Analysis of children and youth social problems within the European Union

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the research is to analyse the social problems encountered by minors within the European Union. The first chapter focuses on the role of the social work within the child protection system; the study is carried out by comparing the child protection system in Italy and Latvia. The second part of the research takes the European Union as a case study, initially analysing the rights and advantages that a young European citizen has. Secondly, the most relevant social problems for young Europeans are analysed, such as lack of employment, drug use and addiction and the possibility of being bullied and cyber-bullied. The research was conducted by analysing secondary data (scientific articles, EU reports, EUROSTAT statistics, journal of youth studies). The results highlighted by the research were reported in the first part of the study, within the comparison between Italy and Latvia, where a difference in the development of a protection system for minors is found. On the contrary, the analysis at the European level, where social issues are shared by young European citizens, is balanced. In conclusion, it is possible to point out that both at the national level and at the international level of the EU there are child protection systems and laws that specifically deal with the social problems of young people; nevertheless, it is relevant to emphasise that each State has a different situation.

Keywords: *Child protection, social problems, children, youth, the European Union*

INTRODUCTION

To have a general view of the situation of the young generation in Europe it is necessary to have a general overview of the present population. According to EUROSTAT statistics in 2019, there were 446.8 million inhabitants, of which 67.8 million (15.2%) were children aged between 0-14 and 6.4 million between 15 and 29 years (16.6%), corresponding to 31.8% of the total population. This number has dropped significantly in recent years, in fact, in 1999, it was 38.1%. These numbers give a clear representation of the trend that the European population is assuming over the years; Europe appears to be an "old" continent.

Several studies have researched the causes of this phenomenon, among the major, there are low fertility rates and the possibility of migrating from one country to another, a factor that would make the formation of a stable family more complex.

In a study conducted by Shelley A. Jackson (2002), it is revealed that between the ages of 5 and 11 children face a variety of problems, which are mainly identified by parents and teachers. One of the first factors that make adults perceive the problem's existence in the child is the poor school performance, which manifests itself in bad grades or expulsions. Subsequently, the identification of a problematic situation, the child is usually taken in charge by the counsellor or the psychologist present in the school; unless the case requires the child to be placed in a specific mental health community or centre. During the school's years, from the age of 6 onwards, children come into contact with the first problems of life. These problems are mainly perceived as peer violence, social behaviour, educational neglect, social exclusion, committed crimes and dropout from regular education. (Dimitrijoska, Ilievski & Trbojevik, 2019). Addressing these issues at an early age also involves a change in the character and personality of the child, which will have relevant side effects in everyday life and on their future.

To manage minors with similar difficulties, the intervention of a multi-professional team made up of social and psychological assistants, pedagogues, and educators, is necessary. The most frequently addressed issues are bullying, addictions and conflicts between peers, teachers, and parents. When taking charge, the client in this case, the minor and the family, are provided with support aimed at discovering the resources available in the area. A significant aspect that social workers need to take care of is to make the child's social inclusion possible, especially for children with difficulties.

Research question and objectives:

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What issues confront young people today and how has the child protection system evolved in European Nations?

The objectives of the research are:

1. To address the child protection system in the European Union.

2. To compare the child protection system between Italy and Latvia.

3. To analyse the social problems of youth in European region.

METHODS

The conceptual research approach was used in this study to obtain insight into this idea and the study threads, hypotheses, and experiences that were investigated. Research on the child protection system in the European Union and the issues faced by the youth within the Union was gathered online trough Google Scholars, European reports, the Eurasian Child Mental Health Study (EACMHS) Group**,** Eurostat, World health Organization, European Parliament, and Commission. After sorting a total of 35 documents were reviewed with 12 of them proving to be useful for the completion of this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. ANALYSIS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL – comparison between Italy and Latvia

1.1 Child protection system in the EU and role of social work

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2015), cause of request of the European Commission, developed a study at the European level to analyse and study the national protection system for minors present in the various Member States. To guarantee that a child protection system is effective and well-integrated into society, the presence of a national legislative framework is necessary, which has as its central objective the creation of a safe space for minors. Such laws must follow and pursue the fundamental rights of minors, present in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Beyond respecting the fundamental rights, the legislative framework must consider certain areas concerning the life of the child, such as the education and physical and mental health.

