

# 10 Proposals about the Future of Evidence-based Bullying and Violence Prevention in Europe

## Recommendations resulting from the Conference on “Evidence-Based Prevention of Bullying and Youth Violence European Innovations and Experiences”

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(Draft for further discussion and revision)

One of the main goals of the European Science Foundation’s series of exploratory workshops is to stimulate thinking about future directions of research in a field of research. In what follows we have put together 10 proposals about research areas that we believe are important to promote evidence-based bullying and violence prevention in Europe. We suggest use these ideas as the background for the discussion on Wednesday afternoon. If you have any ideas related to the proposals that you could not raise at the conference, please send them to us via email, [mpe23@cam.ac.uk](mailto:mpe23@cam.ac.uk).

### Priorities for effective evidence-based prevention

We believe that governments could achieve noticeable population-wide reductions in bullying and aggressive behaviour amongst children and adolescents by adopting evidence-based prevention and intervention approaches. This requires close co-operation between local and national governments and prevention researchers. Currently many European countries do not have the requisite research capacity and the evidence base to provide effective support in their societies. In the following 10 postulates we propose 10 domains where research is urgently needed to contribute to more effective violence prevention.

1. Across Europe, resources should be expanded to develop, identify and test new prevention programs and policies, using the highest evidentiary standards to determine effectiveness.

A move towards the more effective prevention of different manifestations of aggression and violence across the life-course requires considerable efforts to expand the scientific evidence base of what works. While differences exist between countries and regions across Europe, the requisite knowledge base is generally still very thin. There are significant gaps in the development of research-based high quality prevention programmes that suit the needs of local and national agencies, in the scope and number of clinical trials that assess intervention effectiveness, and in large-scale field trials that help us understand how evidence-based programmes and policies can be embedded into mainstream services.

2. The development, testing, and implementation of policies and programmes supported by research evidence can benefit from more intensive and regular research collaboration across Europe. [Co-operation]

Despite recent developments there remains a significant gap in systematic collaboration between European researchers on more effective ways of reducing aggression and violence. More intensive co-operation and knowledge exchange on programme development, innovative research methodologies, comparative assessment of intervention effectiveness, treatment outcomes and policy developments could greatly contribute to a greater population-wide impact of evidence-based prevention. Currently, various countries and local governments are moving towards developing ‘best-practice’ lists based on diverse criteria for standards of evidence. It would be desirable to co-ordinate efforts across Europe so that standards of evidence can be shared and potential clients have access to the broadest possible body of knowledge.

- 3. There is a lack of well-designed prevention innovations in Europe. Specific funding should support collaborations between researchers, private partners, and service providers to develop innovative and research-based interventions that are tailored to meet the needs of different systems of services, specific target groups, of diverse manifestations of aggression and violence. [Product development]**

Over the past two decades a large proportion of evaluations conducted in Europe examined whether products developed elsewhere can be transferred into the European context. Testing the transportability of interventions will remain important in the future. However, we believe that there is a significant potential in Europe for the development of new practices and programs that have a better cultural fit to the structure of social services, education systems, or cultural expectations of European societies.

- 4. More research on the generalizability of evidence-based models across (culturally) diverse groups, European countries, and contexts is needed, such as systematic replication studies. [Cultural adaptation]**

Europe is characterized by huge cultural diversity, both between and within countries. Little is currently known about the extent to which prevention programmes require culturally specific adaptation. While evidence suggests that the underlying principles of effective prevention are similar across cultures and settings, there is more controversy about the extent to which delivery format, recruitment, and framing need cultural adaptation. There is also evidence suggesting that the distribution of causally relevant risk factors differs between populations, requiring more knowledge about the advantages and disadvantages of tailoring interventions to specific needs.

- 5. Future research should examine how the general principles underlying effective prevention must be tailored to the specific needs of different at-risk groups or different types of aggression. [Tailoring to diverse risk groups and specific types of aggression]**

Children and adolescents at risk of aggressive behaviour may differ by the extent to which they are exposed to specific risk-factors, their aggressive behaviour is accompanied by other types of malfunctioning, and the kinds of aggressive behaviours. There is currently limited knowledge about the extent to which the tailoring of prevention strategies to specific needs increases their effectiveness and to which extent such tailoring would be practically desirable.

- 6. Many European countries have high-quality and innovative social services and education systems that entail activities with a preventative purpose. There is a significant gap in knowledge about the effectiveness of those services. [evaluation of embedded services]**

A large proportion of evaluations of bullying and violence prevention measures test the effectiveness of commercial products, often initially developed for the US market. Across Europe, local and national authorities often run services that are similar in purpose and structure to commercial products (e.g. support for young mothers, parenting advice, anti-bullying programmes, social competencies in school curricula) and that are often open to innovation and dynamic development. In some countries, studies suggest that existing services have effects similar to new products. However, little is known about the effectiveness of programmes and practices in mainstream services.

- 7. We know little about how evidence-based programs can be taken to scale and embedded into mainstream services. More studies are needed in intervention effects in large-scale field trials, preferably with follow-up measures over several years. Also, more *translational research* on how programmes and policies can effectively be inserted into mainstream services is necessary. [translational research]**

While a lot has been learned about how prevention and intervention can work in efficacy trials, much less is known about how programmes can be taken to scale without losing their effectiveness. Also, knowledge about the effectiveness of early prevention is mostly based on short term-effects. Contrariwise, there is a gap in knowledge about long-term effects of early interventions.

More well-designed large-scale field trials are necessary that provide policy makers with realistic estimates of effects that are replicable at the level of whole populations. Often, such evaluations should be conducted as independent evaluations in that the role of the evaluators and programme developers are institutionally separated. Large-scale dissemination trials are costly and it is essential that they are carefully planned and adequately resourced, and that their findings are effectively communicated amongst researchers and policy makers in Europe. Furthermore, there is a distinct lack of research on the best approaches towards integrating practices and programmes into mainstream services.

- 8. Important lessons can be drawn from experiments that did not achieve the desired outcomes. Researchers, funding agencies and political actors should support the publication of unsuccessful trials. [failed trials]**

Sharing knowledge about evaluation studies that did not achieve the desired results is as important as sharing knowledge about successful interventions. Across Europe there is still a tendency that 'failed' experiments are not published and discussed amongst the academic community. We believe that this practice poses an important obstacle to the progress of evidence-based aggression and violence prevention, and encourage researchers to disseminate findings from unsuccessful trials.

- 9. Innovative research is needed that examines changing manifestations of aggressive behaviour such as cyber-bullying or peer sexual violence. [interventions for specific manifestations of violence]**

Important underlying risk-factors are similar across many different types of aggression and violence, suggesting that effective prevention actions are more likely to be general than specific in their effects. However, manifestations of violence change as a result of technological, cultural, and social change. More research is needed on effective prevention in newly emerging fields such as cyber-bullying or peer sexual violence.

- 10. We have a limited understanding of the general mechanisms that make interventions work. More research is needed about the mediating causal mechanisms and active components of successful interventions. [Mechanisms and active components]**

The cornerstone of effective prevention and intervention efforts is an understanding of the causal mechanisms that transport an effect from the initial preventative manipulation to the individual behaviour as the ultimate outcome. Currently, our understanding of the active ingredients of interventions and the causal mechanisms triggered by interventions is very limited. We believe that a better understanding of these processes could make a significant contribution to more effective interventions.

