

## Care and protection of children born in family and social contexts marked by mafia culture

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### Background

In the last ten years Italian Juvenile Justice has paid more attention to the participation of children in the cultural transmission of the mafia phenomenon. Consequently foster and alternative care measures have been adopted. In particular, Calabria is the Italian region where the cultural transmission of the mafia phenomenon has captured special attention. In this territory, the mafia is known as "Ndrangheta" and has its roots on family bonds. The court's decision on the Calabria's situation of criminal organization was to recognize the role of the family as guilty of perpetuating the anti-social values of the mafia culture to the children, and secondly in their exposition of dangers behaviours. Both these negative attitudes are identified to have a tangible effect on the child's mental and physical development. Finally parental negligence was shown during the judicial inquiry itself to be detrimental to the child's development. That's why the juvenile justice system has adopted a phenomenological approach to intervention, to offer alternative pedagogical, cultural, and social opportunities that are different from those provided by the mafia world.

The application of this approach has led to the signature of a governmental protocol for a systematic intervention to guarantee the rights of children born in family and social contexts marked by the presence of the mafia culture. To make it possible, a project called "Liberi di Scegliere" (Free to Choose) was created to require institutions to collaborate with the private social sector and other child care services of the public system to implement these measures.

### Objectives

The purpose of the research is to document, through the methodology of the case study (Stake, 2006), the life stories of the children and young people involved in the Liberi di Scegliere project in order to identify the emerging practices that have characterized the accompaniment and adherence to the values of legality and democracy of those who and the related governance mechanisms. The overall objective is indeed to develop a body of knowledge that contributes to increasing the safety of children and improving the quality of their development. The aim is to develop knowledge and tools to accompany and guide the paths of children who experience the vulnerabilities related to the mafia phenomenon first-hand, in an educational and participative sense.

The research questions are as follows:

What protection of children's rights is possible today in mafia family contexts?

What insights can be gained from a qualitative analysis of the processes and outcomes of some of the projects for the removal of children from their families of origin implemented within the Liberi di Scegliere project?

What are the biggest challenges with regard to parental involvement and parenting support in this context?

### **Method**

This study starts from the ecological paradigm based on resilience and a participatory dimension that involves families, the institutions, the social network, and those who support the parents in children's education. Through the explicitation interview (Vermersch, 1997) the research aims to collect from the life stories the emerging practices that have been adopted to take care of the children's right and improve their connection with the values of legality and democracy. Furthermore, from the voice of the children and subjects involved, research would explore the governance-related mechanisms.

### **Result and Conclusions**

The partnership of the Centre for Juvenile Justice in Catanzaro and the Association Libera, Nomi e Numeri Contro le Mafie enabled seven case studies to be carried out. A total of 67 subjects were involved in this research: parents, children, formal service, informal service, etc. The research samples were selected considering the willingness of the families to participate or for the relevance of the case according to social services. Among the subjects involved, some have completed their experience within the project, but are still close to the Libera network or social services. The age of the subjects identified as children varies between 14 and 25 years.

From our pilot case study questioned the need for attention that has been lacking for families living in vulnerable conditions due to mafia-type criminal organisations. The documentation of this story allows us to identify some emerging practices, but also the need for a governance and intervention structure involving both parents to offer them a system of care and protection in which they can explore perspectives that do not depend on mafia culture.

The documentation of the practices adopted will help to fill a gap in the literature on the subject and, at the same time, may help to develop a method of accompanying families and children in vulnerable conditions due to a social context marked by mafia culture.

The overall objective is indeed to develop a body of knowledge that contributes to increasing the safety of children and improving the quality of their development, also with a view to formulating an adaptation of the P.I.P.P.I. programme, an intervention aimed at families facing vulnerable situations where it may be difficult to provide children with adequate



conditions for their growth. The aim is to develop knowledge and tools to accompany and guide the paths of children who experience the vulnerabilities related to the mafia phenomenon first-hand, in an educational and participative sense.

**Keywords**

Children, mafia, foster care, rights, family education.

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