

Case study 1: The story of Samuele (17 years old)

Reason for entering the juvenile justice system:

Samuele is a 17-year-old boy from Reggio Calabria. Three years ago, a civil procedure placed him in a residential community, located outside his region of residence. This procedure was opened after the boy was kidnapped by a drug-dealing group: as a member of the drug-dealing network himself, he was accused by the criminal group of stealing part of the drugs from their storage. During his hostage, he was repeatedly beaten and only freed after a leading member of the criminal group paid his debt.

What the social worker knows:

Samuele has a history of anti-social behaviour and drug addiction from an early age, albeit his conduct has never been addressed by legal authorities or social workers, despite his particularly dysfunctional and neglectful family context. In fact, the boy comes from a chaotic, invalidating and neglectful family, from which he wants to separate, but to which he understandably feels bonded. Both parents had a history of drug addiction, while his mother was responsible for numerous incidents of family violence against her husband and children. In addition, his mother was a victim of violence perpetrated by the man she started a relationship with, while her husband was in prison. Samuele's siblings have been and are victims of direct and indirect violence. Before Samuele's court case started, his mother imposed the presence of her new partner at home, while still living there with her husband. The woman, like her husband, had poor parenting skills, did not care for her children and has never been a role model for them. After the arrival of his wife's partner, Samuele's father left home and lived on the street for some time. Samuele and his siblings were used to his absence, as their father served several prison sentences.

One day, Samuele saw his mother's partner abusing her. He threw a chair at him to stop the violence, but his mother kicked him out of the house because of that. He slept on the street for a few days, then met a man who introduced him to drug dealing and explained how the local organized criminal groups operated. This man was a point of reference for him, as he rewarded him for his dealing skills: this is how Samuele became a drug dealer himself. He started using substances at the age of 11-12 and developed an addiction that led him to steal a fair amount of drugs from the criminal group he was part of. Once discovered, he was kidnapped and kept segregated for several days; at this time, he was abused and his life was threatened.

Once released, Samuele did not find the courage to report this episode, until the police arrested several members of the group. Only then he decided to disclose what he suffered during his hostage and enrolled in a protection programme, which provided for his transfer to a different area.

The separation was very traumatic for Samuele, especially because he had always been very protective of his siblings. They were placed in two different juvenile communities after the latest in a series of incidents of neglect, in which their mother left them at a train station.

After the trial against the criminal group that kidnapped Samuele started, the Magistrates proposed that both Samuele's parents and siblings be transferred to another region as their lives

were considered at risk. Samuele wanted his siblings to be transferred to the community where he lived, in order to be close to them.

Samuele worked as an entertainer at a summer camp in another region for a week, which his siblings also attended. He was happy to spend time with the children and to act as a role model for them, not only in emotional, but also regulatory terms.

What the community staff knows

Samuele cried desperately throughout the trip to the out-of-region community and, once arrived, he started to abuse cannabinoids secretly, because they helped him “not to think.” Over the three following years, he made significant progress and was able to open up with the community operators, with whom he developed a significant emotional bond and a trust-based relationship.

As the trial against his kidnappers opened and Samuele was to testify against them, he started to present oppositional behaviour and made several attempts to escape. One day, Samuele packed up, ready to leave. At first, the educators managed to convince him to stay, but at night he climbed over the balcony and ran away with two other boys, who made their way back to the community a few hours later. On the next day, Samuele, hungry and cold, reached his native region Calabria. He feared that his family might suffer retaliations at the hands of his kidnappers if he testified at the trial. Two days later, he returned to the community in a terrible psychological state, threatening further attempts to run away.

After some time, the operators found out that Samuele had debts with local drug dealers, who were looking for him through the other community residents. Samuele had also tried to convince some of these boys, including a 14-year-old, to buy cocaine for him and send messages to the dealers, as he could not use his mobile phone.

What the psychologist knows:

Samuele's story teems with experiences of neglect and trauma caused by his caregivers. Such negative experiences led the boy to believe that he was intrinsically wrong, unworthy of love and affection and deserving of the abuse and neglect he was exposed to. Samuele referred to his younger siblings as 'children', as if he was a father figure for them.

The boy experienced enormous psychological suffering which he externalized and openly admitted. His maladaptive behaviours, impulsivity and substance abuse are the psychological consequences of his early childhood upbringing. Samuele often became easily irritable with other people, especially if rules were imposed or if he perceived injustice. On one occasion, during lunchtime at the community, a boy asked him to exchange pasta for chicken and when Samuele gave him his plate, the other boy started laughing at him, and kept both the pasta and the chicken for himself. Samuele jumped up, threw the chair in the other boy's face and started kicking him. Some of the staff immediately intervened, but Samuele, enraged, pushed everyone away and continued to punch and kick the other boy, causing him several injuries. When asked (later) what had happened, he replied: "When he started laughing at me, I suddenly became so angry and then I can't remember anything until the staff pulled me away." After similar episodes, Samuele usually retreats to his room for days, does not speak to anyone and wants to be left alone.

