Where the streets have no name

An in-depth study on the influence of community violence on children from the slums of Caracas.

Master thesis Latin American and Caribbean Studies

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Abstract

Children in the slums of Caracas, Venezuela have to deal with violence in their daily life. This thesis will focus on the effect that community violence has on these children in the slums and the way they cope with the violent situation. By conducting interviews with the children, they were offered a voice and proved that children are a group that can speak for themselves and have a clear idea about what goes on in their neighbourhood. Children find themselves being surrounded with violence that causes them to be limited in their mobility, have a constant feeling of fear and can lead them into becoming violent actors themselves. Children are affected by community violence in many ways. Yet they have learned to live with it and found various ways to cope with it. Not only have they adopted several coping strategies, but they use according to the situation. Nevertheless more action is needed to change the prospects for better future for these children. There is still a great lack in support that is offered to the children both in capacity of the support as in the content in which support often lacks to acknowledge the agency of children.

Content

1. Introduction

La cultura no se impone,
Se construye

Culture is not imposed
It is built[1]

An often heard phrase when asking for the reason of the occurrence of violence in Caracas, is 'falta de cultura' or there is lack in culture here. There are many ways to explain the phrase 'Culture is not imposed, it is built' mentioned in the photo on the front page and repeated here above. In this context it means that culture cannot be enforced upon people, but has to grow and be actively constructed in a society. Venezuela, and especially its capital Caracas, is one of the areas where urban violence is part of the daily lives of many children. All over Latin America urban areas suffer world's highest inequality, with the rich just living at a stone's throw from the poor. Many of the children that live in urban areas are excluded from essential goods, services and basic rights, such as the right to be protected from violence, abuse and neglect and to have the ability to participate fully in society (UNICEF[2]).

Children are a particular vulnerable group with their limited means to draw attention to their situation and defend themselves (Cecodap[3]). There is devoted disproportional little attention on this subject in the public agenda, by politicians and by state institutions. Until recently, research on urban violence the perception of the ones that suffer the most from the violence, the urban poor population, were often forgotten (McIlwaine & Moser 2007). Consequently, the children of these urban poor are disregarded as well. While the exposure to long-term violence in childhood is a determent for a future life in violence[4]. Children are a crucial link in the vicious circle of violence. Therefore there is a need for research and policy on the subject of violence against children.

Unfortunately, research on children and violence in Caracas is very limited. Besides quantitative research that offer some statistics, there is little known about the large group of children under the age of 16 that live in the shantytowns of Caracas. This research will not only focus on the poor and their experience with everyday urban violence, but on a specific group that seems to be overlooked, the children of the poor.

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[1] Text from photo on the cover. Photo taken by Jennie van Haren. Location: Boulevard de Sabana Grande, Caracas, Venezuela. Date: 17-05-2010.
[2] UNICEF, reviewed website: www.childinfo.org, date: 06-12- 2009.
[3] Cecodap is a non-governmental organization that promotes children's' rights in Venezuela.
Source: report of Cecodap 'Balance: Venezuela October 2008 / September 2009. Impacto de las diferentes formas de violencia contra niñas, niños y adolescentes'.
[4] Interview with Alejandro Moreno, researcher at the Centro Investigaciones Populares (CIP) in Caracas. Date: 19-04-2010.

These children are between the age of 8 and 15 years and are dealing with violence in their community.

Aim of this research

With the relevance of research on this subject being clear, the aim of this thesis first is to raise awareness about the part children have in community violence. My hope is that with this thesis children get a voice in research on the effect and consequences of violence. They are often a forgotten group when it comes to being victims of community violence, and support for children that have a home is often considered to be a task of the family instead of the community. Further, I hope that urban poor children will no longer be considered as a group that is difficult to reach and interview. I think I have shown with this research that with an adjustment in methods even children under ten years of age can be interviewed about a serious subject like violence. Children deserve a voice. By conducting this research children from the slums of Caracas will be heard and their opinion and point of view will be taken seriously. They will be empowered and in the future acknowledged to be a group that should be taken into account in policy on prevention of, fighting against and support in violent situations.

To reach this aim, the following problem statement will be the guideline in this research: what effect does community violence have on children in the slums and how do children cope with this violence? In dissecting this problem statement, a couple of themes will be met. First the theme of the display of violence in the slums of Caracas is explored to understand the situation these children live in. Here questions will be raised about the victims, the violent actors, the types and places of the violence. A second theme is the effect that violence has on these children. Here the limitations, emotional of physical harm and long term effects due to violence will be studied. Questions about the involvement of children in violence (both as victims and asviolent actor) will be answered here as well. In a third theme, the way children cope with the violent situation will be elaborated. Children will explain how they cope with violent situations. The various strategies they use are explained and illustrated. A fourth theme offers insight in the sources children have for support in coping with community violence. The various organizations, institutions, centres and prevention programs are put central here in a framework.

In addressing community violence there will be paid attention to the interrelatedness of different types of violence, however a specific child-related type is left out of this study: domestic violence. Domestic violence portrays itself within the family instead of the broader sense of the community and will therefore be left out. Still it proves to be impossible to fully eliminated all influence from domestic violence as it is a

common feature of everyday life in Venezuela. Therefore it will be mentioned when necessary for understanding the situation that children in the slums live in.

Methods and setting

With the subject of violence being very relevant in the slums of Caracas, the setting of my research found itself in an unsafe area of the city: the so-called *barrio*. *Barrio* in Venezuela is a stigmatized name, which refers to a lower class neighbourhood where the poorest live and safety is far to be found[5]. The *barrios* are often located uphill with narrow and steep streets that have no name. These are the areas that are known for their violence. The unsafe nature of my research location had implications for the execution of the research and the methods used. I spend much time in the first weeks to learn the places I could and could not go to, to be able to move around being well aware of the dangers and risks. Moreover, I decided to conduct the interviews with children and their surroundings at a community-based organization, which could provide me with the basic security and allowed me to follow a fixed group of children during a period of time. I decided to do my research in Cotiza, part of the *barrio* San José, at the centre of the non-profit organization Asociación Civil de Educación Integral San Benito (ACEISB). ACEISB runs four day-care centres that provide day-care from 8.00h to 16.30h on weekdays for in total about 150 children from Cotiza. This is hardly enough to provide for the need that there is for centres like these. Because of this, ACEISB focuses on the children from the poorest families that are selected by the headmaster Gisela Garcés. She considers the level of poverty, the nutrition of the food the children eat at home, the family situation, and the distance from the centre. At ACEISB the children get a meal, there are sports and art classes, they have help with their homework and there is room to play. For two months, from March 22nd 2010 until May 17th 2010, I visited the centres Las Torres and Los Cojecitos, both named after the part of Cotiza they are to be found. Here I observed the practices, spoke to the children and the *maestras* and visited the homes of some children.

Among the informants were children of roughly eight to twelve years old, three of their families, the teachers at the centre, professionals in the field of violence prevention, government officials and everyday civilians in Caracas. However the children offered the most specific empirical data, the professionals often gave me a larger insight not only in the present situation and facts, but as well about the process of violence and the impact it has on children as much as the culture in Venezuela.

To create as much of an in-depth picture of the situation I chose for doing qualitative research. In order to make the results of the research more valid, the method

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[5] In order to evoke a change in this stigma the president changed the name *barrio* in *comunidad*. However the name *barrio* is still widely used in common speech and therefore will be used in this thesis.

of triangulation is used. With triangulation a variation of sources and methods will be used to cross-check the information. This limits the possible bias of the found information (Mikkelsen 2005: 349). The used methods are (participant) observations, interviews, spider's webs, mapping, transects and a self-developed game. Many of these methods are participatory methods, which is uncommon in research on the subject of violence in urban settings, according to Moser and McIlwaine (2006: 91). This type of research agrees with the bottom-up approach that in this case gives the children a voice in this research.

The observations were an independent source of information but also were used to cross-check the information obtained through other methods. The interviews were adjusted to the type of informant. With the children and the everyday-civilians I used informal conversational interviews which occurred in the natural course of interaction. For gathering information from the surroundings of the children, like their family, community workers and professionals, the 'semi-structured interview' was used. The questions in these interviews were predetermined and open-ended, but with the liberty to formulate additional questions on the spot. With the children I created association spiders combined with drawings, a collage to explore the subject of their neighbourhood, a map to visualize and discuss the social life and mobility in their neighbourhood and a card game to discuss actions and the need of support after a violent event. All participatory methods offered direct information, but more so functioned to instigate conversations. Furthermore, the methods used in this research are useful as well for their accessibility and the fact that most are relatively easy to do. The combination of drawing and verbal communication is comfortable for the children and a playful, non-threatening way of obtaining information. On the subject of ethics, the theme of violence is quite serious and could bring children to relive situations they would want to forget or make them feel vulnerable in the centre where they should feel safe. I took this into account during my work with the children and set an agreement with the headmaster of the centre that in case of any suspect of maltreatment or emotional discomfort of a child, I would discuss the matter with her.

Thesis structure

This thesis starts with a theoretical framework in which the most important concepts and theories are depicted. After this first chapter that presents the scholars' point of view, the following chapter will describe the context in which the research is conducted. Here, a draft of the current situation in Caracas offers a frame of reference which can be used as a basis for interpreting the empirical data that will be presented in the following chapters. The empirical data will be divided in three themes, the display of violence, the effect of violence on children in the slums of Caracas and the way children cope with this violence. A concluding chapter will describe the most important results and offer recommendations

for follow-up research. By the use of notes at the bottom of the text, and boxes or pictures within the text, extra information is presented.

2. Urban violence in Latin America

The subject of community violence in the slums of Caracas has its roots in the urban violence that is widespread throughout Latin America. Here the wider context of urban violence will be depicted with a look at its underlying factors and consequences. With children being the focus of this thesis, their role in urban violence is discussed as well. Not only the extensive impact violence has on children will be addressed, but as well the various ways in which can be coped with violence and in which violence can be prevented will be reviewed. Last this chapter will be concluded by placing community violence in the context of this research: the slums of Caracas. Discussing some violence statistics and the background of community violence in Caracas, it will become clear that Caracas is a perfect case-study for research on the subject of the effects of community violence.

Urban Violence

Three decades ago the overall perspective on the future of Latin America was positive. Now the region in which 75 percent of the population lives in urban areas is left disillusioned (Koonings & Kruijt 2007: 1). Not the economical progress that the prosperous cities promised, but poverty, insecurity and social exclusion are the reality in which fifty to seventy percent of the inhabitants of urban areas live. Although statistics are often not reliable in giving a precise overview, they do paint a general picture. Between the 1980s and the 1990s Latin America had a fifty percent increase in the homicide rate. With a global rate of five homicides per 100.000 inhabitants in 2000, Latin America counted 27.5 per 100.000 in the same year (Moser & McIlwaine 2006: 90). This makes Latin America the most violent region of the world where violence has become embedded in its culture (Balán 2002: 4). The citizens have to bear the consequences of this violent culture and will have to search for ways to cope with the situation.

The enormous increase in violence in Latin America is especially noticeable in urban areas. With the urbanization going much faster than anyone predicted (Davis 2004: 5) cities became packed with inhabitants living in areas characterized by poverty, unsafe transportation and housing, exclusion and inequality. This inequality is enlarged by the fact that often rich and poor live in a small range from each other (Balán 2002: 2). The violence that is displayed in these urban areas was marked by its shift from violence with a political ideology perspective, to violence with its roots in crime and delinquency (Abramovay et al. 2002: 58). The latter dominated from then on and has some specific characteristics that distinguish it from the 'old' political orientated violence, such as that it does not directly focus on political gains, it knows a wide range of actors

of which many are poor, everybody is a potential victim, and it occurs in urban areas. The latter gives this new violence its name urban violence.

