

RAN Y&E

CONCLUSIONS PAPER

*RAN event – Youth isolation – How to get them out of it?
26-27 November 2020, Online*

Youth isolation – How to get them out of it?

Key outcomes

Youth isolation has been amplified by the restrictions in society due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth workers and teachers have encountered many challenges in their attempts to reach out to isolated and vulnerable young people. Some of the most important challenges for youth workers and teachers include:

- **Youth isolation due to COVID-19.** The current social climate caused by COVID-19 creates uncertainty, feelings of alienation and frustration for young people. In some cases, this has led to isolation. The pandemic has highlighted the most vulnerable cases, especially in socially and economically deprived areas across Europe.
- **Social exclusion and threat of radicalisation.** There are serious long-term effects of isolation for those within the hardest-hit communities. Isolation also can lead to segregation, and this may well inhibit the development of important social skills of young people. Long-term Social exclusion for a longer period of time could make young people more susceptible to radicalisation and create a fertile soil for extremist recruitment. Extremist groups play into the above-mentioned feelings and have aimed their recruitment strategies towards these vulnerable youngsters
- **Prevent radicalisation.** Teachers and youth workers have a key role in identifying vulnerable youngsters at risk of radicalisation and consequently to develop multi-agency-based interventions.
- **Using digital means to combat youth isolation.** Young people are more online now than ever before, which creates challenges and opportunities. COVID-19 has made vulnerable young people often ignored by society more invisible in the physical world. However, many youngsters are visible online. By developing local networks that utilise digital platforms, reaching previously hard-to-reach isolated youth has now become a possibility. One challenge for teachers and youth workers is how to create a synergy between the other stakeholders (e.g. social work, local municipalities, community or religious figures, or mental health organisations/professionals) .

This paper will set out the main highlights of the discussion in line with the challenges with regard to social exclusion and youth isolation, youth isolation and radicalisation, and engaging with digital means to combat youth isolation. In answer to these challenges, the paper will offer recommendations and next steps for teachers and youth workers faced with such issues, before setting out key examples of relevant practices to help combat youth isolation.

Highlights of the discussion

- There is a need for teachers and youth workers to understand the conditions from which radicalisation can develop. While radicalisation in some cases thrives in areas of social exclusion, poverty or communities with a lack of education, radicalisation also happens to young people in privileged socioeconomic contexts. The participants agreed that trigger factors for processes of radicalisation can include a lack of routine, a lack of equal access to resources (e.g. a laptop, working wifi) and a breakdown in communication with peers and adults.
- Youngsters living in vulnerable families at risk of social exclusion are amongst the groups that deserve special attention. The breakdown of networks that form the lifeworld of youngsters and that support the most vulnerable communities in society are a concern that has impact on the role of teachers and youth workers. With restrictions on social activities, sports clubs and other events between local groups, the lack of opportunity to develop essential social skills with others is a concern. Most importantly, those continually excluded from society could be more easily influenced by radical ideas of extremist groups.
- Digital platforms offer the greatest potential to combat youth isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The development of social networks by teachers, youth workers and young people themselves can aid peer-to-peer support and reduce the possibilities of radicalisation or social exclusion.
- Although the potential of digital means was highly acknowledged, participants in the meeting reflected that using digital means to combat youth isolation is not easy. Creating a digital strategy to reach vulnerable youngsters is challenging:
 - Motivation for youngsters to attend online activities is limited, as many youngsters suffer from “online fatigue” when they have attended an online school day.
 - In some cases, they don’t even have access to the right digital resources to participate from the home environment.
 - Furthermore, crucial knowledge about the use of digital platforms is often limited both amongst professionals and in some cases in the homes of the students.
- The physical means to prevent radicalisation due to youth isolation remain pivotal for a successful intervention. This means that structural collaborations between the different stakeholders in a multi-agency setting are considered crucial to the success of preventing or countering youth isolation.

Recommendations

- The establishment of multidisciplinary networks between schools, social organisations and families is essential. This is especially true for vulnerable families. Incorporating parents into these networks is vital, as parents can be seen as the most important actors offering credibility and authority. One of the positive side effects of the pandemic was that crime and delinquency went down in some countries due to more parental control. Supporting and involving parents in taking back the reins was recommended by some practitioners.

