Youth Distress, Crime and Gratuitous Violence in the Perspective of Social Medicine

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ABSTRACT: The issue of gratuitous youth violence is a pressing public health concern and a symptom of weakened social cohesion. Social medicine frames it as a collective phenomenon shaped by inequalities, education, employment, social capital, and marginalisation. Research shows a correlation between declining community cohesion and institutional trust, on one hand, and rising antisocial and aggressive behaviours, on the other, especially among youth. This study highlights the role of social determinants while underscoring critical-reflective thinking as a protective factor. Drawing on Aristotelian perspectives, critical thinking is presented as an ethical safeguard, fostering responsibility, relational health, and primary prevention.

KEYWORDS: Youth distress; gratuitous violence; social medicine; critical-reflective thinking; Phronesis

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. Youth, Deviance and Public Health: The Evidence-Based Contribution of Social Medicine. – 3. The Challenge of Gratuitous Violence: Deciphering a Phenomenon Beyond Instrumental Reason. – 4. Critical-Reflective Thinking: An Ethical and Social Safeguard Against Gratuitous Violence. – 5. Concluding Reflection and Preventative Approaches.

1. Introduction

The issue of youth distress and its expression in forms of deviance, crime, and aggressive behaviours represents a crucial challenge not only for social and educational institutions, but also for social medicine. This discipline investigates how social determinants (such as income, education, employment and social integration) affect the health and well-being of populations. It considers the collective phenomena that compromise quality of life and community cohesion.[1] From this standpoint, medical practice is regarded not entirely as a technical service, but also as a social fact that reflects collective responsibilities.[2] This underscores the complexity of balancing public health protection and individual self-determination, a complexity that has already been highlighted in other bioethical and legal domains.[3] From this standpoint, youth violence is regarded not solely as a public order issue,

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[1] www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241500852 (last visited 02/09/2025).
[2] S. RICCI, *Atto Medico. Evoluzione e Valore Sociale*, Roma, 2000.
[3] F.M. DAMATO, P. RICCI, R. RINALDI, *Informed consent and compulsory treatment on individuals with severe eating disorders: a bio-ethical and juridical problem*, in *Clinica Terapeutica*, 174, 4, 2023, 365-369.

but rather as a matter that exerts a direct influence on the health of the community, contributing to elevated rates of mortality and morbidity, generating direct expenditures for health systems, and engendering indirect ramifications manifesting as loss of human capital and eroded social cohesion.[4] Such phenomena must therefore be analyzed as symptoms of complex social processes, in which economic, cultural, relational, and educational dynamics intertwine to shape the living environments of young people.

A large body of research has shown how socioeconomic inequalities, educational and occupational precariousness, cultural marginalisation, and fragile community ties are all decisive factors in generating contexts and geographies where youth distress finds fertile ground.[5] In Italy, extant data demonstrate a correlation between areas with high youth unemployment, insufficient educational and professional opportunities, and a higher incidence of antisocial behaviours.[6] The findings indicate that the issue cannot be reduced to individual psychological factors, but must be examined through the lens of social determinants and structural conditions.

A particularly fruitful hermeneutical concept for interpreting this framework is that of social capital. Introduced by Pierre Bourdieu and popularized by Robert Putnam, the concept refers to the set of relational networks, shared norms, and mutual trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.[7] Putnam's conceptualization has undergone further refinement to distinguish between bonding social capital (which strengthens identity within homogeneous groups), bridging social capital (which connects individuals across diverse social groups, fostering inclusion and information exchange), and linking social capital (which connects individuals and groups to institutions and authority figures, granting access to resources and opportunities).[8]

In contexts where social capital particularly in its bridging and linking forms is vibrant and dynamic, its effects become clearly observable. The extant literature provides illustrative examples, including research on the regenerative role of neighborhood associations in disadvantaged urban areas. Specifically, studies highlight the impact of community networks, both formal and informal (neighborhood organizations, block associations, civic groups), in fostering mutual trust and activating connections between residents and local institutions, such as schools and social services. This contribution proffers young people tangible alternatives to marginalisation and legitimate channels for social inclusion.[9]

In contexts where social capital is found to be weak or fragmented, characterised by anonymity, scarcity of communal spaces, and pervasive distrust of institutions (low linking capital), young people face a sig-

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[4] www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241563703; www.who.int/publications/i/item/9241545615 (last visited 02/09/2025).

[5] M. MARMOT, *Status Syndrome: How Social Standing Affects Our Health and Longevity*, New York, 2005; R. WILKINSON, K. PICKETT, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, London, 2009.

[6] www.istat.it/storage/rapporto-annuale/2022/Rapporto_Annuale_2022.pdf (last visited 02/09/2025).

[7] P. BOURDIEU, *The Forms of Capital*, in J. RICHARDSON (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York, 1986, 241-58; R.D. PUTNAM, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, 2000.

[8] *Ibidem*; M. WOOLCOCK, *The place of social capital in understanding social and economic outcomes*, in *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, 2, 2001, 11–17; S. SZRETER, M. WOOLCOCK, *Health by association? Social capital, social theory, and the political economy of public health*, in *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 33, 4, 2004, 650–667.

[9] R.J. SAMPSON, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*, Chicago–London, 2012, 151-155, 171-175, 350-370.

nificant reduction in available opportunities. In such scenarios, deviant peer groups, though distorted, may become the only source of identity and protection. Urban contexts characterised by spatial segregation and limited opportunities for positive aggregation offer a pertinent illustration of this dynamic. In such environments, young people frequently establish narrow, peer-centered networks that serve to reinforce oppositional attitudes and deviant behaviors.[10] Conversely, longitudinal research has shown that neighborhoods characterized by greater social cohesion and the capacity for informal social control (collective efficacy) display significantly lower levels of violence and disorder.[11] Within this framework, sports and recreational activities represent a privileged channel of inclusion, as they have been demonstrated to strengthen community ties and provide young people with concrete alternatives to marginalisation (Smith, 2020). Consistently, clinical research confirms that physical exercise, beyond its bodily benefits, produces significant cognitive and psychological gains, with potential preventive implications.[12] Epidemiological research has repeatedly confirmed the correlation between low levels of community social capital and higher incidence of violent conduct, depression, despair, and other risk behaviours such as substance use.[13] A particularly well-studied case concerns communities with strong civic associationism, such as some regions in Northern Italy analyzed by Putnam, where widespread associational networks and high levels of social trust were correlated with lower crime rates and greater civic cooperation.[14] The findings of this study indicate that social capital is not merely an abstract concept but rather a tangible resource. The presence of social capital has been observed to serve as a protective factor against violence and distress among young people. Conversely, its absence has been identified as a contributing factor to the development of deviant behaviours.