There are many definitions to be found of violence. Concha-Eastman (2002: 44) offers a comprehensive one, in which 'violence is an intentional use of force or power with a predetermined end by which one or more persons produce physical, mental (psychological), or sexual injury, injure the freedom of movement, or cause the death of another person or persons (including him or herself)'. This definition can be extended through the notion of intimidation, threats and material deprivation (Moser & McIlwaine 2006: 93). Further, both Abramovay (2002: 17) and Moser and McIlwaine (2006: 93) relate violence to the norms that have been set in a specific society in a specific time. These elements show that violence should be seen as a subjective, ambiguous and multidimensional concept which should be carefully defined when working with it.

As said earlier, there can be seen a clear shift in violence from political driven violence to what Koonings and Kruijt (1999: 11) called 'democratized' urban violence. In democratized urban violence, violence is an option for conflict solving for a wide range of actors with many different goals that they mean to reach by the use of violence (Rodgers 2006: 268). Urban violence can be classified in four types according to Briceño-León and Zubillaga (2002: 20). The first type of violence is structural violence, which is embedded in the structures of society and is seen in the condition of everyday life. The second is symbolic violence, which has a stigmatizing aim in order to gain power for certain groups by marginalizing others. Thirdly, psychological violence is violence that causes mental or emotional harm through interpersonal contact, threats or mistreatment of specific individuals or groups. Fourth is interpersonal violence that is characterized by physical violence in direct interactions between people. A further typification of violence is offered by Briceño-León and Zubillaga (2002: 21), in which they distinct expressive violence (in order to assert a feature of identity), emotive violence (expression of rage) and functional violence (obtain or maintain political, social, economic power). These types of violence do not exclude each other, but are often interrelated in reality. In this research the subject of focus is community violence, which can contain all these above types of violence. Community violence in this research is defined as violence that manifests itself on the streets or in public space within a community. An important distinction must be made from domestic violence that manifests itself within the boundaries of the house.

Causes and consequences
The factors underlying violence in Latin America are multidimensional and intertwined; it is difficult to define the causality of the factors. Nevertheless, the following will address some characteristics of Latin America and its society, which have contributed to the increase of violence.

First, the political history of Latin America with many civil wars shows a legacy of violence in the region. These civil wars instigated the use and widespread distribution of firearms (Abramovay et al. 2002: 59), which contributed to the lethality of crime and violence. Second, national and international state interventions in the 1990s drove many disappointed citizens from their rural areas to the large cities, which caused overpopulation of the cities and forced housing in shantytowns for many poor migrants (Davis 2004: 11). This impoverishment increased inequality and social exclusion and meant a degradation of the welfare state (Briceño-León & Zubillaga 2002: 21). With consumption patterns being raised through commercials in the media, which were not realizable for the urban poor, the exclusion they experienced became tangible and a hot bed for the new, urban violence was created.

Briceño-León and Zubillaga (2002: 24) argue that the rise of urban violence in Latin America has its roots in five interrelated processes. First, an increase of the profitable drug market and drug trafficking, which meant an increase in drug-related violence. Second the enormous growth of the use of firearms gave crime a more violent character. The third process is an increase in unrealizable consumption wishes, which are met through violent crimes. Fourth, the generalized fear among the population and stigmatization of the poor as deviant and violent play a large role. Last, Briceño-León and Zubillaga (2002: 24) point out that fear raises support for extralegal action by the police among citizens. They demand responses of the police beyond the limits of the law.

Besides these social aspects that have influenced the rise of violence, the lack of efficiency of state institutions and judicial system which causes impunity, are put forward as factors that contribute to the rise of urban violence by Abramovay (2002: 60). It is no coincidence that the most violent urban areas have a clear absence of state institutions, which offers opportunity for violence to prosper. Because of these governance voids, the use of violence by civilians becomes a matter of creating social structure that was not present in the neighbourhoods (Rodgers 2006: 269). As Koonings and Kruijt (2007: 12) put it strikingly, the urban areas have become characterized by their 'unrule of law'.

Consequently, violence creates dangerous situations. Especially the streets and squares are dangerous places to be when dealing with youth or gang violence, because of the many escalations between gangs on the streets (Rodgers 2006: 277). With the constant possibility of being victimized, many poor and middle class citizens feel that they live in a 'state of siege' in their city. They experience constant insecurity, restriction of their freedom and fear of going into a public area. As a consequence social fabric has eroded and cooperation and solidarity has shattered (Rodgers 2006: 277). The impunity, due to failing judicial systems also raises insecurity and fear amongst the people; and raises opportunity amongst the part of the population that chooses the road of violence. The lack of power and action of the judicial system and the police drives civilians into

taking matters into their own hands, if they want justice to be served (Abramovay 2002: 60). The inability of the state institutions in handling violence, results in a lack of trust in the state on social, political and institutional levels.

Children and community violence

The consequences of violence as described above are very present for children and adolescents. With around half of the population in Latin America being under 18 years of age (Fletes Corona 2004: 175), children and adolescents count for a significant part of society. In addressing violence, children and adolescents are a particular vulnerable group. As Perdomo describes (2004: 200) children and adolescents are often seen as inferior citizens. Abramovay (2002: 55) adds that they have little rights, are the property of their parents, are left aside and denied their right to a full social, material and educational or working life.

Role of children in urban violence

Within urban violence, and especially the violence that occurs in their neighbourhood, children are either victims, perpetrators or both. Especially children that live in poorer households and neighbourhoods are confronted with daily community violence. This violence and its effect on children cannot be seen apart from the broader context of risks and insecurity in the community. These are for instance poverty, domestic violence, and a lack of decent education and labour prospects (Garbarino 2001: 363). Community violence mostly entails various interrelated types of violence and can be seen as a community phenomenon. Therefore, children are exposed to a diversity of violence they cannot escape (Shields et al. 2007: 599). Many children in urban areas do not have a place in their community where they feel safe and instead have a constant feeling of fear.

Stigmatization of the poor has its effect on children as well. They are seen by the middle and upper class as the future perpetrators and delinquents, that cannot help falling into a life of crime (Fletes Corona 2004: 180). This stigma can be very dangerous for youth as it takes away their agency and could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, children from poor violent neighbourhoods see few roads towards a satisfying adult life. They lack in education and job opportunities, which makes the prospect for a decent life difficult, while a life in violence is easily accessible (Téllez, 2002). The use of violence is a way for youth to search for an identity as well. Violence and violent groups give adolescents and children a sense of belonging and identity (Abramovay 2002: 57).

The impact of urban violence on children

Even though violence seems an attractive option for some children and adolescents, this does not mean that the impact of violence for these and other children is any less. In

research that Shields et al. conducted in Cape Town, South Africa on the effects of community violence on children, exposure to community violence was found to be a cause for severe distress (2007: 598). It has a great impact on children and their families even if they are not directly involved in the violence (Swick 2008). Witnessing violence or hearing about violence creates an environment of fear and insecurity. When hearing of violent incidents that they did not witness themselves, children form mental representation of the violent incident and replay this event in their minds (Margolin & Gordis 2000: 448). Hearing about violence has as much, as not more effect on the child than witnessing it, because these representations can be made more fearful than they in reality were. The more a child witnesses violence the larger the effect of distress is. However, this does strangely enough not go for the witnessing murder, which seems to have a numbing effect on children (Shields et al. 2007: 589).

Especially when the violence is of chronic nature, it can create an atmosphere of high anxiety, distrust and chaos within the family relations (Swick 2008). As Aguirre states in Téllez (2002) when violence is a constant part of the lives of the children, it becomes normalized. With a chronic absence of security and a constant fear of being violated or your loved ones being violated, life loses its value (Téllez, 2002). When children have trouble understanding the reason or cause for dangerous situations and when they are not able to give meaning to the situation, they have a hard time coping with it (Garbarino 2001: 368). When children have the idea that they can control or predict the violence, the distress they experience because of it will decrease (Shields et al. 2007: 590). Parents, teachers or other trusted adults can give an explanation to the child and offer a positive outlook contribute greatly to the welfare of the child, when even these trusted adults are demoralized, the child looses all prospect (Garbarino 2001: 372).

The impact of violence on the lives of children has various outcomes. Margolin and Gordis (2000) describe some of them in their article on the effect of family and community violence on children. Exposure to community violence is linked to anti-social activities, aggressive behaviour, post traumatic stress symptoms, delayed cognitive development and poor academic performance of children. Further being victimized or witnessing violence that involves people that the child knows, causes depression and internalizing problems such as anxiety. The ability of children to form relations with others is affected by the exposure to violence as well. Both through the negative effect of the stress caused by violence on the parenting skills of their parents, as through a lack of resources that children can turn to for support in time of need. Without a positive relation with their parents, a secure home situation and the benefits of a support system, children are hindered in forming secure relationships with others.

The severity of the consequences of violence for children is influenced by different factors. Factors that include the nature of the violence are: the proximity of the violence, the brutality of it, the emotional bond that the child has with the victim, in witnessing or hearing about the violence and the continuous presence of the violence. Another factor that is of influence on the severity of the consequences of violence is the supportive relations that the child has in his family or with other persons (Margolin & Gordis 2000: 468). Many of the children in urban warzones suffer from a posttraumatic stress disorder, that involves not being able to cope effectively with the psychological responses to the stress they experience due to the present violence or threat of violence in their everyday life (Garbarino 2001: 368). Shields et al. (2007: 594) found no gender differences in the amount of violence exposure or distress from this exposure. What can be stated though, is the likelihood of the different kind of violence that boys and girls are exposed to, such as sexual violence and violent crimes.

Coping with violence
Being violated, witnessing violence and living in a neighbourhood that is surrounded by violence, are circumstances that some children deal with everyday. The constant violent environment the children live in make them search for a way to cope with this violence rather than strategies to solve the problem of violence, as often the violence seems to be unsolvable. Here lies an important notion in dealing with coping strategies. Often coping strategies are seen as strategies of resolving a problem. However problem solving and coping are interrelated, they are two distinct concepts (Moser & McIlwaine 2004: 178).

Moser and McIlwaine (2004: 179) identify five coping strategies: avoidance, confrontation, conciliation, reporting and submitting, of which avoidance and confrontation are adopted most often. *Avoidance* is a coping strategy in which children withdraw to live in silence and isolation from the surrounding violence. This is the most frequently used coping strategy, according to Téllez (2002). This strategy is often used by children that are usually shy and internalize their behaviour (Margolin & Gordis 2000: 468). Avoiding is adopted because of fear of retaliation, powerlessness and the fear of making the situation worse (Moser & McIlwaine 2004: 179). For girls their appearances are often changed, it is important to dress decent and wear no skirts. The *confrontation* strategy is less common and is mostly associated with violent youth with a "kill them before they kill me" mentality. Hitting back, screaming and biting during rape (Moser & McIlwaine 2004: 181), or joining the violence and picking up arms themselves are also part of this strategy (Téllez, 2002). Children that usually show acting out behaviour, tend to adopt this coping strategy (Margolin & Gordis 2000: 468). The confidence in and use of religion by praying, or getting to know the (possible) perpetrators are strategies used to protect oneself through *conciliation* (Moser & McIlwaine 2004: 181). *Reporting* crimes

is another way of dealing with the violent acts surrounding the neighbourhood. This strategy is often inhibited by the lack of trust in the state institutions and the judicial system. (Moser & McIlwaine 2004: 182) Sometimes *submitting* oneself to the violence and let the perpetrators rob or rape you, can be a way of coping with what is bound to happen. In this case often it is used as a way of 'be brave and deal with it as it comes'.

