European Network of victims of terrorism

Theme of the Amsterdam Event
30th of June 2009

European Values under threat of terrorism, what can the European Network of victims of terrorism contribute?

An introduction to the theme of the Amsterdam event

Given the growing recognition of the power of terrorism to target its goal of weakening social capital, public health strategies must not only recognize its effects on social connectedness, but adopt broad interventions that recognize the interdependence of community health and social connections.
Reisman et.al
In: The trauma of terrorism
Yael Danieli, Danny Brom, Joe Sills, 2005

Introduction

The discussion on 'shared values' in Europe was started under the Dutch presidency in 2004. In his speech the Dutch Prime Minister said it as follows:

The idea was to look for common grounds on which Europe can be build, to be united in all diversity. Values like liberty, respect for human rights, solidarity, equality.Values which are important to be able to live peacefully in Europe.

These values are not something you can take for granted. They are under attack. Not because of differences between cultures or beliefs. Those differences are part and parcel of Europe and Europe's richness. But they are under attack from small groups of radicals working all over the world.

When the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered a letter was left pinned to his body. The letter contains an ominous sentence: "Oh, Europe, your day has come". That is a message directed against our freedom and the principles of our community of values. It shows how important it is to defend and strengthen our values, and to acknowledge the fragility of our civilization.

Since these words were spoken in 2004, in the shadow of the attacks in Madrid, the threat of terrorism remains a reality in Europe. The victims of terrorist attacks will have to live with the long lasting consequences and the fear for new attacks is an everyday reality.

Terrorism is a form of psychological warfare, whose intent is to frighten and demoralize people, induce chaos, and disrupt the fabric of society. This disruption the social cohesion directly affects each citizen and the community as a whole. Terrorist attacks result in many victims and affect many people directly but also indirectly by the fear these attacks cause and the arbitrare nature of the attacks on innocent people.
When terrorism is getting a hold on individuals and society, fear and distrust will be the consequence. It will split communities into groups distrusting each other, it will exclude people and groups of people, it will make people feel isolated and alone and it will infect organisations and institutions.

Since we know how important social cohesion is for values like tolerance and respect, and peace and safety there is a challenge to fight this threat. From the literature of the psychosocial consequences of trauma we also know that social support is a very important aspect for recovery and a protective factor against long term health complaints like posttraumatic stress disorders. Where the active social relationships between citizens and communities are being affected in a negative way this mutual support suffer.

Definition

Social cohesion is a term used in social policy, sociology and political science to describe the bonds or "glue" that bring people together in society.

According to the government-commissioned, *State of the English Cities* thematic reports, there are five different dimensions of social cohesion: material conditions, passive relationships, active relationships, inclusion and equality.

- The report shows that material conditions are fundamental to social cohesion, particularly employment, income, health, education and housing. Relations between and within communities suffer when people lack work and endure hardship, debt, anxiety, low self-esteem, ill-health, poor skills and bad living conditions. These basic necessities of life are the foundations of a strong social fabric and important indicators of social progress.
- The second basic tenet of cohesion is social order, safety and freedom from fear, or "passive social relationships". Tolerance and respect for other people, along with peace and security, are hallmarks of a stable and harmonious urban society.
- The third dimension refers to the positive interactions, exchanges and networks between individuals and communities, or "active social relationships". Such contacts and connections are potential resources for places since they offer people and organizations mutual support, information, trust and credit of various kinds.
- The fourth dimension is about the extent of social inclusion or integration of people into the mainstream institutions of civil society. It also includes people's sense of belonging to a city and the strength of shared experiences, identities and values between those from different backgrounds.

- Lastly, social equality refers to the level of fairness or disparity in access to opportunities or material circumstances, such as income, health or quality of life, or in future life chances.

How social cohesion influences victims of terrorism on an individual level? Some examples

Example 1

'Things began to go badly soon after that. The Channel 7 journalist had by now taken a few shots with his digital camera and I thought he asid that his larger crew, and maybe his 'young female colleague with some flowers', would arrive later. Sure enough , I thought that had happened when a young woman appeared in the afternoon with a pot plant. But then my confusion began. Aidan introduced her as 'a friend of yours from Sydney'. I rolled over too quickly to my right to say hello, and got my first savage feeling of nausea and vertigo. My smile to her must have been rather strained, and my mind began losing its connections. I decided that this person was one of my Ph.D. students from Brunel (I still didn't have glasses and couldn't see features at all clearly through my puffy eyes anyway). She asked me the usual questions about what happened, as any visitor would. The feeling of sickness subsided, and so we talked on for quite a bit until she asked for my son' telephone numbers in Sydney (I must have mentioned them while talking about Craig on the train). This didn't seem like the agenda of a student, even though when I had asked her why she was here she talked about doing some writing. Anyway, finally the penny dropped with me and, in response to my probing, she told me she was a journalist for the Daily Telegraph in Sydney. Then she began to hassle me, taking what it seemed like endless photographs, and I felt mor and more nauseous.'

One Day in July by John Tulloch, survivor of the Edgware Road Bomb, one day after the attacks when he was lying in hospital heavily injured.

Example 2

When I think of a particularly gutsy Spaniard, I think of Edurne Uriarte. A political science professor with raven black hair and a ready smile, she was the intended target of a powerful package bomb left in an elevator that she frequently uses at the University of the Basque Country. Her bodyguard spotted the suspicious package, averting a tragedy for Uriarte and many others on campus that December 18, 2000.
A university professor with a bodyguard? Sadly yes. In today's bitterly divided northern Basque region, it's not just the teachers. Several thousand town councillors, lawyers, journalists, even a priest, who have been outspoken about the outlawed Basque separatist group ETA, dare not step outside without one or two hefty gun-toting shadows. These are frequently plainclothes police officers, or private security guards.
It is just one telling reaction to ETA, which poses special danger in the Basque region, but is also a threat that extends to practically every corner of Spain. Even architect Frank Gehry' famed Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the largest Basque city, was an ETA target, just before it opened in 1997, and a police officer died.

Voice: Spain: The ETA Enigma by Al Goodman
In The trauma of Terrorism, Yael Danieli, Danny Brom, Joe Sills 2005

Discussion

The issue of important values, more specifically social cohesion being under threat raises a number of questions to stimulate the discussion in the context of the network of victims of terrorism:

- ✓ In what way are victims of terrorism confronted with the threat of values in their life
- ✓ What does social cohesion mean to victims
- ✓ Do we agree to the importance of social cohesion
- ✓ How can disruption of social cohesion be prevented
- ✓ How can broad interventions support public health and social cohesion
- ✓ What is important in social support for victims
- ✓ What can facilitate this social support
- ✓ What is lacking in the connections between communities and the support for victims
- ✓ What is the need of the network of victims of terrorism according to social cohesion
- ✓ What can the network of victims of terrorism contribute to social cohesion

Aim of the Amsterdam conference

Since it stands to reason that improving the cohesivess of existing systems of social organization would strengthen community resilience and serve as effective countermeasures for terrorism, we need input to make the network influential in supporting decision making on the issue of social cohesion and in coping in threatening events (for successful education, communication and preparedness)

Activities that promote a sense of community well-being and social cohesion would thus be effective countermeasures to this disruption. Reaching out to communities with a public health approach to reduce exposure, seek help, comply with recommended treatment or change the nature of social contact can support social cohesion. Community based interventions like using established messaging channels, emphasizing risk reduction and health promotion, to offer opportunities to communicate with community based or workplace populations and provide information aimed at reducing anxiety, improve positive coping and promoting early intervention screening need the support of social networks.