Samuele described numerous episodes in which he and his siblings were neglected and exposed to their parents' psychological challenges. Samuele recalled that he was often left with no food as a child: 'My mother would almost faint on the sofa and couldn't get up for hours.' In those moments, Samuele said he felt terribly frightened, because it seemed that his mother was going to die and his little brother would not stop crying of hunger. He would look for food around the house and get him anything he could find. Samuele recalled that in those moments there is been no one to calm him down and reassure him that everything was going to be all right, so he withdrew into himself at night, fantasizing about a better life. The next morning, his parents would go back to 'normal' and acted as if nothing had happened.

Samuele started abusing cannabinoids at the age of 12. His abuse seems to have become more acute, as the boy uses substances both to regulate his tension and irritability and 'distance' himself from his difficult context.

His personal vulnerabilities and unprocessed traumatic experiences trigger Samuele's deviant behaviours. Samuele is more impulsive than his peers and he lacks ability to regulate his anger. Despite this, the young man is sufficiently aware of his suffering to the point of asking for help.

Despite his challenges, Samuele presents skills and attitudes which, if channelled well, can favour his healing process. Samuele's strenghts, however, need to be monitored, actively supported and not left to his autonomous management (that is why, for the above-mentioned reasons, the youth needs one or more solid role models). Apart from the desire to emancipate and change the way he lived in the past, Samuele presents healthy emotional needs that needs to be considered. In fact, he repeatedly expressed his desire to be reunited with his siblings.

What Samuele's little sister knows

Diana is 13 years old and is finishing junior high school. She said that her mother abandoned her and her little brother at the train station after a visit to Samuele, because she did not have enough money to buy a return ticket for all three of them. Before Diana was placed in a group home, her mother hardly ever prepared a hot meal for her and her brothers and often fed them McDonald's food at both lunch and dinner.

She said she is relieved to be in a group home, despite pressures from her mother who wants them at home, and she feels uneasy about returning to her family at weekends. At such times, she is forced to witness the violent fights between her parents. One night, she called Samuele very scared, because her parents were fighting, her mother was 'acting crazy' and beating her father. She then called the police who arrived shortly afterwards to interrupt the fight.

Since she started a romantic relationship with a local boy, she has returned home more willingly and tried to spend as much time as possible with him, away from her parents. This is the reason why she stated that she did not want to be removed from her context, and threatened to run away if this was imposed by the judiciary.

She met Samuele after over a year, at the summer camp where Samuele was an entertainer. She admired the authority her older brother showed in front of her siblings, his commitment to

entertaining them and the affection he showed them. Despite the distance separating them, Samuele remains her main point of reference.

What Samuele's parents know

Samuele's parents were very concerned about his drug addiction. However, they admitted that they did not have the ability to respond to such a situation adequately and requested the help of the Services. On the occasion of the young's man repeated escapes from the community, his parents noticed that he had returned to his old circle of acquaintances and had probably started dealing and abusing substances again. However, their concern did not make them more willing to move far from their home and find a job with the help of an association that offered them support. They did not yet know how they would be able to support Samuele from a distance once he returned home (if the boy decided to leave the community once he was an adult) and referred this responsibility to the Services.

What Samuele knows:

Samuele said he had clear ideas about what he deemed right and wrong, as well as about what was legal and illegal. He outspokenly expressed negative views about organised crime and illegal activities in general. He felt ashamed for the offenses he committed. He admitted that he had first-hand experience of such contexts and wanted to seek help to break away from them.

He said he dropped out of a catering college because he had 'gotten in a bad company', and subsequently started a vocational course for assistant chefs because he wanted to work in the catering industry. Before leaving school, he excelled in history and attended classes regularly. He expressed the desire to remain in the same community after turning 18, i.e. after the end of the civil procedure, until he could find the necessary stability to move into his own house and find a job in the area. He also attended a dance school where he took a course in Caribbean dancing. He said that dancing made him feel good and gave him no desire to take drugs before class, partly because he needed to have control over his body in order to dance in pairs, but mainly because dancing calmed him down. He made friends with the other community residents and often cooked for them. Though several girls showed interest in him, Samuele said that he did not want to get into a relationship, because "women are not reliable, they'll leave you as soon as they find another man."

He described his parents as fragile, unable to offer the sense of safety necessary for their children's healthy development. He said that as a child he often witnessed verbal and physical fights between his parents and that he and his siblings also suffered corporal punishment. He stated that he was quite happy to return home to visit his parents but only for a few days. He is happier now that his younger siblings are in a community: he believes that if they were removed from home later, they would have risked going down a bad path. He is very protective and said tenderly that he is proud of his 10-year-old brother, who has now learned to read perfectly. Samuele openly shared his inner conflict between the desire to build a future away from his home environment and the desire to be reunited with his siblings, even though he understood that it was impossible for him to care for them.

Reflections and questions:

What are the most relevant facts in this case?	What hypotheses can be made?	What would be the next steps to confirm/deny the hypotheses?	What do we still need to know and learn?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17-year-old boy • Substance abuse • Originally from Southern Italy • His parents are drug addicts • Samuele is a drug addict • Samuele tried to protect his mother and was then sent away from home • He got in touch with drug dealers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Samuele used drugs to appease the intensity of his emotions • Dealing drugs and being in a gang might be a way to belong • His sense of responsibility for his siblings originated from the obligation he felt to act as a protective figure for them, given the scarce protection and stability offered by their caretakers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewing Samuele • Asking for more information from his brothers and sister, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child trauma and substance use