The coping strategies the children and adolescents have adopted can be inadequate, but might be the only way they know. With early intervention the child can be thought better ways to cope with the stress and insecurity around him before the inadequate strategies are too far integrated in the child's life (Shields et al. 2007: 589). Variables that may influence the coping strategies of children are cognitive flexibility, the ability to adapt to new situations and tolerating change. The more the child has obtained these three variables, the more able it is to adjust and cope with the violence in an effective way (Margolin & Gordis 2000: 468).

In the so-called urban war zones children often lack a sense of security, when their family, community workers or school cannot offer this security to them, many of them reach out to youth groups such as gangs in order to cope with the ongoing insecurity, experience a sense of belonging and financial support (Garbarino 2001: 366). Once in a gang, children or adolescents are directly involved in violence and becoming a perpetrator themselves is just a small step.

Prevention

One preferable step ahead of coping is prevention. Because research shows that when adolescents have been a victim of violence in their childhood they run a high risk of become perpetrators in their future life (Abramovay 2002: 59), nowadays there is more and more attention for developing programs in order to prevent children and adolescents from lapsing (again) into violence. There are three levels of prevention that generally determine the focus of the prevention program. The first, primary prevention, has programs that focus on preventing children or adolescents to become involved in violence themselves. An example are programs that respond to the adolescents' need to expressing his identity. It appeared that many adolescents and children turn to violence in order to give them identity and express their anger and dissatisfaction with the situation as it is (Abramovay 2002: 76). Secondary prevention aims at for instance decreasing the negative affect that community violence has on community members. These are programs that prevent the situation from aggravating, such as teaching programs about non-violent solutions to problems or early response to trauma with children. Tertiary prevention focuses on preventing something to happen again. So programs here focus on rehabilitation for youth, or on increasing trust within the community (Garbarino 2001: 375).

Preventing youth from turning to violence is not only the task of the youth themselves but can be facilitated by their surroundings. By promoting more cohesion and positive and trusting interaction within a neighbourhood, marginalized groups that are particular vulnerable for violence can be integrated into society (Abramovay 2002: 66). Parenting skills, family structures and the amount of social support that is offered to the child are positive influences on the effect of exposure to violence (Shields et al. 2007: 590).

Community violence in Caracas put in context
Venezuela seems to be a perfect case-study for a research about the effect of violence. It has become the number one most violent country of the world. This makes it a hotbed for urban (youth) violence, especially in Caracas (Koonings & Kruijt 2007: 93). As has become clear from public opinion studies, the biggest concerns of inhabitants from Venezuela are violence and insecurity (Sanjuán 2002: 88) There is a constant fear of becoming a victim in Venezuela and especially Caracas, a city that in the past decadehas been characterized by growing relative poverty, fragmentation of public life and continuous crisis on political, economic and social areas.

Looking at the statistics of violence, there is only one conclusion to draw: Venezuela and especially its capital Caracas is overwhelmed with violence. As Briceño-León states in a report[6] executed for Laborotorio de Ciencias Sociales (LACSO), in 2007 Venezuela counted 13.157 homicides, which is 49 per 100.000 persons. In 2008 the number of homicides increased to 14600, which is 52 per 100.000, and 2009 will most likely know an increase as well. Compared to the world average is 8.8 homicides, Venzuela can be considered as en extremely violent country with its epicentre in the capital Caracas.

Causes from a historical and political view
The underlying causes for the amount of violence and criminality, are diverse and so often intertwined that they cannot be distinguished well. As could be read earlier, the danger lies in oversimplifying the situation. However, there are some factors that seem to be characteristic for the situation in Venezuela and therefore deserve attention here.

Venezuela knows a long history of violence (Velásquez 2004: 51). The violence that characterized Venezuelan society began to change in the 1980s with a shift from political violence to economic and social violence (Farías 2006: 59). But, as many agree, the transition to these new types of violence had its real onset in 1989 with days of excessive use of violence, which were named the '*caracazo*'. In these days the dissatisfaction of the citizens about the economical situation came to an outburst and

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[6] Report LACSO-Alfa. 'Inseguridad y Violencia en Venezuela, informe 2008, Caracas'.

violence took hold over Caracas and Venezuela. Inhabitants of Caracas responded to the violence with self-made curfews, avoidance of public spaces and private security measures such as fenced houses (Márquez 1999: 24), which still is the case today.

Besides this, Venezuela knows a contradictory political structure being a democratic state while the majority of the inhabitants are denied many of their civil, political and social rights (Sanjuán 2002: 89). The inefficiency of state institutions and the judicial system makes Venezuela a country where "crime pays" and a culture of illegality characterizes the country (Sanjuán 2002: 90). The inefficiency feeds the violent culture further through the use of citizen's violent alternatives for the state institutions in order to seek justice. Sanjuán (ibid) speaks of a 'cycle of violence' that haunts Venezuela, where violence is present in both public and private life.

Another part of the cause for the violent situation in Venezuela is offered in Márquez (1999: 88). Márquez states that the disintegration of the Venezuelan family, with many young mothers left alone raising their children, especially in the poorer societies. In these families the mother has a central position being responsible not only for raising her children but as well for the financial situation of the family, with the man no longer being present. Ninoska Zambrano[7] of the non-governmental organization Fundana that provides complete care for children that are in court custody, shares the opinion that especially the poor households live under great daily pressure. This stress is the cause for caregivers of the children, mostly mothers and grandparents, to be easily agitated and fall into methods of child raising that entails physical and verbal punishment or neglect. Rosa Devesa from Fondenima[8], an organization that works on prevention of child mistreatment, adds that these single mothers are often young and their frustration as well is a product of an unwanted teenage pregnancy and therefore changed life. The unstable families cannot offer a safe, nurturing haven for children. As Zambrano explains, children often are left alone in the house when their parents are working. Therefore they spend much of their time on the streets where no adults are present to guide them in life outside the house. On the street the so-called *malandros*[9] are awaiting the children to help them, give them a sense of belonging and welcome them into a life of crime.

Another cultural phenomenon that Rosa Devesa of Fondenima mentions are the 'spoiled children'. She states that children in Venezuela are spoiled in a material way by their family. Consumption is an important feature in Venezuela and children are used to get what they desire. And indeed it can be observed that children are rather well dressed

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[7] Ninoska Zambrano is a psychologist at Fundana. Date of interview: 12-04-2010.
[8] Rosa Devesa, social worker at FONDENIMA in the children's hospital. Date of interview: 25-02-2010.
[9] *Malandro* is the Venezuelan name for a criminal or crook. In popular language a *malandro* indicates a gang member from the *barrios*.

for being member of the lower-class. Devesa thinks that when children are used to get everything they want, their aim will get higher and higher. When a parent cannot afford buying material goods for their children the children will start stealing to keep their consumption pattern up. Delinquent and probably violent behaviour is the outcome.

3. Display of community violence in the *barrios* of Caracas

We see everything and hear everything.
The *barrio* has no secrets for us.[10]

Caracas is a violent city, especially the *barrios* are seen as the epicentre of violence. But what do the children notice of this? Does living in a *barrio* mean that experiencing violence is inevitable? These questions will be answered in this chapter by offering a look into one of the slums in Caracas: Cotiza. Through a description of both the family members of the children and the children themselves about their life in a violent culture, it will become clear to what extend violent practices are a part of the daily life of the children. In addition, there will be offered insight into the main violent actors and the various types of violence that children have to deal with.

Life in the *barrio*
The streets here are steep and get narrower the higher up in the *barrio* you get. The street scenery is quiet, there is nothing to be found besides an occasional street dog or neighbour who watches over the street from the door post of his house. At some street corners small groups of young men can be found: the *malandros*. They talk quietly, smoke and observe the few people that pass by. Cotiza seems to be a quiet place where doors are closed, people stay inside and houses are secured by gates. The higher uphill you live in the *barrio*, the poorer you are. This is seen by the way the houses are constructed, with cardboard roofs and small rooms that house up to ten people. But even in the centre of the *barrio* the houses look like brick containers and are built on top of each other, along the narrow streets that have no name. Space is scarce here and families live close to one another. Eight year old Hernan lives here with his family. The first part of the house is of the uncles and cousins of Hernan. On the first floor, which is reached by a steep stair without handrails, the house of Hernan is located. Here he lives with his mother, his older sister and her daughter. Their house exists of a bedroom for Hernan and his mother, a room for toys and storage, and a room for his sister and his niece. The house shows many loose bricks that make up unstable walls and it has a rooftop of cardboard. There is an outdoor space of two square meter to sit and for the children to play. Hernan does not know his father, neither does his niece. Both women raise their children without a man around.

The streets around the house are not as violent as some place here in the neighbourhood, according to the mother of Hernan. But nevertheless she will not let Hernan play outside alone or with friends. 'During the day there are not many people

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[10] Alonsa, nine years old.

here, but at night it is a place where drugs is sold and prostitutes sometimes work', tells the mother of Hernan[11]. It is not a safe place for children. She does not understand that some parents let their children be on the streets until 23.00h. This is very irresponsible in her eyes. Hernan does not have many playmates. He plays with his cousins, friends in school or at the centre. His mother does not allow him to play at the house of other children:

> You cannot trust the parents if you do not know them well. There might be people at the house that are involved in drugs, that smoke or participate in delinquent activities. I do not want Hernan involved in such practices.[12]

She wants to protect Hernan from bad influences. The mother of Hernan knows many people in the neighbourhood, but is not close to most of them. 'We keep to ourselves,' she states, 'that is the safest way to live around here.'

Living in community violence

The threat of violence that the mother of Hernan experiences from possible violent actors within the drug and prostitution scene, can be seen as what Briceño-León and Zubillaga (2002: 20) call structural violence. This structural violence is embedded in the culture of a society and is present in daily life. Besides this, more extreme incidents occur as well. The mother of Hernan explains that six months ago a few streets from their home someone was shot. One of the *malandros* of the other part of the *barrio* took a shot at one of the *malandros* from this part of the *barrio*. There were many stray bullets and the situation was very dangerous, all the more because the shooting happened at midday when people are on the street getting home from school or work. Shootings like these are incidents, but as can be read every week in the newspapers, they occur often in the *barrios*. And therefore contribute to the constant feeling of fear. The mother of Hernan tells: 'Since then people are more scared. Children are not allowed by their mothers to walk alone or play on the streets.' She is worried about the situation in which she has to raise her son.

> Fortunately Hernan does not notice everything. He knows that he has to look out and be careful and I tell him why, but I do not think that he feels the insecurity yet. He still lives a bit in ignorance. This is better for now.[13]

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[11] Date of interview with Hernan and his mother: 06-05-2010.
[12] Intreview with the mother of Hernan, date: 06-05-2010.
[13] Intreview with the mother of Hernan, date: 06-05-2010.

