

## Teenage Vulnerability: Presentation and Discussion

On Friday 7th June, representatives of Ruse's social services came together with school psychologists and pedagogical advisors to consider ways in which we can improve our collaboration to support vulnerable teenagers.

The meeting had been requested by David Bisset who had become concerned about features of recent cases discussed during supervision sessions with a number of groups representing different parts of Equilibrium's network of social services. There is a clear pattern suggesting that teenagers under the age of 16 are being "used as puppets" by criminal groups in the city. There are signs of a style of orchestration that no longer suggests that the waywardness of certain teenagers leads them towards trouble. Rather, it looks as if trouble lies close to the school gates and that youngsters identified as vulnerable are being routinely picked out by criminals leading to involvement in theft, narcotics and prostitution.

According to David, if criminal gangs are using "intelligence" and have the capacity to target youngsters with specific vulnerabilities, educators and child protection officers need to devise early intervention and prevention strategies. We need to "get to them first".

The group considered three questions –

1. What are the signs of risk? How does a vulnerable teenager behave at school that differentiates her / him from classmates?
2. Do we need additional resources and do certain things need to change to enable us to effectively intervene?
3. Are there any simple things that can be done quickly to improve the situation?

Regrettably, the overall response was pessimistic and the group identified significant factors that prevented effective screening for vulnerability among teenagers and positive early intervention.

- **Lack of professional capacity.** A school generally has a single psychologist and a single pedagogical advisor. Their roles are not clearly defined in terms of practical performance and quality of support to children and families. Rather, they operate in a heavily bureaucratized environment that places emphasis on form-filling and compilation of data.
- **Lack of parenting capacity.** A combination of factors has impacted on the safety and security of teenagers within the extended family. Divorce rates have soared as have the numbers of single parents. Many families include an absentee parents who is working elsewhere in Bulgaria or overseas. Indeed, sometimes both parents are absent. Couples are tending to delay having children. Although this means they have greater life experience and financial security, it also means that they have established a style of life that makes it difficult to juggle work, leisure and parenting. Parents often deny that their teenage daughter or son has a problem. It is too frightening an issue for them to deal with.

In his opening presentation, David looked at global trends in teenage vulnerability and – especially – the large studies done by social psychologist Jean Twenge and her colleagues. Increased levels of anxiety disorders and depression do not appear to be linked to higher levels of child poverty.

David focused on two features of modern life that deprive teenagers of a sense of self-efficacy and control over their lives. Both cause sleep deprivation meaning that the demands of daily life become overwhelming –

1. Membership of "Generation Me" (Twenge) fuelled by addictive use of social media

2. Coercive education and a pattern of scrutiny, testing and assessment that starts at a very early age

Those in the age-range 8 to 16 seem to be especially vulnerable.

**Key observations**

Parents and teachers need to encourage responsible use of social media. Youngsters reveal too much on Facebook.

Members of society tend to turn a blind eye to teenage behaviour in public places.

Criminal gangs appear to operate with impunity. "Everybody knows who they are."