Case Analysis

A Proposal to Use Mediation and “Night Correspondents” to Curb Urban Violence in Cergy, France

Laurence de Carlo

Mediators, called “night correspondents,” have been hired by some French municipalities to reduce violence in the neighborhoods, using dialogue and daily help (in repairing things in particular). Night correspondents seem to be especially appropriate to reduce incivility, i.e. daily nonrespectful behavior. This essay reports on the results of two surveys conducted in Cergy by MBA students of two seminars at ESSEC business school. Although the recommendation of hiring night correspondents has not been followed yet in Cergy, several decisions have been taken by the social lessors and other public actors in the neighborhoods aimed at reducing violence, through mediation processes.

The issue of violence in some low-income neighborhoods in France has been explained, until recently, by the living conditions of their inhabitants. Substandard housing conditions were considered as the main source of the problem, leading to solutions that aimed at renovating the neighborhoods and improving the quality of public and private areas, at an institutional level.

Recently, new ways of explaining the problems appeared and new approaches have been tested in France. One of these innovative approaches involves the hiring of a type of mediators called “night correspondents.” Night correspondents have been hired by municipalities in the aim of interacting with the inhabitants of public housing to reduce violence in the...
neighborhoods through dialogue and daily help (in repairing things in particular). Night correspondents seem to be especially appropriate to reduce incivility, that is daily nonrespectful behaviors, which seem to be growing in low-income neighborhoods (Roché 1996, in Robert and Pottier 1997a: 641).

As the case of the city of Cergy (a city 30 kilometers from Paris) will demonstrate, night correspondents respond to the expectations of public housing inhabitants (which are to be taken care of, as the buildings in which they live) and those of the youth considered to be troublemakers (which are to be respected and reassured).

These results emerged from two surveys conducted in Cergy by students of two seminars run by the author at ESSEC business school, which is also located in Cergy. The students also made proposals at an institutional level. Although the recommendation of hiring night correspondents has not been followed yet, several decisions have been taken by the social lessors and other public actors in the neighborhoods aimed at reducing violence not only by offering better lodging conditions at an institutional level but also using dialogue through mediation processes.

These actions constitute another significant result of the seminars. First, one of the main problems in fighting against violence in neighborhoods in France stems from the difficulties public actors have in working together. In the Cergy case, 18 social lessors, several Town Hall services, and representatives of the police and justice authorities all worked together. Second, through their decisions, they have promoted mediation, which implies a new common vision of the problematic situation.

The survey’s results and proposals and the seminars’ results will be outlined in this essay. They will be introduced by the historical background and the institutional context of the treatment of violence in neighborhoods in France: general definitions of night correspondents and uncivil behaviors; and by the local and pedagogical context of the surveys. I shall conclude by analyzing the decisions that have been taken by the local actors, with regard to the issues that emerged during and at the end of the surveys.

Background and Institutional Context

Violent events — such as cars set on fire and ransacked buildings — have repeatedly taken place since the beginning of the 1980s in certain (poor) suburbs of Paris and Lyon (the second largest city in France). These events have triggered an institutional answer to the problems stemming from the difficult living conditions in these tough neighborhoods of the French cities.

The first institutional approach occurred in 1977, as the State took charge of about 50 zones among the French suburbs. In the 1980s, the contractual relationship between national, regional and local authorities for affected areas, progressively extended this charge to 148 sites in the IXth plan (1984-1988); then to 400 sites in the Xth plan (1989-1993) (Body-Gendrot 1993: 210-213). At the end of the decade, new governmental authorities were created in order to link together the three main aspects of the state’s