I think about the little walk I took with Hernan and his mother on our way to their house. Hernan kept asking to play on the street with me. His mother allowed it, but I remember the cautious look on her face. Hernan did not seem to care about safety, he just wanted to play. Moving to another part of town that is safer will not happen according to the mother of Hernan: 'This is where I have lived my whole life. We will not move from here.' The idea of another place to live is unimaginable for many people. Despite the danger, insecurity and violent environment, moving is not an option. 'Where would we go? And how would we pay for that?', is the reaction of the grandmother of Alonsa[14], a nine year old girl that goes to the centre Las Torres of ACEISB, just like Hernan. The grandmother tells me about her son who got murdered a little more uphill in the neighbourhood. He was shot in his shoulder and bled to death. She thinks the perpetrator might be a gang member from the other part of the neighbourhood. Nobody had seen a thing or at least they said so, according to the grandmother. She could have tried to retaliate the death with her family, but what good would that have done?

The shootings that the mother of Hernan and the grandmother of Alonsa speak about are an example of interpersonal violence (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 2002: 20). This type of violence occurs often in Caracas and is besides the structural violence the cause of feeling of constant insecurity on the streets. The unpredictable character of these 'outbursts' of interpersonal violence, is the reason that it creates a sphere of fear, according to a shop owner in Cotiza.[15] The grandmother of Alonsa is happy that the children did not see it. They do not need to be more scared due of the sight of a shooting than they already are. She tells me that it is unsafe on the streets here at all times. She rather does not have the children walking on the streets alone. But it happens anyway, she explains, and then she has to go out to find them when she thinks they are away too long. Fortunately, the children are very busy. They have school and the centre to keep them occupied on weekdays, computer lessons on Saturday and church on Sunday. This way she avoids them hanging around on the streets too much.

Logically the children are scared sometimes. According to the grandmother, Alonsa and her sister hear and see everything that goes on around the house. Everyone is a bit scared. But that is normal here, 'what can we do about it?', she asks herself: 'The best thing is to keep away from people with problems. You should not go looking for trouble, then you will end up getting it.' During my conversation with her grandmother, Alonsa walks in. She greets me and makes herself a snack. When she sits in front of the television a neighbour calls for her at the door. She picks up some cigarettes and sells them to the man. She has an adult-like look in her eyes doing this.

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[14] Interview with Alonsa and her Grandmother, date: 05-05-2010.
[15] Date of interview: 24-04-2010.

The distant looks that seem to tell the many things these children have seen and been through, can be seen with many children of the centre. Allyse[16] is another example. She is 11 years old and covered with round marks on her arms and legs, possibly cigarette burns, although she does not want to tell me what the marks are. She has a pale, wildish expression on her face and is very skinny. She often shows nervous and anxious behaviour and seems to be on her guard at all times. One day she came to the centre with a large cut on her arm. She hurt herself while making dinner for the family, she explained. Allyse lives uphill in the neighbourhood in a single-room house without solid brick walls or a firm roof. When it rains everything in the house gets wet and the family has no dry clothes to wear, nor a dry mattress to sleep on. Allyse lives with her mother, aunt, sisters and cousins. They are with ten persons in total. Her mother is a prostitute and now pregnant with the next child. Who the fathers are of her children she does not know. The family lives in a very unsafe area where *malandros* live and with many of her mothers' customers being drunk men. One of her neighbours, a 15 year old girl, used to go to the centre at Las Torres as well. Now she works as a prostitute, just like her female family members. It is the only future she knows. And as the headmaster of ACEISB thinks, it will be the only future for Allyse as well.

A child's point of view on violence the *barrio*

In describing their *barrio*, the children mention some good things such as being able to go to school and playing with their cousins at home. But mostly they speak about the things they dislike. Romina, a nine year old girl at the centre Las Torres, knows many people who are sick. They have cancer, aids or 'bacteria's that bother them'. As well she sees a lot of litter on the streets, graffiti on the walls and chaos on the streets by the passing motorbikes. The last thing she mentions are children and adults that are crying. She feels sorry for them, probably they have been fighting or their family is sick. Here violence does not seem to be the first thing on her mind. Unlike Romina, Florita[17] does seem to be preoccupied with the violent situation. She explains that she sees many 'bad people' in the streets. They are *malandros* hanging around and looking for trouble. She knows about them from her mother, who warned Florita for them. With this input of Florita the other girls that are sitting aside her, are now loudly speaking about stories they have heard of people being robbed. All have a mother, aunt or neighbour that has been robbed of her purse or mobile phone. It becomes clear that these children have heard about many violence incidents.

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[16] Allyse, eleven years old.
[17] Florita, eight years old.

Florita and Alonsa have the opinion that most people are scared because there are so many robberies. They see others getting robbed or molested. Florita, tells how she watched a bakery getting robbed:

> There were some men that ran towards the bakery and shouted at the boss. (…) I think they had guns. It was scary; the boss came out crying and screaming.[18]

Alonsa, interrupts her:

> Yes, we all see these things don't we? People are getting robbed for their mobile phone. This happened to my mother, my aunt and the neighbour.[19]

Romina adds:

> And car robberies as well. You know, we know everything. We see it and hear it from our mothers who are reading the newspapers. We hear people talking all the time.[20]

The normality of seeing and hearing about violent acts is striking. Florita explains that children can be a victim too. And that a robbery can happen anytime, 'you never know when'. These children have seen and met many victims of robbery, many of which are family members or neighbours. They are aware of the danger of being mugged and show fear for this happening to themselves and the people they love as well. They make clear that in their neighbourhood everybody is a possible victim and therefore all feel threatened by the violence in the *barrios*.

However it can be questioned to what extend these children actually have seen robberies. Especially the younger children sometimes tell stories that seem too fantastic to be genuine. For instance children attribute heroic roles to themselves. An example of this is Barto, an eight year old boy who told me about a *malandro* he saw on the street. Barto thought this man might had killed someone. He got scared and ran home as fast as he could. Up till here the story seems credible. After this Barto told me the following:

> But what really happened after that, I got my friends, they have guns you know. We went to the *malandro* and I threw stones at him and yelled. My friends as well. (…) I beat him and I wasn't scared or anything.[21]

This part seems to be rich in fantasy and might be a wish of Barto to be able to defeat the *malandros* that he is scared of. The last comment of Barto in which he puts an

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[18] Interview with Florita, date 14-04-2010.
[19] Interview with Alonsa, date 14-04-2010.
[20] Interview with Romina, date 14-04-2010.
[21] Date of interview: 22-04-2010.

emphasis on not being scared of the *malandro*, is a comment that often occurs in interviews, mainly with boys. Even when in the course of the interview they stated to have been scared or sad, they will deny this at the end of the interview.

The violent actors

The *malandros* the children talk about are most likely member of one of the *bandas*[22] or gangs. The *barrios* all know their *bandas*. Cotiza is no exception. The *malandros* often hang out on the streets and have regular encounters with *malandros* from the other *bandas* from areas around them. The violence that can be seen on these streets varies. Newspapers write about homicides mostly. These occur in the *barrios* in fights between the different *bandas*, or more likely during kidnapping or robbery. The violence that the *malandros* show exceeds all borders according to Alejandro Moreno[23]. Moreno is a researcher at Centro Investigaciones Populares (CIP) specialized in research on violence in Caracas. As he states: 'The limit of the violence shown when killing a person is the amount of bullets in their gun'. There is no limit to the extremities that are shown in robberies, homicides and encounters between *bandas*. Alejandro Moreno[24] discovered in interviews for research he conducted about gang related violence, that *malandros* find it a necessary element of their membership to kill. In these killings the way that the other is killed is important, the bloodier, the better. According to Moreno these *malandros* feel no remorse or guilt and have an indifferent attitude towards the violence they use. With this in mind it is not surprising that in a research of Cecodap[25] it became clear that in far the most cases of social violence against adolescents and children involved injuries by firearms and of these many are homicides. Especially for boys, who have a bigger change to become a victim of social violence than girls, public space is the place that most violence is encountered.

Gregorio Perez[26], a coordinator at the organization Luz y Vida, is of the opinion that children in *barrios* indeed see much violence such as robberies, homicides and shootings:

> It is no longer that shocking for them anymore. Most of them have a father, cousin or uncle that died because of violence. And many see their family members sell drugs and use firearms.[27]

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[22] *Bandas* is the Venezuelan name for gangs.
[23] Date of interview: 18-03-2010
[24] Date of interview: 19-04-2010.
[25] Source: newspaper El Universal, 'La violencia doméstica se ensaña con los menores de seis años' by Giuliana Chiappe. Date: 22-01-2010.
[26] Date of interview: 04-05-2010.
[27] Date of interview: 04-05-2010.

The most violent are the young men who are on drugs. These young men have no control over themselves, according to a sixty year old inhabitant of Cotiza[28]. He adds that it are not only men who use violence, but women as well. According to him children see their mothers fight with other women. 'It is an ugly sight,' he states. That this is true is confirmed by Ria, a nine year old girl[29], who tells me that she sees her mother fight a lot. Her mother often has arguments with neighbours. During these arguments they shout at each other, use abusive language and sometimes even hit each other or throw things at one another. Ria says that she hates it when this happens.

The hidden violence: domestic and school violence

In observing the streets and public space, there could be seen a lot of something that generally stays behind closed doors: domestic violence. Although this research does not cover domestic violence, it will be named here as being part of the violent culture in public space and life on the streets and therefore being visible for children. Couples can be seen fighting with each other, in as much a verbal as physical manner. It is not uncommon either to see parents yell at their child, give it a slap in the face, grab it with force or simply ignore their child. This seems to be the tip of the iceberg of the phenomenon domestic violence, of which many children suffer. In a research of Fundacredesa[30] it became clear that 70.7% of the children suffer from violent punishment by their caretakers. Physical punishment is deeply rooted in the Venezuelan culture. According to Unicef[31], in the same newspaper article, eighty percent of the parents find maltreatment a natural part of child raising. Maltreatment here withholds a diversity of actions, such as physical and verbal aggression, violation and sexual abuse.

Besides the violence on the streets and within the family, Cecodap found that school is the second most violent place for school going children. In its report[32], where it draws up the balance of 2008-2009, it states that school is not a safe place to be for children, as it reflects the violent situation on the street. Rosa Devesa of Fondenima[33] states that many teachers show a lack of norms and do not search for an effective, non-violent way to deal with their pupils. She does feel for the teachers having 35 children in their classroom and tells me that she imagines it being hard work to keep children that are violent themselves studying quietly. More than teachers, it are the children themselves that show the majority of the violence present in schools. Within classrooms,

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[28] Date of interview: 24-04-2010.
[29] Date of interview: 06-05-2010.
[30] Source: newspaper El Universal, 'Sociedad acepta violencia infantile. Mas de 70% de los menores de edad reciben castigos fisicos o humilantes', by Giuliana Chiappe. Date: 17-08-2009.
[31] Source: newspaper El Universal, 'Sociedad acepta violencia infantile. Mas de 70% de los menores de edad reciben castigos fisicos o humilantes', by Giuliana Chiappe. Date: 17-08-2009.
[32] Report of Cecodap: Balance Venezuela Octubre 2008/Septiembre 2009. Impacto de las differentes formas de la violencia contra las niñas, niños y adolescentes.
[33] Date of interview: 25-02-2010.

on the playground or in the hallway these children show behaviour that they see on the streets or in their home.

Concluding remarks

The violence that is displayed in the neighbourhood of the children can be classified as structural violence and interpersonal violence. The two interchange in daily life and are the cause for a constant threat of violence. Children know about this threat and feel this threat themselves from their own experiences or stories that they have heard from their surroundings. It is no understatement to say that children live amongst violence, both of a more structural and incidental nature.