- Both teachers and youth workers must find ways to create safe spaces for isolated young people vulnerable to radicalisation. Training must be offered to stakeholders on recognising early signs, creating a safe space for communication or intervention, and continuing to work proactively with the youngster.
 - For youth workers in the most deprived areas, one of the major recommendations is the integration of positive role models for the children in community activities. These role models or “ambassadors” can also be used to reach out to youngsters who do not reach out for help voluntarily.
 - Another important recommendation for youth workers is the development of schemes of engagement on social media platforms to reach young people (12 or older) for one-to-one sessions or group communications. This might include building an online community for young people by young people to aid their development into active online role models.
 - A necessary step includes the creation of a collaborative roadmap between stakeholders to reach out to isolated youngsters — for example, between the school environment and youth work organisations. The roadmap should include at least the following:
 - Signalling of absences. Routines are key for schools to follow up on student absences. School computerised tracking systems can be useful to keep track of student absences and, consequently, when children have dropped out or are at risk of doing so.
 - Ownership of the case. Decide which person/organisation will own the case and why. Actors involved could be youth workers, police community officers, social services, a sports coach, youth welfare system, a teacher/mentor or other school members.
 - Division of tasks amongst different professionals. For example, planning a home visit to the family. Which professional is best equipped? Decide what matters most. Is it the one with the warmest relations, or the one with the best understanding of the cultural background? Furthermore, with an increase in mental health problems, schools are advised to have available professionals who address emotional-behavioural problems.
 - When these tasks take place (time-bound action plan). Furthermore, it needs to be decided when to create a separation of school (time) and out-of-school time.
 - Consultation structure and sharing information. Mapping the case is crucial to make the right decision and to best safeguard those youngsters at risk. One tool available is to have structural round-table talks.
 - Mitigation of youth isolation. Stakeholders need to be clear on the risks of youth isolation and need to know how to mitigate them. Be aware that this should not put extra burden on teachers.
- Youth centres can organise workshops to parents to help them develop their digital skills to understand what their children are doing online. This also allows them to keep an extra eye on their child in case they are lured into harmful content online.
 - In Spain, safe meeting points (community centres) in the physical world to meet with a professional, teacher or youth worker in the evening was quite successful. Elements of success in this approach include:
 - Creating a safe space for dialogue and trust. Whenever youngsters say something offensive, try not judging them so as to keep the connection.

- Listening is important. Try and find out what is behind their story.
- Being authentic. This means not creating a fake image of yourself.

The online version of this approach has proven to be more difficult. Therefore, participants discussed that youth workers should approach youngsters in a similar way online. One example is by trying to be an online role model on your own social media accounts. More recommendations on how to do youth work online are included in the RAN papers '[Doing digital youth work in a P/CVE context](#)' and '[How to do digital youth work in a P/CVE context: Revising the current elements](#)'.

- Other recommendations include supporting young people to develop their own digital groups as the creation of peer-to-peer networks has proven to be successful in previous cases of youth isolation.
- To make young people more resilient, they must be educated on how to judge information on the internet with regard to its reliability and intent.

Relevant practices

- **Armen Tekort (Belgium): [Empowerment and Buddy Guidance](#)**
This initiative trains volunteers to become “buddies in empowerment” prioritising youngsters in extreme poverty. There are different buddies supporting different family members and life areas of the young person. Instant intervention, one-to-one contact and context maps are some of their key strategies to work effectively. There is also a 24/7 desk for emergency interventions. The project implements Kline’s Thinking Environment, appreciative enquiry models and Hofstede’s identity pyramid.
- **City of Stockholm (Sweden): [Safe City Action 2020](#)**
Concerned with the rise of right-wing extremist propaganda, especially amongst youngsters on social media platforms, this initiative creates municipality teams to prevent youngsters from staying at home by nurturing stimulating environments. These teams build collaboration between different sectors: teachers, youth workers and social workers. Home visits take place as part of the mapping of the situation and to encourage parents to get involved. It is a solution-focused initiative that achieves success from the first step forward.
- **Youth Worker Utrecht (the Netherlands): [JoU](#)**
This initiative uses social media for reaching isolated youth. The initiative builds a relationship of trust with the youngsters by getting to know their profiles, nicknames and networks. When the youth workers cannot find the children, they do home visits. The youth workers also collaborate with schools and encourage youngsters to attend. A key strategy is to link all areas of life: family, school and the neighbourhood.
- **Dutch Police (the Netherlands): [Gamechangers](#)** (Dutch language)
This initiative emerged as a response to the first COVID-19 wave, in which large groups of youngsters moved from the streets into their homes. As 86 % of the young people were found to have a gaming console, the project created 6 police teams who play live streaming of popular games at least once a week. Amongst the most popular are: FIFA 20, Fortnite, Warzone or Call of Duty (only for 18+). Police use PS4 to connect with youngsters who join their community in order to play under certain rules. In

this way, police stay connected with youth and interact with them, aiming to prevent situations that might lead to crime and also to share supportive information with young people.

Follow-up

This meeting explored the topic of youth isolation, which showed to be particularly relevant in light of COVID-19. It showed that there is still need for developing know-how for teachers and youth workers with innovative tools and resources that could be developed to reach isolated young people. It was suggested that RAN could continue to assess the impact of ongoing good practices and resources tackling youth isolation and possibly gather all these insights and practices into a practical guide for teachers and youth workers with innovative tools and resources to reach isolated young people.

Furthermore, this meeting showed that in some EU Member States, multi-agency networks that involve social work, youth work, schools and other actors such as police are in a further stage of existence than in other countries. Therefore, such a guide needs to take into account all countries' different regulations in order to be applicable to every context.

Lastly, strategies for continued investigation into post-COVID-19 effects on young people who have experienced isolation – particularly within the context of mental health – should remain on the agenda.

Further reading

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