Within this theoretical framework, the specific issue of gratuitous violence assumes primacy. This phenomenon manifests as aggression not aimed at achieving economic or instrumental gain, but often as an expression of frustration, search for recognition or belonging, and lack of prospects.[15] In this regard, the philosophical-juridical reflection of Sergio Cotta maintains that violence is never merely an individual act, but rather represents a deficit of symbolic and communal order. It emerges when civil coexistence deteriorates and when the capacity to assign meaning and proportion to conflict is lost.[16] It can thus be posited that gratuitous violence may be interpreted as a symptom of a social bond crisis and a risk of collective pathology. Its analysis raises crucial ethical and philosophical questions concerning the genesis of human action and the complex relationship between freedom, responsibility, and the formation of moral habit (*hexis*).

Social medicine provides a privileged lens for this enquiry. Its approach is distinguished by an emphasis on risk and protective factors operating at the community level, as well as by its focus on cultural and

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[10] L. WACQUANT, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*, Cambridge, 2008.

[11] R.J. SAMPSON, *op.cit.*, 151-155, 171-175.

[12] T. ARCHER, S. RICCI, F. MASSONI, L. RICCI, M. RAPP-RICCIARDI, *Cognitive benefits of exercise intervention*, in *Clinica Terapeutica*, 167, 6, 2016, 180-185.

[13] I. KAWACHI, S.V. SUBRAMANIAN, D. KIM (eds.), *Social Capital and Health*, New York, 2008; S. FOLLAND, L. ROCCO, *The economics of social capital and health: a conceptual and empirical roadmap*, in *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 76, 3, 2014, 387–410; I. SUTHERLAND, J.P. SHEPHERD, *Social dimensions of adolescent substance use*, in *Addiction*, 96, 3, 2001, 445–458.

[14] R.D. PUTNAM, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, 1993.

[15] www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide-2019.html (last visited 02/09/2025).

[16] S. COTTA, *Perché la violenza? Una interpretazione filosofica*, L'Aquila, 1978.

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relational resources that have the potential to impede the propagation of violence. The present study is predicated on the hypothesis that the development of critical-reflective thinking constitutes one of the most effective tools for containing such phenomena. The cultivation of awareness of one's actions, the evaluation of consequences, and the understanding of underlying motivations can serve as a protective factor for both individuals and society as a whole.

Educational research has demonstrated a clear correlation between the development of metacognitive and critical competences and the acquisition of skills in self-regulation, emotional management, and evaluation of consequences. In this perspective, self-regulation is regarded as an integral component of critical thinking, as it enables individuals to monitor and adjust their own reasoning processes, thereby guiding them toward more informed and responsible decisions.[17] The presence of gratuitous violence, as indicated by the absence of rational motivation and a limited cognitive elaboration of emotions, can be interpreted as a failure of this reflective dimension.

The philosophy of Aristotle provides an additional interpretative key that is deeply rooted in human nature. In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle introduces the concept of *hexis*, understood as a stable disposition formed through the repetition of acts. It is evident that each action contributes to shaping the character of the individual, gradually reinforcing specific inclinations. The repetition of violent behaviour may therefore foster a tendency to violence, progressively transforming it into a 'second nature' that guides future behaviour.[18] The absence of critical thinking strengthens this self-referential mechanism, while reflective capacity has the capacity to interrupt the process, opening the way to a different ethical orientation and greater awareness and responsibility.

From this standpoint, manifestations of societal vulnerability, such as youth distress, criminality, and gratuitous violence, should not be regarded exclusively as deviant phenomena to be repressed. Instead, these phenomena should be seen as indicators of a community bond crisis. The present study is predicated on the aforementioned premises, and its objective is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to explore the contribution of social medicine in identifying the collective determinants of youth violence and elaborating prevention strategies oriented towards public health. Secondly, it explores the role of critical-reflective thinking, understood not merely as a cognitive competence but also as an ethical and educational resource, capable of countering the trivialization of violence and strengthening individual and collective responsibility. The integration of these two analytical levels enables the delineation of a genuinely multidimensional approach, establishing a connection between the structural roots of the phenomenon and the sphere of moral and civic dispositions. This synthesis paves the way towards an integrated model of prevention, encompassing scientific, epidemiological, and philosophical-educational perspectives.

2. Youth, Deviance and Public Health: The Evidence-Based Contribution of Social Medicine

Social medicine, although it is anchored in the medical field as an independent discipline, is distinguished by its transdisciplinary orientation. This approach is intended to facilitate the integration of diverse perspectives in the study and intervention on the determinants of health. In this investigation, the

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[17] P.A. FACIONE, *Critical thinking: What it is and why it counts*, in *Insight Assessment*, 2015, 5-7; 22-25; M.C. NUSSBAUM, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton, 2010, 23–26, 27–38.
[18] ARISTOTELE, *Etica Nicomachea*, in C. NATALI (a cura di), Bari, 1999.

systemic impact of social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors on population health is the primary focus. The methodological approach adopted is consistent with the foundational theories of prominent authors such as Rudolf Virchow, who asserted that medicine is fundamentally a social science.[19] This approach does not restrict itself to the disease in isolation but encompasses the process of illness (pathogenesis) and its intricate interaction with the broader context.[20] From this standpoint, youth violence is analyzed not only as a juridical-criminal phenomenon, but also as a social determinant of health, with measurable consequences in terms of incidence of injuries, premature mortality, psychiatric impact, and both direct and indirect costs to healthcare systems.[21]

The most significant contribution of social medicine to the understanding of such phenomena lies in its ability to document, through epidemiological methods, the causal links between social determinants and outcomes of distress. A fundamental construct in this regard is that of health gradients,[22] which demonstrate that health and well-being do not decline uniformly between those with and without access to care, but vary gradually and dose-dependently along the entire socioeconomic spectrum. Each downward step on this social ladder is accompanied by a measurable decline in outcomes, including reduced life expectancy, higher prevalence of chronic diseases, poorer mental health, and, importantly, a diminished perception of control over one's future (sense of agency). The unequal distribution of life opportunities, which is rooted in structural systems that generate persistent inequalities, engenders an environment conducive to chronic frustration, helplessness and existential insecurity. These conditions can manifest in a dysfunctional way as violent behaviour.