4. The effect of community violence on children in the *barrios* of Caracas

Yes, life in the *barrios* isn't easy[34]

With this above phrase Barto recapitulates the effect that community violence has on his life. It does not make his life any easier he concludes. As could be seen in the former chapter, Caracas knows much violence that unfortunately reaches children as well. The children that live in the *barrio* see, hear or experience the violence in their daily life. What is the effect of this? What limitations do these children experience because of the ongoing unsafe situation in their neighbourhood? In this following chapter I will deliberate on the different areas in which children are affected by community violence, but starting with the factors that influence the severity of the effect caused by community violence.

The severity of the effect

Children are an especially vulnerable group when it come to dealing with a severe topic such as violence. As a sixty year old inhabitant of Cotiza says[35], children are sponges and they absorb everything they hear and see, among this as well the community violence. Both Garbarino (2001: 372) and Shields et al (2007: 590) state that when a child feels that it can control the violence or understand it the severity of the negative effect of violence is less. While when a parent or other important adult is demoralized, the child loses all hope. In Caracas the most common conclusion after a conversation or interview on the topic of violence is: 'What can we do about it? We will just have to live with it.' This demoralized phrase is a reaction on the lack of predictability of community violence in the *barrios*. Violence can happen anytime, anyplace and to anyone. Children learn this as well and are warned for it. It is unthinkable for most that the situation ever will be any different. And most children do not know any better. They only know their own neighbourhood.

Besides the lack of control children have over predicting violence, they lack control over their own lives, which makes them extra vulnerable. Ninoska Zambrano of the non-governmental organization Fundana[36] agrees with Perdomo (2004: 200) that children are looked upon and treated as inferior citizens and the property of their parents. Only recently in the past decennium the rights of children have been broadened in Venezuela,

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[34] Barto, eight years old, date of interview: 22-04-2010.
[35] Date of interview 24-04-2010.
[36] Date of interview: 12-04-2010.

but culturally children are still not seen as full-fledged people that have the right to a healthy social, emotional and educational life.

It may be clear that children are a particularly vulnerable group, not only due to their lack of control and agency but as well because of their own imagination. When children hear about violence of others instead of witnessing it themselves they try to visualize the event in their minds and replay this imagination in their head. The fear and insecurity that derive from the imagination which often is more fearful than the actual event, can be larger than when a child sees the real event happening. This could be seen in the stories of earlier introduced eight year old Barto. His stories are often wild and full of guns and fighting and seem never ending. He does give himself a heroic part in this representations, which could mean he experiences some sort of control in his stories. Romina[37] of nine years old also seems to fantasize about stories she heard. She tells me about a time she sat in the bus and saw a *malandro* rob the bus driver. The story has many chasings, gunshots and people screaming and crying. It might be true, but as well it might be a representation of what in fact she heard. Whatever it maybe, the conclusion is that Romina now is afraid to go into a bus. Ramirez[38] of eight years old, tells me that sometimes he hears a shot at night when he is in his bed. After this he starts to think about what happened, how it happened, who fired the gun, for whom it was meant, and if he is still safe or if they can find him in his bed. Thinking about events like these make children be occupied with violence in their head, which will contribute to the fear they might already feel.

Fantasizing about the violence children hear about can make them more scared, and when this lasts for a long period of time a sphere of anxiety can be the consequence (Swick 2008). However, as Aguirre states in Téllez (2002), chronic violence can have a numbing effect as well. With this last effect violence and insecurity becomes normalized and life loses its value. Both can be seen in behaviour of the children I spoke to in Caracas. On the one hand children like Allyse, an eleven year old girl, that grow up in the rougher parts uphill the *barrio* have a wildish, nervous look over them. They seem constantly agitated and on their guard. On the other hand when talking about violence to the children they seem no longer shocked or surprised. When presenting situations to the children related to violence, such as seeing a gun on the streets or encountering a *malandro*, a common reaction is: 'Oh, that is bad'. The younger children of eight or nine years old are startled by the situations and having to imagine what to do in those cases. But the older children of ten and eleven years old say that these situations are not new to them. Some of the situations even have become normal. They say: 'I have seen many knifes,' or: 'My cousin has a gun, I have held it before'. Here, there seems to be a

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[37] Date of interview: 05-05-2010.
[38] Date of interview: 06-05-2010.

difference in impact of violence between children who already have much experience in dealing with violence themselves and children who have dealt with it from hearsay without experiencing it themselves.

On a cultural level chronic violence can have impact as well. As Ninoska Zambrano of Fundana[39] and Aguirre (in: Téllez, 2002) agrees, the violent culture in Caracas and the maltreatment at home teach the children on early age that their life is not worth much:

> Children and adolescents think since their own life is not worth anything, that of others' is not either. This makes it easier for them to decide about someone's life when holding a gun.[40]

Although this reaction on the violent culture may sound extreme and certainly is not true for all children, it does notifies us about a tendency in which children are able to be involved in violence not only as victims but as well as violent actors due to the impact of violence around them.

The effect on a functional and physical level

On the level of everyday life children experience impairments due to the violence in their community. On a physical level for instance due to direct experience of being in contact with a violent actor or on a functional level due to limitation in their mobility. Although the effect of violence in this rather practical level, seems to be a obvious and logical effect, there is a lack of theoretical response to it. As can be seen in the following paragraphs, there is a lack of theory on the functional and physical effect, instead theory seems to be directed at the emotional and behavioural effects more. Nevertheless, in the field, children do experience a great deal of physical limitations and impairments due to community violence. Therefore in this subsection this will be discussed based mainly on the stories of the children and their surroundings.

Gisela Garcés[41] has encountered many children with severe bruises and contusions in her centres. Mostly these are due to domestic violence in their homes, but as well children that were not attended to enough and therefore encountered violence on the street and occasionally by a teacher or child at school. As well Ninoska Zambrano, who gives shelter to abused and maltreated children, tells me that she just took in four boys in the age of one to seven years old. These boys have been beaten, cut, burned with cigarettes and whipped. She explains that the physical punishment and experience with violence can cause delays in the development of the children. The children are not only affected by violence in a physical way themselves, as well are their direct

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[39] Date of interview: 12-04-2010.
[40] Interview with Ninoska Zambrano of the organization Fundana, date: 12-04-2010.
[41] Gisela Garces, headmaster of *ACEISB*. Date of interview 03-03-2010.

surroundings. As Lucia Martinez[42], a teacher at the organization Luz y Vida explains, many children have the experience that their father, uncle or cousin is killed by violence. Often these are encounters with a *malandro*, or by hitting a stray bullet. This leaves children with grief and having to miss their family member.

Ria and Florita[43] mention that they are not allowed by their mother to play on the streets; because of the 'bad people' that walk around. Their mothers have warned them many times that the streets are unsafe and that it is possible to get killed there. Ria, tells me that she cannot play everywhere because the streets in Cotiza, and especially her part of the *barrio*, are dangerous. Her mother does not allow her to play on the street. Furthermore there is a playfield near her house. This field is a sandy motor cross area where people dump their old furniture. Here the older children hang around. Ria went there a couple of times, but the older children kept teasing and fighting with the younger children so she does not feel safe to go there anymore. Besides these areas the children cannot name any play areas that are safe for them.

Magda and Reya[44], both teachers at the centre Las Torres of ACEISB explain that during the day many children are on the street. In the process of creating a map of the area around the centre, they explain that Cotiza has little to do for children. There are a few playing grounds where sports such as basketball can be played, but two of the three are visited only by adolescents and adults. Children do not go there, but hang around the smaller street, deeper in the *barrio*. When the children are not allowed to be on the streets by their mother, they mostly spend their time at home, playing with neighbour children in the patio of the house. Jhon, a nine year old boy[45], says that he does not mind it that he is not allowed to play on the streets. He has room at home to play with his twin brother, sister and cousins. They like to dance and practise a lot at home. Their favourite music to dance to is reggaeton, the music of the *barrios*. He draws me a map of his daily route. He has to walk a long way to both school and the centre he says, with many stairs on his way:

> I am not afraid to walk on the streets here [the road to his school and the centre in his neighbourhood], I know the way and the people that live here well. (…) I do not meet bad people here. Most people are happy ones I think. I just mind the litter, that is dirty and people might trip over it.[46]

Jhon does not know what other problems he could have besides becoming sick. Not all children appear to be equally worried about the violent situation in their neighbourhood.

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[42] Date of interview: 04-05-2010.
[43] Date of interview: 21-04-2010.
[44] Date of interview: 25-03-2010.
[45] Date of interview: 29-04-2010.
[46] Date of interview: 29-04-2010.

Asking Barto what he thinks about his neighbourhood (without yet mentioning the violent situation), the first thing he thinks of is the litter on the streets:

> We cannot play on the streets because of it [the litter on the streets] and the dogs that run around here cannot be trusted. They sometimes bite kids. (…) Sometimes there are even dead dogs lying on the street! And nobody cleans them up.[47]

As a second obstacle in his neighbourhood he speaks about the traffic and especially the motor cycles that drive fast through the streets. He says that I have to watch out on the streets, because the motor cycles can easily hit me while passing by. When I ask him if he feels unsafe on the streets because of the *malandros*, he thinks for a bit and says 'Yes, I do'. Barto explains that he tries to stay away from the military men because they tend to bother playing children. If Barto means the policemen here or the men of the military base nearby is not clear to me. Just as before this could be a story of hearsay. He knows as well of *malandros* hanging around at corners. But is not too scared of them, he hardly ever encounters them and he figures that they do not steal from children anyway: '*Malandros* steal from people who have stuff to steal. What do kids have? So kids are safe.'

Unlike Barto, Gregorio Perez of the organization Luz y Vida does think that children can be a target of *malandros*. He explains that when children have a family member or friend that is a *malandro* in one of the *bandas*, which is not uncommon according to Perez, then it is dangerous for the child to cross the border to the territory of another *banda*. Therefore children cannot move freely in the city and are limited in going to school, playing outside or going outside their area. Perez has the opinion that this limits the prospect for children of an education or a job in the future as well.

The effect on an emotional and behavioural level
The *barrio* can be a scary place to grow up in for children. Some children like Hernan are protected as much as possible by their mother, but against some things that happen on the streets there is no real protection. As told earlier children have little places in their neighbourhood in which they feel safe. This constant unsafe feeling can be a reason for emotional and social problems as depression, anxiety inability to form trusting relationships, delayed cognitive development and aggressive behaviour (Margolin & Gordis 2000). Looking at the children in the *barrio* I cannot say that I observed this all, nor was I in the opportunity to do psychological research with the children. For this a longer research period would have been necessary, to be able to have a closer relationship with the children and to be able to observe behavioral changes. However a

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[47] Date of interview: 22-04-2010.

few observations can be noted. Many children show a lack of concentration. They seem to be preoccupied with the things that happen around them. As well they often show aggressive behaviour and anti-social behaviour like cursing and hitting others. Ten year old Fausto is an example of this. The *maestras* all worry about him. He displays violent, aggressive and hostile behaviour, but nevertheless is very popular with the other children because of the jokes he makes. He has a hard time concentrating and seems hyperactive. Lupe[48], the coordinator of the centre Las Torres of ACEISB, urged his grandmother to get him on medication to make him concentrate better. She thinks that he is a smart child and that he could do well outside this environment:

> He just gets swallowed by his friends and cousins. He looks up to them and wants to be like them. He thinks they are so cool, while all they do is get him into trouble.[49]

His preoccupation with his cousins and all that happens outside the centre does not seem to do him any good.