At the European level, not all member states had developed specific policies for the protection of minors, or simply the laws enacted were referred to a precise children's group having problems. These limitations have led to excluding a part of children, such as children with disabilities, belonging to ethnic minorities or sons of migrants. The data from 2015 show that 18 European countries are committed to defending children's rights. A particular example is the UK, which does not have a national reform but differs between England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

Considering the two states under analysis, Latvia, and Italy, it is possible to observe that, already in 2015, there are some differences. The first difference is that Latvia presents an instrument called Protection of the Rights of the Child Law ("Bērnu tiesību aizsardzības likums"); on the contrary, in Italy, there is not yet a specific law for the protection of minors.

1.2 Child protection system in Italy

While examining the past, it is possible to underline the main youth problems and analyse the development of the issue of the protection of minors in Italy. The 1960s-1970s was a decade in which the child's protection system focused more on problems related to poverty, delinquency, mistreatment, and the loss of parents. (Bravoa, Canali, Del Vallea & Vecchiato, 2013) The aid services were in the hands of religious institutions and governed at a national level. With the law 81/1970, the Italian territorial situation changed considerably, as the regions gained a considerable administrative control over their own territory; this change also had consequences at the level of the child protection system. From that moment, the provinces were in charge of protecting and safeguarding children without families or with physical and psychological disabilities.

Between the early 1990s and 2000s, different law was enacted to defend children, such as Law 216/1991, which prevented the inclusion of minors in criminal activities and Law 104/1992, which approved defending the rights of minors with disabilities. During the first decade of the 2000s, laws focused on the problem of minors without family and home; various law regarding custody (Law 54/2006) and foster/residential care were approved. Considering all the laws mentioned so far, we observe how the figure of the social worker fits into the child protection system. These types of social services are the responsibility of the local administration; for this reason, social services are fundamental to manage specific problems; the area of minors and families is one of the most relevant areas.

In the article written by Fazzi (2019), it is reported that two different ways of providing child protection service exist. The first is requested directly by the local authorities by the will of the family or the school; the second alternative is based on a request by a social worker to investigate a possible case of maltreatment, abuse, or a family problem. Following this request, the judicial court, after analysing the case, establishes whether it is appropriate to issue particular safety measures to ensure the safety of the minor in the family's environment or not. Firstly, the role of social service in these cases is to guarantee support to the family, to ensure that the minor can stay in his own home. If this option is not possible, the social worker will have to take care of finding a temporary alternative accommodation, for example, in communities specialized in the reception of minors.

1.3 Child protection system in Latvia

In Latvia, following the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992) was created a multisectoral system to protect minors based mainly on the prevention of maltreatment and abuse. (Skrastiņa & Putniņa, 2018)

With the 1998 Law (Protection of the Rights of the Child), the population became obliged to report any harassment or abuse towards minors; this facilitated the identification of possible problematic family situations. This law was essential for the Ministry of Welfare to develop and implement a plan for minors' protection system and a general improvement of the lives of children and their respective families. Inside of this programme is fundamental to underline the collaboration between the State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's rights and The Ministry of the interior, which contributed to drafting the Guidelines for preventing child crime and protecting children from criminal offences (2012).

The child protection system is called cross-sectoral because it is based on the collaboration of several institutions, The Ministry of Welfare and The State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights and the Ombudsman's Office, created in 2007. These administrative bodies have different functions; the first must coordinate policies regarding violence's prevention, rehabilitation, and funds for social services. The second, created in 2005, checks whether children's rights are respected, at a national and local level. The third promotes the rights of the minors and has a facilitator role among the bodies of the cross-sectoral system. Research shows how this cross-sectoral collaboration is not balanced in all the municipalities of Latvia; in particular, the good functioning of the Riga system emerges, which has formulated a precise collaboration agreement (15.07.2009, No. DL-09-169-lī).