Within this theoretical framework, social capital is not regarded as an abstract concept, but rather as a crucial mediator between structural conditions and individual outcomes. Research indicates that a dearth of social capital typified by pervasive mistrust, social isolation, and underdeveloped social networks significantly curtails a community's aptitude to wield informal social control, offer assistance, and engender prospects for youth reintegration.[23] It is within this relational void that violence can flourish.

Research in the field of social medicine has identified further determinants. Prolonged exposure to poverty and economic inequality has been demonstrated to result in psychological distress, as well as a physiological response of chronic toxic stress. The existence of scientific evidence from the field of neuroscience indicates that such a permanent state of alertness has the capacity to induce alterations in the development of the brain in children and adolescents. This has been shown to result in deficits in executive functions, including planning and problem-solving skills, reduced impulse control, and impaired emotional regulation.[24] Conversely, the phenomenon of school dropout and the recurrent experience of substandard education in deprived environments emerge as significant risk factors. This is not solely attributable to the absence of technical skills acquired, but chiefly due to the deprivation of a crucial pro-

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[19] L.J. RATHER, *Rudolf Virchow: Collected Essays on Public Health and Epidemiology*, New York, 1985.

[20] S.W. BLOOM, *The Word as Scalpel: A History of Medical Sociology*, Oxford, 2002.

[21] www.who.int/publications/i/item/9241545615 (last visited 02/09/2025).

[22] M. MARMOT, *op.cit*.

[23] R.J. SAMPSON, *op.cit*., 151-155, 171-175, 350-355.

[24] G.W. EVANS, P. KIM, *Childhood poverty, chronic stress, self-regulation, and coping*, in *Child Development Perspectives*, 7, 1, 2013, 43-48; J.P. SHONKOFF, A.S. GARNER, COMMITTEE ON PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF CHILD AND FAMILY HEALTH, COMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, ADOPTION, AND DEPENDENT CARE, SECTION ON DEVELOPMENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL PEDIATRICS, *The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress*, in *Pediatrics*, 129, 1, 2012, e232–e246.

tected milieu for socialization, where the establishment of positive relationships and social competencies can flourish. This also removes the primary opportunity for upward social mobility, thereby fueling a vicious cycle of disadvantage.[25] A particularly salient example of this phenomenon can be seen in the challenges faced by young individuals diagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorders, as evidenced by the discourse surrounding the diagnostic criteria of the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition).[26] This discourse underscores the pivotal role that access to adequate education plays in determining not only individual health but also social cohesion.

This perspective has been widely corroborated on the international stage. The World Health Organization, through the report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health,[27] highlighted how economic, educational, and relational inequalities exert both direct and indirect impacts on population well-being, influencing not only health indicators but also social behaviours and deviant phenomena. A plethora of studies in the domain of social epidemiology have repeatedly demonstrated that crime rates and aggressive behaviours among young people are elevated in contexts characterised by persistent poverty, job insecurity, and inadequate levels of social capital.[28,]

The empirical evidence collected reveals a significant correlation between the social characteristics of neighborhoods – particularly cohesion and collective efficacy – and a reduction in levels of violence and antisocial behaviour among young people. The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) has demonstrated that communities characterised by greater mutual trust and informal social control exhibit lower rates of violence, even under equivalent structural disadvantage.[29] Recent research on large adolescent cohorts has confirmed that perceived cohesion during adolescence is a predictor of favorable psychosocial outcomes in young adulthood.[30] Conversely, studies on 'legal socialization' have indicated that a low level of trust in the legitimacy of institutions, coupled with perceptions of procedural injustice, is associated with an elevated risk of delinquent behaviours and a greater propensity to accept violence.[31] The findings emphasize that manifestations of violence among juveniles cannot be attributed to individual deficiencies; rather, they must be interpreted as manifestations of collective dynamics and the quality of the prevailing social context.

Surveys conducted at a national level, for example those carried out by ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics),[32] demonstrate consistent patterns. Specifically, regions characterised by elevated levels of youth unemployment and constrained access to cultural and educational resources also exhibit a higher inci-

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[25] N. FREUDENBERG, J. RUGLIS, *Reframing school dropout as a public health issue*, in *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 4, 4, 2007, A107.

[26] R. FERRARA, R. NAPPO, F. ANSERMET, P. RICCI, F. MASSONI, G. CARBONE, A. SPARACI, E. NONNIS, L. RICCI, S. RICCI, *The impact of DSM-5 on the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder*, in *Psychiatric Annals*, 51, 1, 2020, 38-46.

[27] CSDH (COMMISSION ON SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH), *Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health. Final Report*, Geneva, 2008.

[28] R. WILKINSON, K. PICKETT, *op.cit*; I. KAWACHI, S.V. SUBRAMANIAN, D. KIM, *op.cit*.

[29] R.J. SAMPSON, S.W. RAUDENBUSH, F. EARLS, *Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy*, in *Science*, 277(5328), 1997, 918–924; R.J. SAMPSON, *op.cit*., 151-155, 171-175.

[30] Y. KIM, S. PARK, J.H. LEE, H.J. CHO, *Adolescent social cohesion and psychosocial outcomes in young adulthood: Evidence from a longitudinal cohort study*, in *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 53, 2, 2024, 325–339.