Besides concentration children state to be scared a lot as well. Neto, a ten year old boy from the centre, tells me in one of our conversations:

> My uncle gets into fights with neighbours. He can get really angry then. I want him to stop fighting, sometimes he listens. He has a gun you know, he will use it if he feels like it. People may get killed this way, he might kill the other person or the other person might kill him.[50]

Neto mentions that his uncle gets into fight like these often enough for them to become a normality. But still it frightens him and makes him worry about his uncle. He remembers that he sometimes cried when it happened. That was when he was younger. However, being older now he still needs help from adults to try to end the fights of his uncle. These adults can be his mother or any other person that is near:

> It is very difficult to stop a fight between two adults with guns by yourself. (…) But I am not a little kid anymore, I do not get scared that easy now. Don't think I'm afraid or something.'[51]

Although the children all have seen knifes, guns fights and robberies before, they still see the danger and seriousness of such events. During interviewing most children tend to

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[48] Date of interview: 22-04-2010.
[49] Date of interview: 22-04-2010.
[50] Date of interview: 06-05-2010.
[51] Date of interview: 06-05-2010.

become more quiet and have a somewhat distant focus in the eyes. Some children do not want to talk about it.

The many occasions in which children see, experience or hear violence do not only affect their emotional life but as well gets embedded in their behaviour. Children learn to use violence because they hear their own experiences with it, but as well because they see other people use it. They are taught to use violence. For many children violence is a normal reaction to problems and a way of getting things done. This can be seen in the centre as well when children are in disagreement with one and another, they hit and kick each other immediately with force. In interaction with each other, a difference of opinion easily leads to a fight in which they are quick to use aggressive measures. The children are suspicious of one another, they gossip, pinch each and hit each other and use name-calling to get their opinion of another child across. This is all done in a way that you would expect from an adolescent or adult. As is said that hitting is seen as a natural way for a parent to raise its child, it seems a natural way for children of communicating with each other. Children see their fathers, brothers or uncles on the street solving their (financial) problems with the use of firearms. These children see that new sneakers are obtained easily by using force, and will grow up doing the same thing their male examples do. Especially the older children and adolescents will do anything for a pair of brand sneakers, a watch or a mobile phone. These items give them the recognition and respect from their peers that they cannot find at home, as Ninoska Zambrano explains. Clearly their parents or caregivers cannot afford these items, so robbery seems a solution. These children grow from seeing violence, experiencing violence, to learning about violence and using violence themselves.

Affected through involvement
One way of being involved in violence, is as a victim or witness. The effect described in the former subsections were mostly described from the point of view that the child is a victim. However, another way community violence affects children is when they are drawn into the violence and become violent actors themselves. Especially the boys that live in the unsafe parts of the neighbourhood seem to be more involved in violent activities. As Magda explains to me these boys, like Fausto and his best friend Augustin, often have cousins, uncles or fathers who are involved in delinquent activities such as dealing in drugs or weapons. They are used of having guns around the house and seeing people use them. Fausto and Augustin told me after the first interview that they were through talking to me about the subject, 'maybe later, ask me later' was the reaction I got every time I wanted to chat with them. Fausto and Augustin both have been through a lot. Fausto lives with his grandmother. His father died a couple of years ago in circumstances that Magda describes as 'vague'. 'Nobody really knows,' she tells me, 'it

must be gang or drugs related, I am pretty sure of that.' His mother left him in the care of his grandmother and lives somewhere else in Caracas now. Fausto tells me that he does live with his mother, but that his grandmother is there as well. I wonder if he is ashamed for not living with his mother or that he rather pretends that he does. Lupe tells me that his uncles and cousins are bad news. That Fausto has friends who are *malandros* or are on their way of becoming so. She thinks that it is good that he goes to the centre. Without this he would be on the streets a lot and now he has a safe place to go to and some sort of stability besides his grandmother.

Augustin seems to be more serious than Fausto about his schoolwork and displaying proper behaviour. But he had his share of experience in delinquency already too. On one of my last days at the centre Augustin does not show up. Emilia[52], the cook of the centre, shared her knowledge about Augustin's situation. The house where Augustin lives appeared to be one of the bigger outlets for selling drugs in the neighbourhood. Everyone already suspected something, but nobody knew for sure. Emilia tells me that Augustin himself worked alongside his uncles in selling the drugs. She heard the police were searching his house for drugs. His uncles and cousins are looked for, just like Augustin himself. 'Now we know why he was not here today,' Lupe says. As far as Emilia knows Augustin was not caught. 'I did not say anything about knowing him, and him being a pupil at this centre,' Emilia states. Augustin is only ten years old and already involved with selling drugs. In a small interview I had with Augustin he told me that he did not like drugs:

> People who smoke [drugs] become weird. They act weird and their eyes get different. They have a certain look on their face. With that look you never know what will happen. (…) It makes people steal and use guns. They don't know what they are doing then. It is if they lose their minds.[53]

To my question how he knew about this, Augustin said 'You can see it everywhere on the streets you know.' Now I know that he does not just sees it everywhere on the streets but that he is confronted with it in his home.

In a striking example Alejandro Moreno[54] tells about the way children encounter violence and get involved with it as being violent actors. He describes different occasions in different *barrios* in Caracas, which all had the same drift and are equally shocking. Moreno begins by telling that a man with a guitar case goes to a place where many children can be found. Here he asks the attention of the children and summon the children to look in his guitar case and each pick one of the presents he has for them in this case. The children do so and end up with pistols in their hands. All children go

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[52] Date of interview: 13-05-2010.
[53] Date of interview: 22.04.2010.
[54] Date of interview: 18.03.2010.

running in different directions with their new pistols. Soon one girl is shot, by accident or not. The mothers of the neighbourhood are worried and call upon all mothers to collect the pistols from their children. By the time this is done most pistols have disappeared or are sold. These children at the moment have had contact with a pistol. They might have used it, with whatever consequence. Whatever they feel about the pistol, they now have experience with it. These children have become violent actors by owning and using a gun. This experience is forced upon them, they had no way of knowing what would happen, but as it turned out they now have experience with guns.

Another example Alejandro Moreno uses is the excursions that are set up in various *barrios*. On these informal excursions children are brought to a military area. Here they learn about the military, but as well about weapons and the use of guns. There will be said that the use of guns is not for playing and that a guns are not a children's toy. Nevertheless, by the time the children get back from the excursion they know how to use a weapon. Once again, without choice children are confronted with weapons and knowledge about handling them. In these examples children are deliberately are brought in contact with weapons, either to use them, to distribute them or to warm children up to them so they will be less scared to use the weapons in the future when *malandros* might be looking for new partners in crime. For children it can be difficult not to be drawn into violence as actors.

Concluding remarks

As Gregorio Perez already stated, due to a limit of mobility the prospect for a good future is limited for most children. Many children simply will never set foot outside their *barrio*, because they cannot or their parents do not encourage their children to do so. This creates a narrow view of how life is and can be, and takes away possibilities for a better future for the children. Besides this, children get involved in a more active way in violence. Both Abramovay (2002: 59) and the Venezuelan researcher Alejandro Moreno agree that a child who was a victim of violence in its early childhood runs a high risk of becoming a future perpetrator.

5. The way children in the *barrios* cope with community violence

> When I see someone getting robbed,
> I know what to do: run for home![55]

Dealing with the ongoing community violence may be the most difficult task of children in Caracas. How to cope with a phenomenon that is elusive and cannot be controlled by them? Children in the slums of Caracas have two things to deal with in this matter, the direct violence around them and the consequences of the violent society that they live in. Both the direct violence and the consequences of the violent culture demand certain coping mechanisms of the children. Children develop such strategies or mechanisms mostly automatically without making a conscious choice for the one or the other. In this chapter I will offer an overview of the reactions of the children to violent situations. This will give a sense of the coping strategies that children have acquired in order to deal with their everyday environment.

The five coping strategies offered in the theoretical chapter by Moser and McIlwaine (2004: 179) will serve as a framework. To this framework I will add or collate three strategies offered by Ninoska Zambrano who works as a psychologist and coordinator at Fundana. She enriches the coping strategy of avoidance with internalizing behaviour and escaping from the situation, she broadens the strategy of confrontation with identifying with the violence, and she adds the golden mean as a new and most preferable coping strategy. There are two strategies that I did not encounter in the behaviour or stories of the children: reporting crimes and conciliation. These are both strategies that are less available for children because they require power (reporting) or ask a higher level of thinking (conciliation) that is more common for adults.

The strategy of avoidance

The streets and other dangerous places are avoided out of fear for what could happen. As Ria explained, she avoids the playfield that is housed by older children that tease her and are looking for fights. She and other children in the centre are not allowed to go to these places by their mothers. This is an example of the most common coping strategy called *avoidance*. With avoidance children try to control their own arousal and distress by restraining themselves from the violence and the thoughts about violence. With community violence, avoidance is used by staying silent and looking the other way. This strategy is mostly adopted because of a sense of powerlessness, fear for retaliation or

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[55] Interview with Neto, date: 06-05-2010.

fear of making the situation worse. Especially children who are powerless against violent actors and have no control over the situation, this is a safe way of coping. Avoiding community violence can mean changing mobility patterns, rethink educational opportunities after nightfall, and avoid people that are involved in criminal activities.

As we saw before the mother of nine year old Hernan does everything she can to avoid the violence in her community. She and Hernan are not out on the streets at night, they keep to themselves and do not mingle with others. This all to avoid them getting in a dangerous situation. Although Hernan himself does not actively avoids situations that could be dangerous, he begs his mother to play on the streets or to go over to friends from school to play, he is taught to use avoidance as a strategy and is likely to adopt it when he is older and thinks more consciously about dealing with his life situation.

Romina does know exactly what to do when she encounters a violent situation on the street. She says the best thing to do is to stay out of it: 'I don't get myself involved. I will just leave'. Most children have this same reaction. They will leave the situation and go home or to another place where they feel safe. The younger children mostly say that they will leave the situation and run for home, however the older ones think that leaving the situation is enough. As Neto of ten years old says to do when he sees someone with a gun on the streets, 'I will just keep on walking, I will not get in his way, so nothing will happen'. However this is a healthy strategy according to Ninoska Zambrano of Fundana, it has another side to it. With the high prevalence of domestic violence, children often have to deal with violence in their home as well. Here they use the same strategy: they want to avoid the situation. Only, as Zambrano states, to avoid the situation these children need to go to the streets, which are not safe and in which they can find more violence. They flee to the streets, where there is no guidance for the things they will encounter. This way domestic violence can lead to exposure to other types of violence.

On an emotional level avoidance is characterized by keeping silent, not wanting to talk about the subject, feeling sick and not having any enthusiasm for activities. This internalizing behaviour is typical for children that have a preference for the avoidance strategy Emilia Orellano[56] of Luz y Vida thinks. For Romina who is an advocate of avoiding the situation, this became clear as well. She is a serious, quiet girl, who does participates from a distance. When we talk about violence in her neighbourhood, she gets more and more silent. She rather does not talk about the subject of violence.