A relevant problem among children in Latvia is their behaviour at school; for this reason, there are programs that have as their primary objective the support of social services that take care of children with particular difficulties. In the article 58 of the Law for the Protection of the Rights of the Minor, there is a commitment among the municipalities to develop and implement programs that can prevent antisocial behaviour. However, it is reported that it is difficult for parents to accept that their child may exhibit behavioural problems due to a mental problem or inadequate discipline imparted over the years. According to the report provided by The Ombudsman's office in 2015, the issue of methods imparted towards minors can be seen as a social issue. The study reports that 14% of the children surveyed stated that screaming is an ordinary action; 10% think the same about corporal punishment and threats (8%). These numbers are further confirmed by parents, who say that shouting and threats of physical violence can be indicated as acceptable methods for raising and educating their children. As a result of this investigation, the United Nations Committee developed programs for parents that promoted non-violent and positive methods of discipline. Concrete examples are the "Children's emotional education" programs, mainly dedicated to fathers and the "Guardian angel", aimed in particular at families with children (0-2 years) having difficulties.

2. ANALYSIS AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

2.1 Youth in Europe

Considering the European Youth (2021) report, it is possible to highlight the characteristics and ideologies shared by the European youth (16-30 years). First of all, it is stated that most of the young people present in Europe are aware of the advantages and rights that derive from being a member of the European community. In particular, the possibility of working and studying abroad (58%), the single currency of the Euro (39%) and respect for democracy and civil rights. A relevant issue for young Europeans is the environment and its safeguarding, together with respect for human rights and gender equality.

Being part of the European community also means being immersed in the global world; this fact is considered a positive factor for young people, unlike the older generations who perceive globalization as an obstacle to the growth of their country. This sense of belonging to a big group of countries leads young people to perceive diversity with greater positivity; for example, 31% of the interviewees cited cultural diversity in the EU as a sensitive topic, almost 7% more than in the +31-age group.

The report highlights that the opinion regarding the EU of a young European is influenced by his/her country of origin and by its history. For example, in the countries of Eastern Europe, such as Slovakia, Polonia and Hungary, the connection between the EU and democracy is emphasized; in Germany (52%) and Ireland (40%), the most cited factor in Europe is the value of Peace. To conclude, it is possible to emphasize how young Europeans are particularly attached to their roots and are proud of being Europeans. In particular, in the Eastern countries, such as Poland (82%) and Latvia (78%), there is the highest percentage of young people with a strong European sense.

2.2 European youth's most relevant problems

2.2.1. Unemployment

Unemployment at the European level has always been identified as a general problem for the population, particularly for the younger generations. According to studies by Lambovska, Sardinha & Belas (2021), this problem worsened after the Covid-19 pandemic due to the restrictions imposed on public and private workers in the various European states. It is relevant to highlight that the level of unemployment has increased not only in the countries where it was already identified as one of the primary problems, such as Italy, Greece, and Spain but in general in all the states of the European Union.

Having a job for a young person is essential because it produces autonomy from the family, economic independence, a sense of belonging in society and personal fulfilment. For this reason, the European Union focuses a lot of energy and resources on developing programs that can predict youth unemployment and help young people to enter the world of work.

In the study in question, there is a comparison between the data of unemployed young people (under 25 years old), considering the time span of end 2019 - to the end of 2020. In 2019, the countries with the highest youth unemployment rate were Greece (32.4%), Spain (30.3%) and Italy (28.4%); on the contrary, the countries with the lowest rate were the Czech Republic (4.7%), Germany (5.6%) and the Netherlands (6.7%). At the end of 2020, unemployed young people in Spain reached the number 600,000, followed by Italy, in which the percentage rose from 28.4% to 30%. An example of a particular increased level of unemployment is Lithuania, which goes from 20.4% to a statistic between 23.8% and 25.6%. Referring to the countries with an initial low rate of youth unemployment, is it possible to highlight the increasement of the percentage as well; one example is the Czech Republic, that went from 4.7% to 10.3%.