[31] G.D. WALTERS, *Legal socialization, legitimacy, and offending: A systematic review and meta-analysis*, in *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 93, 2024, 102042.

[32] www.istat.it/storage/rapporto-annuale/2022/Rapporto_Annuale_2022.pdf (last visited 02/09/2025).

dence of petty crime and vandalism. Consequently, social vulnerability emerges as a significant predictor of youth distress.

Cultural marginalisation processes represent another key determinant. Young people belonging to ethnic or cultural minorities are more exposed to discrimination and symbolic exclusion, which may generate feelings of frustration and hostility.[33] Social medicine interprets such phenomena as collective risk factors, given their disruptive impact on the broader community fabric.

Educational inequalities also play a fundamental role. The absence of a stable and inclusive education system has been demonstrated to reduce opportunities for labor market entry, weaken social belonging, and limit young people's ability to develop reflective competences.[34] These deficiencies intersect with other social determinants, thereby reinforcing vicious cycles that perpetuate disadvantage.

The fundamental merit of social medicine thus lies in its capacity to operationalize abstract concepts into measurable variables, rigorously demonstrating how the social environment influences brain development, mental health, and behaviour, while increasing the risk of violent outcomes. The interpretative framework utilized facilitates the identification and systematization of risk and protective factors, thereby providing the empirical basis necessary to orient prevention strategies and public health policies grounded in consolidated evidence.

3. The Challenge of Gratuitous Violence: Deciphering a Phenomenon Beyond Instrumental Reason

Youth violence encompasses diverse configurations; within criminological literature, a common classification distinguishes between instrumental violence, oriented towards material gain or the acquisition of power (as in cases of robbery or extortion), and expressive or gratuitous violence, devoid of immediate utilitarian ends and characterised by symbolic, identity-related and emotional dimensions.[35] The phenomenon of gratuitous violence represents one of the most insidious and destructive forms of aggression, particularly within the context of youth. Despite the observations of certain authors, such as Pinker,[36] who have drawn attention to a historical decline in violence within modern societies, there is a worrying trend of seemingly gratuitous violence in specific youth, school, and urban settings.[37] Such episodes are often marked by a performative and spectacularized dimension, amplified by the logic of social media, where the violent act finds both its dissemination and, at times, its very justification. Bullying, a practice that is frequently documented and disseminated online to garner visibility and peer endorsement, or assaults on strangers driven by boredom or a desire for confrontation, serve as illustrative examples of such dynamics, wherein their significance lies in their exposure and circulation.

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[33] J.W. BERRY, *Handbook of Acculturation and Health*, Oxford, 2017.

[34] www.oecd.org/en/publications/equity-in-education_9789264073234-en.html (last visited 05/09/2025).

[35] R.B. FELSON, *Violence, crime, and violent crime*, in *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 3, 1, 2009, 23–39; J.T. TEDESCHI, R.B. FELSON, *Violence, Aggression, and Coercive Actions*, Washington (DC), 1994.

[36] S. PINKER, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, New York, 2011.

[37] www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/bullismo-e-cyberbullismo-nei-rapporti-tra-i-ragazzi-anno-2023/ (last visited 28/08/2025); www.who.int/europe/news/item/27-03-2024-one-in-six-school-aged-children-experiences-cyberbullying--finds-new-who-europe-study (last visited 28/08/2025).

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This form of violence is distinguished by its disconnection from the logic of utility. In contradistinction to instrumental violence, which is driven by the pursuit of theft, defense, or revenge, symbolic violence is marked by the absence of immediate utilitarian goals and by its excessive, intrinsically symbolic nature. The subject's peculiarity does not lie in the attainment of material profit, but rather in the acquisition of distorted social legitimacy and the affirmation of individual identity through the humiliation of others. Acts of destructive vandalism against public goods or institutional symbols, profanations aimed at negating the value of the Other, or collective violence by youth gangs, serve to exemplify this logic. In the latter case, group cohesion is forged through rituals of cruelty and domination over random, vulnerable victims. However, interpreting these behaviours exclusively as outcomes of individual psychological traits, such as reduced empathy[38] or heightened impulsivity, would be misleading and reductive. Social medicine invites us to regard these as mediating factors embedded within broader social determinants. The phenomenon of unmediated impulsivity, group-induced de-responsibilities,[39] and difficulties in perspective-taking can be considered as reflections of the failure of educational, relational, and symbolic systems to provide protective resources. The erosion of social capital, the absence of positive role models, and prolonged exposure to deprived contexts have been identified as contributing factors to the normalization of such conduct, thereby transforming individual potential into collective deviance. The etiology of gratuitous violence is therefore multifactorial in nature, arising from the circular interaction of neuropsychological deficits (emotional dysregulation), micro-social dynamics (deviant peer groups), and macro-social determinants (inequality, marginalisation, lack of opportunity).

The intricate and enigmatic etiology of this phenomenon is a matter of profound social and ethical concern. Given its hybrid nature, which encompasses the merging of biological determinants, group dynamics and social fractures, it is resistant to traditional interpretative tools based on calculation and rational interest. The concept of gratuitous violence challenges established categories of social rationality, manifesting as excess and thus constituting a transgression that undermines community bonds. This in turn generates diffuse fear and collective insecurity, extending far beyond the immediate harm inflicted on victims. Its apparent 'uselessness' paradoxically makes it more destabilizing and socially corrosive. It functions as a hyperbolic symptom, a cry of alarm signaling the collapse not merely of an individual but of an entire relational and communal ecosystem. The violent gesture, therefore, appears as the extreme outcome of profound malaise, which, lacking legitimate avenues of expression, erupts destructively in the public sphere.

In this context, the contribution of the philosopher of law Sergio Cotta proves essential for deciphering the symbolic scope of the phenomenon. His reflections, developed in works such as *Perché la violenza?*[40] and *Il diritto come sistema di valori*,[41] although not explicitly addressing contemporary youth violence or the category of so-called 'gratuitous' violence, provide a powerful interpretative framework that goes beyond strictly criminological or psychological explanations. For Cotta, violence is not a natural occurrence or an isolated act, but rather "the sign of a deficit in symbolic and communal order".[42] This

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[38] S. BARON-COHEN, *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*, New York, 2011.