The strategy of confrontation

The second coping strategy is, although less common than the avoidance strategy, still an often used strategy in the slums: *confrontation*. Confronted by the violence children try to control the violent stressor itself, either by joining violent groups or put up a fight

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[56] Date of interview: 04-05-2010.

against violence. These children identify themselves with the violence. They know how to use violence through their experiences and will use it a weapon in their confrontation with the violence around them. It becomes a way of life for them. These children can become the violent actors themselves in a later stadium.

Ninoska Zambrano of Fundana explains that because the children are growing up in violence they identify with the violence. They learn to use it as a manner to solve problems, to express their frustration, to get by and as a manner to love. To love someone here, means to be violent towards that person. This is what they see their parents do and what their friends do. So this is what they do. They become violent. Since many parents work all day, children are left alone in the house. There is no adult supervision and children end up spending their days on the streets. Here they look for the recognition and care they cannot find at home. On the street older children or adolescents who are a member of a *banda*, are often awaiting the children to educate them about life and how they can take care of themselves. These children learn that they get recognition of their peers by wearing new sneakers and dating beautiful girls, etc. That gains them the respect that they elsewhere will not get. Boys find they identity in extreme macho-behaviour, and by the use of violence. Girls find their identity in hanging around with the exiting boys that are involved in drugs or weapons. All this happens when children are minors, states Rosa Devesa from Fondenima. Through this identification with the violence they have a sense of controlling it. Children know how to use the violence then, they know its effect and they can apply to their benefit.

Thinking back to Augustin who at ten years old already works in the drug dealing business of his family, it seems a natural way of dealing with the situation for him. The children that adopt the confrontation strategy mostly are children who show externalizing behaviour such as hyperactivity, jumping quick to aggressive matters to solve problems, and drawing attention to them. Although the children did not mention this often in the interviews I had with them, it could be observed. In disagreements, as I explained before, children often show aggressive behaviour like hitting, kicking, name-calling and pinching the other. The children that showed this behaviour most, were the ones that were involved in violence already. They adopted, with or without choice, the confrontation strategy and displayed this strategy in normal day-to-day behaviour as well. These children use the 'kill them before they kill me' mentality that Moser and McIlwaine (2004: 181) linked to the confrontation strategy as a way to live their live.

The strategy of resting with violence
Being a child and having no control over what happens, submitting to the violence around them is a coping strategy that most children in the case of violence that is directed at them will use. They will take it as it comes as they cannot do anything about

it. And as a coping strategy for dealing with the violent situation in general, children and the most people, use it as a way of growing acquainted with the violence. As seen earlier on, children find the occurrence of violence, weapons and insecurity a normal part of their lives that probably will not change in the near future. Here as well the phrase, 'What can we do about it? We will just have to live with it.' is apt.

Submitting with the violence and letting the violence and the violent situation go, are two strategies that are similar in the way that in both cases violence is accepted as being there and in both cases no action is undertaken to deal with (avoid or confront) the violence. Instead the decision is made not to deal with it anymore. However both Emilia Orellano and Ninoska Zambrano have the opinion that the two strategies are different. With submitting being a rather passive and powerless way to deal with violence, letting go of the violence is an active decision not to let the violence affect your life too much and try to find solutions to live life without needing to avoid, confront or submit to the violence. According to Zambrano this is the golden mean and although being the most difficult strategy to accomplish, she thinks it is the most healthy way to deal with it and the only way of living that eventually can address the violence in a productive way.

The strategy of looking for comfort

For Florita her first reaction to a scary situation on the streets is to run for home. There she will find her mother or grandmother who can comfort her. Romina as well finds comfort in looking for her mother or father, although mother mostly is very busy around the house and does not always have time for her. This suggests a coping strategy that is not named in literature or in interviews with professionals, but what seems to be the most common in the field: looking for comfort in another person.

Most children had the same reaction to the question what they would do in a unsafe situation. They would leave the situation and go home or to another place they feel safe where they would look for someone to help them. Looking for comfort does not mean wanting to talk about the subject. As most children said rather wanting to forget about it, they just need a trusting face to see and give them reason to believe it is all going to be okay, that they are safe. Who that face is can be very different. The people they find at home to seek comfort at are mostly their mother or grandmother. Or in the case of eight year old Ramirez, his uncle who works for the police. Ramirez says that with anything that has to do with violence he goes to his uncle, because his uncle knows what to do and might be able to protect him. In the case of Ria, she finds comfort and help in her little brother because he always knows what to say to make her feel better. Or she will go to her dog, who listens to her and to whom she can speak about anything. Or, as the somewhat older children say, just a friendly person on the street would do as well, as

long as there is an adult they can turn to for help so that they do not have to deal with the situation on their own.

However, this does not go for all situations. In situations where children know what to do, because they have been through it many times, some children state that they do not need help from anyone. These are mostly the somewhat older children. Neto, Alonsa, Allyse, Gennisis and Romina[57] can handle many situations on their own they say. A fight between children, hearing someone say abusive language to them, when somebody threatens them, when they see someone cry on the streets or they encounter a knife or *malandro* on the street, are all situations they can handle themselves without wanting or needing to talk to their family or look for help. This shows that children are on their way of becoming to find violence a normal part of their life and a fact that they have to deal with and in many cases can deal with.

An additional problem in coping: illegality

A lot of children do not know how to read or write. Their families have drug problems and many of them are illegal immigrants from mostly Colombia. Children do not go to school, because of the lack of Venezuelan identification papers and a lack of schools in the community. Many children in the *barrio* Petare live in extremely violent environments. Emilia Orellano is an advocate in the Child Defense Department of Luz y Vida and works to protect the children from violence and to defend their rights. One of the rights that is violated much is the right to an identity. Many children in Petare are children of illegal immigrants from Colombia. They do not exist here officially. Without an identity and therefore without a *cedula* or identification papers these children cannot participate in the educational life or healthcare. Later on these children will not be able to have a job in the formal sector and are socially and economically excluded. Obtaining identity documents is a long process, but when these children have a document they have more rights in Venezuela. Without an identity you do not exist, you are worth nothing, nobody looks after you and you have no future. This is the situation for many children here. As well an identity entails that you are a citizen with rights and as well responsibilities. Without identity you do not feel responsible to act as a good citizen and comply with the rules of the country of residence as Orellano states. Besides the obvious reasons of a lack in education and poverty, this is a reason as well why illegal immigrants fall into delinquency and violence.

Concluding remarks

Looking at the observations and the interviews I had with the children I found that the coping strategy the children used the most and felt the most comfortable with, was a

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[57] Of respectively ten, nine, eleven, twelve and nine years old.

strategy that was not mentioned in the literature, nor by professionals in the field. However the strategy is the most simple and maybe even the most obvious one: looking for comfort and support. As children are not yet able to comprehend the whole situation, they logically look for others to give them answers or help them in dealing with an occasion that made them feel unsafe.

For the other strategies the thing that caught my attention most was the fact that children use different strategies in different situations. For some situations they will use avoidance, for other less threatening situations they use confrontation, and in almost all cases they wanted support in coping, regardless if they used the confrontation or avoidance strategy.

6. Support with coping: organizations and prevention.

> If we can improve the life of some children,
> they might be able to improve it for others[58]

In coping with violence around them, children can use some support and guidance. Unfortunately with the mother being away often and the father being out of the picture completely, children are left on their own. As seen above children often want and need support in dealing with violent encounters on the streets. Sometimes any pedestrian will do, but mostly children tell me that they would want their mother or grandmother to help them at that time. Besides the direct help children want from people they trust, there is a lot more that can be done to make their situation better. On the level of education, social work and prevention changes for the better could be made. The organizations working on the subject of violence prevention believe that it starts with improving life for the children. If they are able to help some children, their hope is that these children will do the same in the future. This chapter gives an overview of the support that is already available in Caracas and looks with criticism at the limitations and improvements of this support, to give an idea what could be further elaborated.

The available support for children

In Caracas there are several governmental and non-governmental organizations that work on the subject of violence and its effect. These either provide basic citizen security, health care, work on violence prevention or are promoters of human and children's rights. The initiatives of these organizations can be named under three levels of prevention: primary prevention that focuses on preventing children or adolescents to become involved either as a victim or as an actor in violence themselves, secondary prevention that aims at for instance decreasing the negative affect that community violence has on community members, and tertiary prevention that has its focus on preventing something to happen again. However most organizations do their best to prevent children to get involved with violence through primary prevention, it could be questioned whether in a violent society like Caracas not all children already have had their experience with violence. In this case most primary preventive methods could work as secondary or tertiary preventive methods. Nevertheless, here is an overview presented that is structured by the aim of the organization or program.

In primary prevention Cecodap is one of the national non-governmental organizations that promotes a good treatment of children and the right of children to exercise their citizenship and creates material for prevention and knowledge about the

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[58] Interview with Emilia Orellano of Luz y Vida, date: 04-05-2010.

laws on child mistreatment. Cecodap does not work directly with the children, but with schools, other organizations and in public space. It presents itself as well as showing vigilance towards the actualization of children's right by the state and the public agenda. Fondenima is an organization that looks out for the (physical) wellbeing of children and awareness of domestic violence. Being housed in the children's hospital in Caracas, Fondenima gives advice as well about how to handle children that need extra care and special attention because of a disorder. They organize workshops for professionals and parents and have a strong focus on child maltreatment within schools and the family. Both Fondenima and Cecodap organize workshops for professionals on detecting child maltreatment. This is the way they work towards decreasing the negative effect of maltreated children as a manner of secondary prevention.

Besides these non-governmental organizations the government has its own department of children's rights defence IDENA. IDENA is the body that is the head and executor of policies on the subject of protection of children and adolescents. It has various programs that work in all three preventive areas on the subject of substitute families, rehabilitation for adolescents with substance addiction, child labour, community shelter houses and community activities for children with a moral message. In addition Idena provides for day-care in a fistful of poor *barrios* through the country. These day-care centres or 'Centros Comunales de Proteccion Integral' house 60 children and provide them from basic care during the day. These centres are a shelter for children in the poorer neighbourhoods and function as an alternative for the streets. Children are occupied here after school, are fed properly and taught norms and values by the teachers that work in the centres about several subjects, among which the subject of violence.

There are non-governmental community-based centres as well, such as the centres of ACEISB in Cotiza and the centres of Luz y Vida in the *barrio* Petare. These community based centres work as a day-care for children till they leave for secondary school. In these centres children are fed, looked after, helped with schoolwork, offered leisure activities and monitored for problems at home or in the neighbourhood. Luz y Vida also is one of the non-governmental initiatives that try to fill the voids in welfare that the government offers. Luz y Vida works in different areas in Petare: defence of children's rights, psychological assistance, education, day care, university social work and research, and workshops for professionals. Like Luz y Vida, all organizations work according to the 'Ley Orgánica para la Protección del Niño y del Adolescente' (LOPNNA) which is a protective law for children and adolescents.

The more intensive form of care aims at secondary or tertiary prevention. The severe cases of child maltreatment end up at organizations like Fundana, which is a non-governmental organization that provides complete care for children that are placed under custody of the state. Their help exists of protecting, housing and treating children

that have been maltreated or abandoned, educating their parents and work with them towards a healthier relation between parent and child, and if reunion with the direct family is not possible, providing for a substitute family.

As a large international organization Unicef can be found in Caracas as well. The main task of Unicef on the subject of violence against children is to inventorize the situation in Caracas, in order to be able to develop programs on child protection in a later stadium. It does already collaborate with national organizations in promoting health care and good treatment of children. These initiatives will hopefully bring a change in the Venezuelan culture, in which violence has embedded.

