment

- **Refrain from labeling individuals or communities** in ways that reinforce stigma or exclusion. Language and framing should promote dignity, inclusion and the understanding that the issue of vulnerability is complex and needs to be described with care and nuance.
- **Ensure targeted, dignity-based support for at-risk youth**, including access to individualized mentoring, psychosocial support and structured life skills programs. Interventions should be trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate and grounded in trust-building relationships.
- **Provide accessible and practical support for caregivers.** This includes offering clear information, low-threshold access to guidance and timely interventions to strengthen family resilience and protective factors.

5. Sustain Successful Programs

- **Systematically identify, evaluate, and document successful local prevention models** that demonstrate measurable impact in reducing youth vulnerability to crime and violence.
- **Ensure long-term, predictable, and structured funding** support to support continuity and sustainable impact of successful initiatives. Investment must reflect a long-term commitment to safeguarding youth and strengthening communities.

Conclusion:

The rising concern around youth crime and street violence demands urgent and informed action. But if we want long-term, sustainable change, we must begin by shifting the narrative. Young people are too often portrayed as the source of the problem—when in fact, we are essential to the solution. This policy paper presents a call to action, and our message is clear: We have insight. We have ideas. We are ready to contribute. Children and youth must not only be protected from harm but trusted as co-creators of solutions that can impact our lives. We urge policymakers, professionals, and leaders to act decisively: to prevent harm before it occurs, to respond to vulnerability with empathy, and to make space for youth perspectives in every step of the policy process. By building protective structures around children and youth, and by trusting young people to take part in shaping those structures, we can break cycles of violence before they begin.