[39] P. ZIMBARDO, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, New York, 2007.

[40] S. COTTA, *op.cit*.

[41] S. COTTA, *Il diritto come sistema di valori*, Roma, 1985.

[42] S. COTTA, *Perché la violenza? Una interpretazione filosofica*, 45.

symbolic order can be conceptualized as the aggregate of norms, values, rituals, and shared narratives that imbue civil coexistence with significance, thereby transforming brute force into relation, conflict into dialogue, and instinct into rule.

It can thus be assumed that violence is never wholly 'gratuitous'; rather, it is indicative of an underlying internal logic, however distorted or deviant this may be. Acts of cruelty, frequently interpreted as manifestations of 'perverse morality', may occasionally be responses to perceived affronts, their perception obscured by cultural or individual frameworks of reference. From Cotta's standpoint, the function of law is twofold: it is both repressive and symbolic. The symbolic function of law is more significant in that it is preventative in nature. In order to achieve this, law must give form to force and channel it through shared procedures, languages and institutions. A balanced legal system does not wait for violence to erupt before punishing it; it works beforehand, symbolically, to defuse it, offering alternative routes for justice, recognition, and conflict resolution. In circumstances where such a symbolic order is strong, the manifestation of brute violence is found to be limited.

From this standpoint, gratuitous violence perpetrated by youth represents the ultimate failure of this symbolic function. The issue at hand is not merely a paucity of rules, but rather the implosion of a shared universe of meaning that should orient existence. The emergence of this phenomenon indicates a crisis of the community as a network of institutions, schools, families, and associations, which is no longer capable of providing young people with recognition through legitimate channels, positive identity narratives, or meaningful rites of passage. The defacement of a mural or the severe damage to a school building by a young person can be considered as an example of this phenomenon. Such an act should not be interpreted solely as vandalism, but rather as a distorted and desperate attempt to assert presence within a social context that otherwise renders them invisible. The violent act becomes the sole means of expression for unarticulated distress.

The unspeakable is imposed through the brutal gesture. This symptom points to a void: the absence of a symbolic law to orient, of shared values to motivate, of adults or institutions willing to listen. The commission of gratuitous violence is therefore considered to constitute a crime against the very social bond. The community, by relinquishing its formative and integrative function, has enabled the manifestation of force in its most destructive form, which is unrestrained by law and a shared ethos. This phenomenon gives rise to questions that extend beyond individual dangerousness, reaching into the symbolic health of the collectivity itself.

This assertion is substantiated by empirical research. Ethnographic studies by Philippe Bourgois[43] in US inner-city ghettos reveal how violence, often deemed 'senseless', operates as a perverse language to gain respect and status where other forms of capital – economic, cultural, or social – are inaccessible. In a similar vein, Michel Wieviorka[44] has demonstrated that expressive violence emerges in contexts of dual marginalisation, both economic and symbolic. Recent neurosociological research lends further support to these insights, demonstrating that prolonged social exclusion and perceptions of humiliation or disrespect activate the same brain regions associated with physical pain and trigger impulsive aggressive

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[43] P. BOURGOIS, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, 2ª ed., Cambridge, 2003.
[44] M. WIEVIORKA, *La violence*, Paris, 2005.

responses.[45] It is therefore the case that gratuitous violence is not, in fact, 'gratuitous': the cost of such violence is denied belonging, trampled dignity, and stolen futures. This failure to recognize and integrate youth into a shared framework of meaning is indicative of systemic issues.

Accordingly, gratuitous violence may be interpreted as the consequence of 'moral bubbles' that normalize otherwise unacceptable conduct, particularly within closed groups or deviant subcultures.[46] Such bubbles form relational microcosms – such as gangs, online groups, and marginalized youth circles – where alternative values, codes, and justifications are produced. Externally perceived as senseless cruelty, these acts internally acquire coherence and purpose: they function as rites of initiation, tests of loyalty, instruments for status acquisition, or the only available language for self-affirmation. The apparent irrationality of the subjects under scrutiny is indicative of a quest for meaning and affiliation within a distorted yet internally consistent moral system.

Social medicine, with its multifactorial approach, provides the necessary framework for integrating these perspectives. It has been demonstrated that the 'deficits of symbolic order' emphasized by Cotta and the 'marginalizations' articulated by Bourgois and Wieviorka do not occur in isolation, but are embedded within systemic inequalities, including poverty, residential segregation, inadequate services and educational deprivation. It is therefore argued that gratuitous violence emerges as the ultimate convergence of material vulnerability and symbolic fragility. In order to comprehend the intricacies of this phenomenon, it is necessary to undertake a collaborative examination of the geographical distribution of inequality and the crisis of shared meanings.

While social medicine provides a detailed map of the risk contexts in which the phenomenon arises, and philosophy unveils its symbolic and ethical-anthropological dimensions, the emerging challenge lies in identifying cultural and educational 'antibodies' capable of acting upon this deeply lacerated symbolic-community level. It is therefore necessary not only to promote policies aimed at reducing inequalities, but also to foster processes that regenerate the fabric of civil coexistence, offering young people alternative languages to brute force and spaces where recognition and belonging can be built through legitimate and non-destructive channels.

4. Critical-Reflective Thinking: An Ethical and Social Safeguard Against Gratuitous Violence

The foregoing reflection has highlighted that gratuitous violence is not merely an act of aggression without utilitarian purpose; it is primarily a symptom of the crisis of social bonds and the symbolic fragility of civic coexistence. If gratuitous violence signals the community's failure to provide shared languages and legitimate channels of recognition, the ensuing challenge cannot be reduced to repressive or emergency interventions. Instead, it is necessary to identify cultural antibodies and educational tools that can repair damaged relationships and provide young people with the inner and ethical resources needed to resist the temptation of brute force. From this perspective, the development of critical reflective thinking emerges as one of the most effective and promising instruments.