Flaws in support for children

All organizations I spoke came to the same conclusion: there is missing a lot in the support for the children. The support that is available has too little capacity, has to exist mostly from gifts and funds from international organizations, gets very little support of the government, and is not accessible for all children. The government institutions are told to have no priority for the problems of children and try to solve the problem of violence with more police on the streets instead of structural solutions. Children themselves have not heard of most organizations and the idea of getting help with dealing with the violent situations that they find themselves in or work that is done to change the violent situation, is new for them.

First of all there is a lack in the support that is already offered. Mostly the community based centres complain about their capacity. Not all *barrios* have these centres and the centres that are there, are too small to take care of all children in the neighbourhood. Therefore the centres that exist in the neighbourhoods often have selection of children from that neighbourhood, as they have too little capacity for all children. As for *San Benito* this means that the poorest children come first. Also Luz y Vida worries about its capacity. Emilia Orellano explains that they have limited staff and office space, there are too little defence advocates to do the work. She thinks that for many people it takes too long to travel to the office or centres of Luz y Vida, therefore people are reluctant to come.

Besides the lack in capacity, Fernando Pereirra[59] of Cecodap thinks that there is a lack in cohesion among the programs of the different organizations. He explains that in working together the programs get more professional and reach a broader public. Cecodap tries to find collaborations with other organizations because of this. His criticism goes further in direction of the government. He explains that the government mostly supports their own plans and follows its own path:

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[59] Date of interview: 04-03-2010.

There is very little cooperation between the government and the non-governmental organizations. The government often does not have the expertise to create and facilitate good programs for the protection of children. The programs are thought of and made in an office in one of the government buildings without consulting specialists. They do not take advise from anyone. (…) Neither do they give away any figures and statistics of the last few years. (…) This makes it difficult to do research and keep an eye on progress of downfall in violence, children's rights etc. There is no transparency in this country.[60]

Rosa Devesa of Fondenima also has her opinion about the government programs:

Venezuela knows eighty thousand institutions, but none of them take proper care of the children and actually work to change the family structure[61]

In her opinion the family is the beginning and should be the end of the extreme violence that houses Venezuela. She would like to see an institution that has its focus on the integration of the core family, with support in teenage pregnancies and help with raising children. In her eyes, and the ones of Gisela Garcés, Fernando Pereirra, and Amanda Martín[62] of Unicef the government as well show more propaganda than actual solutions for the violence problem:

All the institutions that the government has, are nothing more than propaganda. There are just a few centres that are government-based and they have up till one hundred children in just one room with one teacher. What will that help those children? There is nothing done here for the children.[63]

Fernando Pereirra[64] states that the government acts like a preacher. It just does not practice what it preaches. 'Their dreams and wishes are beautiful, but there does not happen anything to actually make them come true,' according to Pereirra. He thinks as well that the initiatives that come from the government to better the community are of a low quality and consist more of propaganda than actual help.

On a more macro level of the fight against violence the government does not get off well either. The government could do more in creating jobs for young men, to keep them working instead of stealing, according to Perreira. So far the government did accomplish that the poor are less poor, but unfortunately this does not reflect in an positive effect on the statistics on violence. In the social work concerning reporting and denouncing crimes is much to improve as well. Impunity is common in Venezuela admits

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[60] Date of interview: 04-03-2010.
[61] Date of interview: 25-02-2010.
[62] Date of interview: 16-03-2010.
[63] Interview with Gisela Garcés, date: 03-03-2010.
[64] Date of interview: 04-03-2010.

Pedro Cornieles[65], a public prosecutor of the superior court in Caracas. There is much bureaucracy: many forms, stamps and all needs to be signed to lodge a complaint. Further, between 2007 and 2009 there were 199.985 accusations filed in Caracas on cases that included violence against women. During this time there were 19 attorneys working on these cases. Many of these cases are yet unattended or unsolved. The impunity is severe. Obtaining support after a crime knows a low pace as well. Some institutions need a referral letter to take in children and their parents for help, organizations cannot intervene without one. These referral letters come from governmental institutions when for instance the neighbours have offered their suspect and an investigation is started. It takes a long time for help to be activated, furthermore because often parents and their children first go to the municipal. Here, according to Carlos Piñero[66], who has a leading job at the *parroquia* San Rosalía, the social worker will handle as mediator between the victim and its perpetrator, in which there will be made agreements for bettering the situation. When becomes clear, after a few appointments, that this mediating does not work, a referral letter can be send. This letter is necessary in order to get help from official organizations and institutions. This way, children have the chance to be in a problematic situation for a long time.

One last point of improvement is raised by Rosa Devesa of Fondenima, Emilia Orellano and Lucia Martinez[67] of Luz y Vida. They think that to improve the lives for children and make them be able to deal better with the violent surroundings, there has to change something in the education. Lucia Martinez explains that education in Venezuela is very formal, children sit still, are quiet and listen. There is no interaction, they are not educated personally. There are projects about children's rights and moral lessons about violent behaviour, but these are rare and show no cohesion with other projects. Children need more help with their conduct, she thinks, they need to be learned values and norms. The moral lessons taught to the children about respect are solely taught formally. The teachers, parents, neighbours do not live up to these lessons in their behavior directed at each other and the children. Through this children get mixed signals. They do not learn to practice what they preach.

With all this in mind, it seems that there is a lot of room for improvement in the violent situation and the support that is offered to the victim, among which are many children. Ninoska Zambrano of Fundana does not know if the situation will ever change. She is certain that it will not happen within one generation. She states:

> I see this generation as a lost generation. The children and adolescents
> that have no future outside the *barrios*, working with what they know to

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[65] Date of Interview: 11-05-2010.
[66] Date of interview: 13-04-2010.
[67] Date of interview: 04-05-2010.

get by. Not only they are lost, this generation living in Caracas, myself, my children, all citizens of Caracas who life in this insecurity and broken life are part of the lost generation. And when will it stop? Will there come an end to this, I do not know.[68]

Concluding remarks

The hopelessness in which Ninoska Zambrano looks at the violent situation in Caracas is characteristic for the prospects that many professionals have in Caracas. This is no wonder as the magnitude of the violence problem and the lack of organizational capacity become clear. There is a lot of room for improvement in the availability, the accessibility and the content of programs for children. Not only should programs address a greater amount of children, children can be included with respect to the content of these programs. This way changes can be made.

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[68] Date of interview: 12-04-2010.

7. Conclusion

The children were given a voice in thesis research and as it turned out, they had something to say. Their experiences, thoughts and manners of coping were the basis of this thesis and are the basis of the conclusions that can be drawn from the empirical part of this thesis. Completed with opinions and visions of the surroundings of the children, professionals from the field and existing theory on the subject, some statements will made here. Besides the general findings and an overall conclusion, I will offer recommendations and possible interesting suggestions for further research on the subject.

Using the words of the children, life in the *barrio* is not an easy life. Community violence is ever-present, either the actual violence itself or the threat of violence. Community violence is mostly seen as violence that is displayed on the streets; but as well it is present in public areas and schools. Children hear about the violence through their parents, teachers and peers, witness violence used by and against others and experience violence themselves. Generally children do not seem to be a target for the violent actors in the *barrio*, as there is little economical or social benefit in robbing or bothering a child. However, as theory already suggested, even when children do not witness or experience the direct violence themselves, stories from hearsay will provide them with material to create a mental picture of the event that can be just as frightening or more frightening than the event itself. Especially the younger children that have little actual experiences with violence tend to fantasize about events they hear.

There are many ways in which children are affected by community violence around them. Often children have family members who are killed or injured by violence. On a functional level community violence means that the children are not allowed to play outside on the streets by their mothers. Children cannot name any areas that are safe to play for them and are bothered by this. Although this is not only because of the violence. Interestingly it appeared that many children are not at first worried about the violence on the streets, but about the litter. They feel that the amount of dirt on the streets is more of a reason not to play on the streets than the unsafe situation. Only when actively asked about the violence, the children start discussing and criticising violence as a negative impact on their lives. In this discussion it appears that on an emotional level violence causes much distress and anxiety for them. Children are worried about their family members getting involved in violent encounters and are afraid to go with a bus, because of a robbery they saw before. How severe the impact of community violence is depends of several factors such as the chronicle nature of the violence and the control children experience over the violence. If children have the idea that they can predict or even control the violence the impact is less severe. However when the adults in the child's life

are demoralized and experience a lack of control, the child looses all hope and violence has a larger impact. This demoralization seems to be the consequence of the chronicle nature of the violence in Caracas. Inhabitants themselves have no faith that the situation will change of the better. Violence has become embedded in the culture of the Venezuelan *barrios* and is a normal feature of the daily lives of children. A child who has been a victim of violence runs a high risk of becoming a future perpetrator. This theory of both scolars and professionals in the field seems to be apt in the *barrios* of Caracas. Many children experienced violence and have learned to use it themselves. They show violent behaviour towards other children on early age, and being a little older, they are involved in delinquent and violent practices.

Although children are vulnerable for violence they are certainly not unable and helpless. As noted before, children see and hear much from the violence in their neighbourhood. They know what goes on and they have a good idea how to handle the unsafe situations. Children have a range of manners to cope with situations that are potential violent and are able to use the strategy that suits the situation best or even use two at a time. Interestingly the coping strategy that children use by far the most, is looking for comfort and support. This strategy is overlooked as well in theory as by professionals in the field, while being an obvious and logical strategy for children. In a violent situation children will reach out for help from a trusted person not being able to handle a situation on their own. Especially for the younger children their home is the place they feel safe, and therefore they will run for home looking for comfort and support. The somewhat older children adjust their coping strategies and say to experience enough safety by just leaving the violent situation and continue walking. However if the situation is more threatening, they still like help from trusting adults.

The coping strategies that children say to use seem very adequate and to be working well for them. However the question can be raised if these strategies will be as functional when the children are adolescents. The older the children are, the less they will be protected by adults. At the same time, when children are older they are more vulnerable for *malandros* and local gangs. Not being protected by their parents, being on the streets instead of a centre after school, or not being in school anymore at all are all factors that make the situation of children more exposed and susceptible for a life in violence. It will be interesting to investigate the way children adjust their coping strategies to the new situation or whether the old coping strategies are still functional.

The support children look for in coping with violent situations comes mostly from family members. However, there are a range of centres, organizations and institutions that work on the subject of violence prevention. Unfortunately it appeared that these are unnoticed by the children. This has some causes. The organizations lack in capacity and are unable to work on a comprehensive way. Furthermore they are occupied with either

the worst cases of maltreatment or vulnerability, or with reforming the public opinion. In prevention programs community violence is an under exposed type of violence; programs are mostly aimed at domestic violence prevention. Importantly, there are little programs that address the agency and ability of children in preventing them from being a victim of violence or from becoming a violent actor themselves. In theory about violence as well children generally are approached as being victims without agency, instead of being able, and possible violent, actors. This while children seem to have deliberate ideas about the way they can cope with violent situations. Their ability to assess situations and the way to cope in these situations should be the guide for designing prevention programs.

The overall conclusion should be clear now. Children are affected by community violence in many ways. Yet they have learned to live with it and found ways to cope with it. Nevertheless more action is needed to change the prospects for better future for these children. Let my statement in the introduction of this thesis be the contribution of research like this to the theoretical discussion about community violence: children are a group that have to be acknowledged in their agency and should be taken fully in account in policy on prevention of, fighting against and support in violent situations.

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