

Social-net-conferences in Austria



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- **1. a new and unusual name** for something well known: family (group) conferences, or community conferences as RJ-procedures.
- **2. a precise name:** the social net as the community of care becoming involved
- **3. a restorative procedure?** The participation/inclusion of victims is missing; reparation happens only indirectly - if at all.

SoNeKos as alternative to detention

- In Austria for the first time transcending the diversionary model – a tripartite pilot
- placed with probation services, with courts and prison administration as referring agencies.
- Motivation for adopting alternatives to detention for juveniles: decreasing rates of juveniles in detention especially custody on remand (the spectacular case of an abused youngster)
- Established in the Juvenile Justice Act and the Law on Probation Assistance – opening the road to nationwide application

Preparation of a pre-trial (release from remand custody) SoNeKo

- First interview of offender with probation worker within two days after notification by the judge (after the arrest).
- Visit of offender by coordinator and drawing up of a social net grid ('card')
- Home visit from the coordinator to the family
- Invitation sent out to all potential participants
- Preparation time for a pre-trial conference is 3 to 10 days

SoNeKo - procedure

The Five Stages/Steps of a Social Network Conference include:

- preparation phase
- information and consultation phase
- discussion phase (family only)
- decision making phase
- Decision of the judge
- implementation phase (follow-up conference)

Core concepts and core achievements of SoNeKos

- **The element of active participation of those concerned.** The involvement of the community of care consisting both of family and friends and of professional caregivers in the decision-making process and the development of a 'care & action' plan adds a new quality to the re-integration process.
- **Expressing a ,Sorge'**, standing between care and concern by the participants results in the experience of being cared for by the youngsters and the evocation of a wide variety of resources on the side of the social net

Example of a Care concern brought forward

- What would be the best place to live for Mathias?
- How will his days (after work) and his weekends be structured?
- What kind of support can he get in order to stay free from delinquency?
- Which activities will provide him with a new set of friends?
- How will he deal with his old friends????

Example of a plan

- Mathias will stay with his uncle
- He will visit his parents and sibling regularly
- Somebody will accompany him on his way to school and when moving around the community
- He will participate in leisure activities of his uncle and a (female) friend of the family, visit a fitness-studio, take part in special coaching for youths...
- Suggestion of anti-violence training

Results from the pre-trial SoNeKos

- In the pilot phase (July 2013 to end of 2014) a total of 47 Social Network conferences have been held in pre-trial detention.
- In the cases of three young people the contract to conduct a Social Network conference had to be rejected because there was no social safety network and because the language problems were too big.
- 33 young people were set at liberty (until trial) on presentation of the action plan to the deciding judge.
- Three young persons have been remanded in custody because of committing another offence for eight persons the action plan was not accepted.
- All young people get support from the Probation Service, about one third intensive support in order to comply with the requirements.

Social-net-conferences - what's that?

- 70% of the offenders complied with the plans set out, at least partially, 10% failed
- In 35% family climate changed for the better
- Average duration of conference – 4 to 5 hours (maximum was 7 hours)
- Since August 2013 (to December 2014) the **number of juveniles in pre-trial custody has been reduced to 33%.**

A few more numbers

- In 2015 114 juveniles and young adults were referred to a 'pretrial SoNeKo', 30 to a 'release conference'.
- January to September 2016 there were 156 pre-trial and 30 release SoNeKos.

Achievements (Summary)

- Social networks are larger and more stable than they are commonly perceived to be by supervising probation officers.
- Family and social resources are manifold and more varied than was thought before. They open up many possibilities for action.
- The emotional force and experienced care for young people by their 'community of care', i.e. their social net is considerable and enables reconciliation processes in the family.
- Parents take back responsibility and do not delegate this to professional caregivers.
- Social control is much tighter. Ambulant care could never ensure this density.
- Plans are concrete, binding, verifiable and also go far beyond the usual target agreements concluded between the client and probation officer.
- Solutions are often surprising and creative, as they are based on the lifeworld of the people.

Obstacles and resistance to the application of SoNeKos

- For agencies of the CJS (public prosecutors and judges, as well as prison administration (including social workers) it is difficult to trust the problem solving capacity of the (family) social network
- Struggles over competencies and prerogatives obstruct the readiness to refer cases to a SoNeKo.
- Keeping contact and talking to all these agencies again and again – as the way to overcome resistance