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[45] N.I. EISENBERGER, *The pain of social disconnection: Examining the shared neural underpinnings of physical and social pain*, in *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 13, 6, 2012, 421–434.

[46] L. MAGNANI, *Filosofia della violenza*, Milano, 2022, 25, 33.

Critical thinking cannot be reduced to a logical-argumentative skill or a mere abstract intellectual exercise. Rather, it is a complex set of dispositions and cognitive abilities that enable individuals to analyse, evaluate, and correct their thought processes, with ethical and practical consequences. In a now classic work, Facione defines critical thinking as an intentional, self-regulated, reflective process leading to sound judgement.[47] He emphasizes that critical thinking is not an occasional competence, but rather a systematic practice of evaluating and revising one's cognitive acts. His model identifies fundamental skills such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference and explanation, accompanied by dispositions such as open-mindedness, truth-seeking, prudence in judgement and the capacity for self-regulation. In this light, critical-reflective thinking becomes an exercise in continuous awareness, guiding the individual to make responsible choices.

From a philosophical and humanistic standpoint, Nussbaum[48] has demonstrated that critical thinking is inextricably linked to an ethical dimension. Simply analyzing arguments logically is not enough; one must also cultivate the ability to 'see the world through the eyes of another', developing empathetic imagination and a sense of justice. According to Nussbaum, this attitude enables the 'cultivation of humanity', or the recognition of the intrinsic dignity of every individual beyond group affiliations. Therefore, critical thinking is not a neutral exercise, but a process oriented towards civic coexistence and mutual respect.

The convergence of the perspectives of Facione and Nussbaum enables us to understand the preventive value of critical reflective thinking in relation to gratuitous violence. According to Facione, this evaluation and self-regulation practice enables individuals to consider the consequences of their actions before acting. For Nussbaum, its strength lies in the capacity to decenter oneself and recognize others as interlocutors rather than objects of domination. These two dimensions — cognitive and ethical — combine to form a genuine antidote to gratuitous violence: rational self-regulation curbs blind impulsivity, while empathetic imagination reduces the likelihood of dehumanizing others.

This integration highlights that critical-reflective thinking is not an academic luxury, but a crucial element of public health. It interrupts the vicious circle that leads from a lack of reflection to the adoption and repetition of violent behaviours, thereby strengthening young people's capacity to develop identities and a sense of belonging based on responsibility rather than brute force.

From an educational standpoint, empirical research has consistently demonstrated that developing critical and metacognitive competencies constitutes a protective factor against aggressive and antisocial behaviours. One of the most authoritative syntheses is the meta-analysis by Durlak et al.,[49] which evaluated over two hundred social and emotional learning programs. The results show that students significantly reduce the incidence of problematic behaviours when training paths include practices of critical reflection and activities of metacognitive awareness, improving their emotional management and capacity for self-regulation. These outcomes suggest that, when applied to real educational contexts, critical thinking is not confined to a cognitive dimension, but produces tangible transformations in the way young people interpret and manage their relationships.

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[47] P.A. FACIONE, *op.cit.*, 4–9; 22–23.

[48] M.C. NUSSBAUM, *op.cit.*

[49] J.A. DURLAK, R.P. WEISSBERG, A.B. DYMNICKI, *et al.*, *The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions*, in *Child Development*, 82, 1, 2011, 405–432.

Another significant contribution comes from evaluations of the widely tested Life Skills Training program in the United States.[50] This educational program integrates the development of socio-emotional skills with critical reflection and conflict management activities. Longitudinal studies and controlled trials involving thousands of secondary school students have demonstrated a substantial decrease in violent and antisocial behaviours, alongside improvements in emotional regulation and peaceful conflict resolution. These results suggest that promoting cognitive and ethical skills oriented towards critical reflection benefits not only academic learning, but also directly affects how young people interpret and manage their relationships, reducing the likelihood of violence becoming a means of belonging or identity affirmation.

From this standpoint, critical-reflective thinking is regarded as a pivotal competence, not only in academic learning but also in the prevention of deviance and violence. The educational value of this approach is inextricably linked to its social value: the cultivation of individuals who possess the capacity for introspection and the ability to empathize with the perspectives of others serves to fortify the foundations of civic coexistence and to mitigate the risk of gratuitous violence becoming an alternative means of belonging or recognition.

The educational and empirical dimension is firmly rooted in Aristotelian reflection, providing a solid philosophical foundation. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle introduces the concept of *hexis*, understood as a stable disposition formed through the repetition of acts.[51] It is important to note that actions are not merely isolated events; rather, they are constitutive elements of a broader process that contributes to the formation of character. It is evident that each gesture, when reiterated over an extended period, exerts a profound influence on inclinations and habits, thereby augmenting the likelihood of its subsequent repetition. In the absence of intervention or critical re-evaluation, such behaviours can lead to the development of a disposition to violence, which gradually becomes entrenched. This suggests that gratuitous violence, despite its apparently occasional and unmotivated nature, often becomes embedded within repetitive behavioural patterns, where the absence of reflection contributes to the consolidation of a destructive habitus.

Furthermore, Aristotle expounds the concept of phronesis, or practical wisdom,[52] which functions as a corrective and orientation force. Phronesis cannot be reduced to mere technical calculation or the ability to achieve an end; rather, it represents ethical discernment. That is to say, it is the disposition to evaluate which action is good and just in a given circumstance, taking into account the consequences and the dignity of the other. In other words, while *hexis* describes the inertial force of habits, phronesis represents the possibility of interrupting such force through critical deliberation. In the absence of considered reflection, violent action becomes progressively automatic and self-referential; however, with phronesis, the individual regains the possibility of reopening the space of choice, transforming an impulsive gesture into a conscious and responsible action.

It is therefore possible to interpret critical-reflective thinking as a contemporary declination of Aristotelian phronesis. The concept functions as a conduit between cognition and ethics, facilitating the sub-

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[50] G.J. BOTVIN, K.W. GRIFFIN, T.D. NICHOLS, *Preventing youth violence and delinquency through a universal school-based prevention approach*, in *Prevention Science*, 7, 4, 2006, 403–408.
[51] ARISTOTELE, *op.cit.*, II, 1103a-1104b.
[52] ARISTOTELE, *op.cit.*, VI, 1138b-1145.

ject's transition from habitual behaviour to a more deliberative and ethical conduct. As with the Aristotelian model, critical thinking does not seek to annul the passions or eliminate conflict, but rather provides the tools to integrate them into a process of personal and civic growth.