2.2.2. Drugs consume

Regarding the European Drug Report 2021, since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on our lives; European countries and the rest of the world have indeed had to introduce measures to protect public health. This crisis has also affected all aspects of the drug phenomenon in Europe, from production, trafficking, and distribution to drug use. At the wholesale level, this is reflected in some changes in circuits and methods, with a major use of smuggling through intermodal containers and commercial supply chains and minor use of human couriers. The data available suggest that during the first lockdown, due to covid restrictions, the levels of consumption of most drugs appear generally lower but then seem to recover one restriction were eliminated. A comparison with 2019 seems indicate that the overall consumption of most of the drugs were similar and, based on this data source, in different cities could be even higher.

Based on data from a survey undertaken between 2015 and 2020 in 26 countries is estimated that last year the cannabis use among EU citizens of age between 15 and 34 years is equal to 15.4%, passing from 3.4% in Hungary to 21.8% in France. Considering only the age group of 15-24, the prevalence of cannabis use is higher: the 19.2% (9.1 million) used this drug in the last year and 10.3% (4.9 million) months. Among the 24 EU member states that participated in the 2019 surveys of aged students between 15 and 16 years, the prevalence in the last year of cannabis use was between 7% and 23%, with a weighted average of 17.3%. The average age of first consumption is 17, and it appears that it is the male sex who consumes the most of this substance (84%). The average age associated with the first treatment is 25 years; this information highlights how young people are an integral part of this problem. Additional substances consumed frequently by young Europeans are amphetamine, with an average age of first use

of 21, with a prevalent majority of men (75%), and methamphetamine, where the average age is 22 and 73% of the users are males.

2.2.3. Bullyism and cyber-bullyism

The definition from the Cambridge Dictionary of the term "Bullying" is:

The behavior of a person who hurts or frightens someone smaller or less powerful, often forcing that person to do something they do not want to do.

When such action occurs online or through the Internet, it can be defined as "cyberbullying". The consequences that are found in the victims of bullying and cyberbullying are related to mental health; for example, cases of anxiety and depression, which can lead to suicidal behaviours over time.

In a study carried out between 2011 and 2017 in a group of European and Asian countries (EACMHS, 2021) the responses of 28,427 adolescents (13-15 years) on bullying and cyberbullying are studied. Focusing particularly on the European countries analysed, Lithuania, Greece, Norway and Finland, it is highlighted that bullying is more frequent than cyberbullying. From the data reported, the country with the highest percentage of victims is Lithuania (25.9% of participants), followed by Finland with 18.8%. Norway appears to be the country with the lowest rate (7.5%), but at the same time, it is the one with a percentage more similar to that of cyberbullying (6.5%). One factor analysed in this study is the gender of the victim; the results show that girls are more bullied than boys in Norway and Finland, less in Greece and on a similar level in Lithuania. A further difference analysed is the typology of bullying; girls especially suffer from relational and cyberbullying; instead, boys face more physical than emotional bullying. This study, analysing the situation of different countries in the European Union, where there are different socio-economic and cultural situations, highlights how the problem of bullying and cyberbullying is present in all the different levels of society, regardless of economic well-being and family situation.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the general objective was to analyse the current situation of young people within the European Union. In the first chapter, the main actors are children, especially the systems that should be able to protect them. The analysis was carried out using a comparison between two very different European states, Italy, and Latvia. The research was developed by analysing the two-child protection systems, observing the history of the country's social services and the social worker's role within it. In conclusion, several differences can be observed between the two protection systems, in particular the relative growth and development is evident.

The second chapter has a more global point of view and analyses the situation of young adolescents in the European Union. The three themes considered, unemployment, drug use, bullying and cyberbullying, are part of the problems most encountered among the young European generations. In conclusion, it can be said that these social issues are generally shared by young Europeans, but it should be pointed out that each Member State of the Union has a specific situation for its own population, with different rules and regulations.

To conclude this study, it is possible to say that within the European Union, there are many problems that children and adolescents have to face in the course of their lives. A factor to be highlighted is the role of social work and social policies within these issues; with the passing of the years, the problems do not disappear by themselves, but it is the social worker's role to be trained and active in learning new methods and working techniques.

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