The reference to Aristotle's philosophy is pivotal in clarifying the notion that the prevention of gratuitous violence should not be confined to repressive or emergency interventions. Instead, it should be integrated into educational and community practices, with the objective of cultivating phronesis among young individuals. Social medicine, acknowledging the pivotal role of cultural and relational determinants, aligns with this perspective: the promotion of critical thinking is instrumental in fortifying the capacity for individual choice and responsibility, whilst concurrently revitalizing the community fabric. This process offers symbolic and moral alternatives to the logic of brute force.

The relevance of critical-reflective thinking is not confined to its individual function of self-regulation and moral discernment, but extends to the collective sphere, acquiring the significance of a public health resource. In accordance with the tenets of social medicine, the analysis and modification of human behaviour must be considered within the relational and symbolic context in which they occur.[53] The promotion of critical thinking, understood as the capacity for analysis, empathy and reasoned confrontation, fosters not only personal awareness but also the creation of social capital, understood as a network of trust, cooperation and mutual recognition. Several studies have shown that a high level of social capital is correlated with a reduction in violent and antisocial behaviours. Communities that exhibit greater cohesion and reflection possess a plethora of symbolic and practical resources, which they utilize to moderate aggressive tendencies.[54] In this regard, education in critical thinking is not merely a pedagogical goal, but rather constitutes a comprehensive strategy of primary prevention. This contribution is fundamental to the regeneration of eroded community bonds, the return to young people of cognitive and ethical tools to interpret reality in a less impulsive and destructive manner, and the positioning of young people within a web of relationships founded on mutual recognition and shared responsibility.

As previously mentioned, contemporary philosophical reflection has emphasized that violence does not solely stem from individual impulses or material conditions of disadvantage, but rather, it is predominantly derived from voids of meaning that emerge during the symbolic collapses of communities. In this context, Magnani[55] describes the so-called 'moral bubbles' that form within deviant youth subcultures: closed microcosms within which alternative codes develop, and violence becomes both an identity language and a tool of belonging. In a complementary manner, Byung-Chul Han[56] proposes an interpretation of violence that is more subtle and pervasive, which he defines as 'microphysical' or 'subcutaneous': it does not always manifest as overt aggression but permeates social and economic structures through invisible mechanisms of pressure, exclusion and performative competition. In other words, violence insinuates itself into everyday relationships, spaces of interaction and symbolic codes, acting silently but with profound effects. Despite their methodological and conceptual differences, both perspectives concur in indicating that the prevention of violence necessitates the regeneration of a symbol-

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[53] www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241500852 (last visited 04/09/2025).

[54] R.D. PUTNAM, *op.cit*; I. KAWACHI, S.V. SUBRAMANIAN, D. KIM, *op.cit.*

[55] L. MAGNANI, *op.cit*.

[56] B.C. HAN, *Topologia della violenza*, Milano, 2020.

ic and critical horizon. In order to achieve this, there is a requirement for tools that can interrogate dominant models, deconstruct deviant languages and offer young people possibilities of recognition that do not translate into destruction or domination. In this perspective, critical-reflective thinking assumes a significant ethical and social value, insofar as it facilitates the identification of symbolic distortions, the recognition of violence as a failure of shared meaning, and the reconfiguration of legitimate and inclusive paths of belonging.

It can therefore be affirmed that the promotion of critical thinking belongs fully to the domain of interventions in social medicine. The issue at hand extends beyond the mere reduction of violent behaviours; it pertains to the enhancement of the symbolic and relational well-being of communities. This is conceptualized as the capacity to generate shared meanings and to ensure modes of coexistence that are not solely reliant on external control. Critical thinking functions as a protective factor on multiple levels: at the individual level, it fosters self-awareness and personal responsibility; at the collective level, it contributes to the generation of cultural antibodies capable of countering the drift of gratuitous violence, thereby fostering contexts in which reciprocal recognition and trust replace the logic of domination.

A parallel approach is discernible in Aristotelian reflection. As previously stated, Aristotle emphasizes the role of action in shaping *hexis*, which is defined as the stable disposition of character. Over time, this disposition may consolidate into what is referred to as a 'second nature'.[57] The concept of ethos, understood as a way of life and a set of daily practices, has been demonstrated to generate habits that structure moral personality. It is important to note that, from this premise, a crucial point is derived. In the absence of a reflective exercise capable of guiding decisions, it is possible for habits to consolidate into destructive inclinations, thereby transforming violence into an instinctive and almost automatic tendency. Conversely, when action is supported by phronesis, the practical wisdom that enables orientation in concrete situations,[58] the formation of *hexis* takes on a virtuous direction. It is therefore argued that critical-reflective thinking is not merely a cognitive instrument; rather, it constitutes a true ethical safeguard. This in turn contributes to the shaping of an ethos that enables the realization of a good life for both the individual and the community.

The relevance of this perspective extends beyond the philosophical level, revealing how the promotion of critical thinking constitutes a factor of public health, capable of influencing the social determinants of violence. In accordance with the principles of social medicine, which emphasize that behaviours must be considered within their social context, Aristotelian ethics similarly instructs that habits are never purely individual but originate and consolidate within the polis.[59] Education in critical thinking is thus configured as a process that simultaneously engages individual prevention and collective regeneration. This approach facilitates the interruption of cycles of violent behaviour, whilst concomitantly fostering community bonds predicated on trust, dialogue and mutual recognition. It is within this dual dimension—both individual and social—that critical-reflective thinking can emerge as a genuine instrument for transforming reality and preventing gratuitous violence.

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[57] ARISTOTELE, *op.cit*., II, 1103a-1104b.
[58] ARISTOTELE, *op.cit*., VI, 1140a-1140b.
[59] ARISTOTELE, *Politica*, in C.A. VIANO (a cura di), Milano, 2002, I, 1253a2–18.

5. Concluding Reflection and Preventative Approaches

The analysis previously undertaken suggests that the phenomenon of gratuitous youth violence cannot be understood through unidimensional explanations that seek causes solely in individual psychology or exclusively in material conditions. Instead, a multifaceted picture emerges, in which structural factors (inequalities, deficiencies in linking and bridging social capital, marginalisation) and individual and symbolic factors (crisis of community bonds, search for identity, lack of meaning) interact in a vicious cycle. As demonstrated by research in the field of neuroscience, the absence of social contexts conducive to development can indeed have a detrimental effect on the development of emotional regulation and impulse control capacities.[60] However, as previously noted, violence can also manifest in privileged contexts, taking the form of an 'existential malaise', that is, as a distorted response to a lack of meaning and performance pressures.[61] In both cases, gratuitous violence manifests as a symptom of a deeper deficit in symbolic and community order,[62] a failure to provide young people with shared languages and legitimate channels for recognition and belonging.

In view of this multifactorial diagnosis, any strategy that is purely security-oriented or emergency-driven has been shown to be ineffective and short-sighted. This is because it intervenes on the effect (i.e. violent behaviour) without addressing the underlying causes that are embedded in the social and symbolic fabric. Consequently, prevention must be integrated and multidimensional, operating concurrently across two complementary axes:

The Structural-Community Axis postulates the necessity of the implementation of public policies that are oriented towards the reduction of socioeconomic inequalities and the regeneration of social capital. This is particularly relevant in the context of its bridging (connecting different groups) and linking (connecting citizens to institutions) forms. This calls for the strategic allocation of resources to promote dignified employment, improve educational standards, ensure adequate youth services, and create accessible community spaces. Interventions of this nature have been shown to rebuild institutional trust and foster social cohesion, thereby addressing the material and relational conditions that allow violence to take root.

The Educational-Symbolic Axis posits that the cultivation of critical-reflective thinking must begin in early childhood, developing in parallel and in synergy with cognitive, emotional, and social growth. This concept should not be construed as merely a logical-argumentative skill, but rather as an integrated ethical and civic competence that combines emotional self-regulation with empathy, judgment, and responsibility towards others. The implementation of structured educational programs, encompassing social-emotional learning, practical philosophy, and restorative justice, has been identified as a pivotal strategy to empower young individuals with the internal tools necessary to deconstruct deviant narratives, resist peer pressure, and seek recognition through constructive channels.

In this context, the concept of habit (*hexis*) assumes a central role. It is erroneous to consider habits as mere routines or automatic behaviours; rather, they constitute stable dispositions that shape character and reveal the individual's deep-seated ethics. These values serve to delineate our identities and

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[60] J.P. SHONKOFF, A.S. GARNER, COMMITTEE ON PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF CHILD AND FAMILY HEALTH, COMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, ADOPTION, AND DEPENDENT CARE, SECTION ON DEVELOPMENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL PEDIATRICS, *op.cit*.

[61] B.C. HAN, *op.cit*.

[62] S. COTTA, *Perché la violenza? Una interpretazione filosofica, op.cit*.

demonstrate, through action, what we truly value. It is evident that each reiterated action serves to reinforce a cognitive structure, which can, in turn, manifest as either virtuous or vicious. The depiction of gratuitous violence frequently symbolizes the culmination of a destructive *hexis* that has been perpetuated through the reiteration of unexamined actions. The potential for 'reversing' habitual practices, therefore, offers benefits that extend beyond the scope of self-help. The daily practice of critical reflection and empathy fosters the development of a virtuous habitus that functions as a preventative measure. This proactive approach engenders an environment wherein young individuals can not only deliberately disrupt cycles of violent behaviour, but can also, in advance of their actualization, cultivate a resilient identity anchored in responsibility and the acknowledgement of others. Primary prevention, therefore, aims to inoculate, through the repeated practice of critical-reflective thinking and emotional regulation, the ethical and cognitive antibodies necessary to neutralize impulses toward violence before they crystallize into stable character dispositions. The educated community, through the adoption of such measures, does not merely repair the damage caused, but establishes the foundations for peaceful and responsible coexistence.

Social medicine provides a diagnosis of collective pathology, mapping risk determinants. Philosophy, as a discipline, is capable of revealing the profound nature of the issue at hand, and it is here that the crisis of the symbolic becomes the core of the problem. Pedagogy, in synergy with other humanistic and social disciplines, provides the necessary operational tools. Critical-reflective thinking has been identified as a fundamental element in constructing a complex therapeutic approach aimed at rebuilding, both individually and communally, the capacity to attribute meaning to coexistence without resorting to brute force. This integrated approach, which mobilizes diversified knowledge from a range of disciplines including sociology, community psychology, law and neuroscience, is the only one capable of addressing the multifactorial nature of the phenomenon.

Acting along these two dimensions — structural and educational-symbolic — is an ethical imperative and a crucial lever for public health, grounded in scientific evidence. At the micro-relational level of care, the physician–patient relationship embodies this logic: self-determination, informed consent and freedom of choice are not just formalities, but practices of phronesis that reduce asymmetries, rebuild trust and ensure that the interaction is non-coercive. This reinforces a horizon of social cohesion and personal reflexivity that is consistent with the trajectory outlined in this work. Promoting cohesive communities and reflective individuals reduces the human, social and economic costs of violence while fostering the construction of a more resilient, just and future-oriented society in which mutual recognition replaces domination as the primary language of belonging. The effective prevention of youth violence cannot be attributed to a single discipline, but is instead the outcome of a collective, transdisciplinary project aligned with the shift in paradigm from safeguarding physical integrity to the right to health. This shift expresses the intrinsic interweaving of medicine and society[63] and identifies the regeneration of social bonds and critical interiority as its most powerful resources.

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[63] S. Ricci, A. Miglino, *Medicina e Società: dalla tutela dell'integrità fisica al diritto alla salute*, Roma, 2005, 1-99.