



Criminality und Violent Delinquency among Young Persons

Dr. Martin Rieger

Senior physician Heckscher Clinic, Munich, Medical specialist for child and adolescent psychiatry,

The assessment of the risk of violence is a critical and necessary element of practice both for forensic assessment and in child and adolescent psychiatric clinics and outpatient clinics [15]. Adolescents are also increasingly addressing issues relating to the forecasting of violence and its controllability.

Violence perpetrated by adolescents has come under closer scrutiny in the public eye and has generally triggered off greater reactions. Criminal research would suggest that there has not only been a general increase in the prevalence of youth violence over the past few decades, but also a change in reporting behaviour which has lowered the threshold for publicising acts of violence [2], also on the part of school institutions.

In the assessment of young offenders, conspicuous disruptive behaviour is frequently observed at an early stage in the school career. At the point of intensification of anti-social development, the association with school institutions is frequently already instable or even completely broken off as borne out by the two typical casuistries.

Risk factors which encourage and increase the probability of anti-social and violent developments in adolescents have been established in numerous empirical studies [summary: 3; 10; 18]. Significant risk factors have been discovered within the family and social environment [6], but additionally within the area of temperament and personality development [13] and neurological characteristics [4; 18]. According to Stouthamer-Loeber et al. [16], the decisive risk factors accumulate over the period of childhood up to adolescence. Their evaluation points towards a multi-factorial structure which displays a growing consistency with the age of the individual. It has also been established that risk-increasing and protective factors can provide reciprocal compensation for one another.

The juvenile and young-adult age-groups display the highest rates of registered criminality. This fact has been valid from a longitudinal aspect as long as statistics have been documented, also in international comparisons. A further constant factor of criminological research is that criminal acts are ubiquitous in the cases of young men [11]. The proportion of lesser or minor offences is high in comparison to the figures for adults, particularly offences involving theft. The statistics however also reveal that adolescents and young men are both over-proportionally involved in violent crime, particularly in robberies and offences related to bodily harm. Theft offences are observed most frequently in adolescents; this frequency decreases with the transition into young adults whereas criminal violence occurs with equal frequency in both adolescents and young adults. The prevalence for violent crime only decreases successively from the age of 21 onwards [9].



The crime rate for young persons which is collected in police statistics under the abbreviation TVBZ [English translation: suspected criminal persons rate] (registered per 100 000 inhabitants) has increased radically over the past twenty years, particularly towards the end of the 1990s and has continued to achieve high figures ever since. Alongside a concrete increase in the crime rate, a shift in the borderline between light and dark-field research and the changed reporting behaviour have been cited to provide an explanation for this phenomenon. This is upheld by the fact that conviction figures have been shown not to have risen at anything like the same rate [2; 9].

For the great majority of young persons, delinquent behaviour is an episodic event as confirmed by both light field and dark-field studies. A separate group of multiple and intensive offenders who commit crimes significantly more frequently and continuously has been observed which deviates from the otherwise typical development in young persons. According to the relevant study approach, it has been established that this group accounts for 3-10% of registered criminals [5; 9; 12]. The description of the sub-group of chronic offenders originates from the study by Figlio & Sellin [19] which evaluated the registered legal behaviour between the ages of 8 and 18 on the basis of the Philadelphia cohort study (N=9945). Chronic offenders who were registered at least five times made up only 6% of the investigated cohort, but were responsible for around half of the criminal offences committed. In a differentiated observation of the development in the crime rate for young persons in Germany, it is important to include both light field and dark-field studies. These studies also reveal that the frequency of delinquent behaviour in female adolescents should not be underestimated.

Light-field studies

Within the framework of a longitudinal cohort study in Freiburg, Grundies et al. [7; 8] investigated the frequency of inclusion of young persons between the ages of 7 – 23 from four birth cohorts (1970, 1973, 1975 and 1978) in police registers in Baden-Württemberg:

- Cumulative prevalence: in the group of 14 – 17-year-olds, an average of 13.1% of male German young persons were registered as having committed criminal acts. In the case of young German females, the average rate was 4.8%.
- Intensive offenders: 1.1% of male German young persons (or 8.4% of those registered) were recognised as intensive offenders who had committed a minimum of five criminal acts. The corresponding rate for young German females was recorded as 0.1% (or 2% of those registered).
- Age-related progression: the rate of the registration of male young persons increased significantly from the age of 13, reaching a zenith at 19 and subsequently falling steadily. The proportion of registered criminal offences for which intensive offenders were responsible also increased steeply up to the age of 19, displaying only a slightly subsequent increase. In the case of 19-year-olds, the intensive offenders were responsible for ca. 52% and the 23-year-olds for ca. 58% of offences. It was clear that a single occurrence of deviating behaviour was chiefly a phenomenon observed



between the onset of puberty and the age of 16. A relatively constant group of intensive repeat offenders had become established by the age of 19.

- Violent crime: the rate of relevant cumulative prevalence (between 14 and 17) was 1.1% for male German young persons. Over 82% of young persons who had committed a violent crime had only done so on a single occasion. The highest rate of incidence was found among the age-group 17-19. The average number of perpetrators of violent crimes was 2.5 per single offence and therefore higher than was the case with other types of offences.
- Non-German offenders: the cumulative prevalence in the case of non-German male young offenders (between 14 and 17) was 27% for all types of crime and 5% for violent crimes, a significantly higher figure than the corresponding rate for young Germans. 3.4% of young persons (or 12.6% of those registered) were classified as intensive offenders.
- Delinquency patterns: Tetel [17] carried out cluster analyses with the data from the Freiburg cohorts to ascertain the probability of the common occurrence of specific offences within a particular age-group. It was possible to establish offender clusters registered as having committed violent crimes including offences involving sexual violence. A versatile cluster also however emerged in which all types of offences were equally highly represented; this cluster was primarily composed of chronic offenders. It was possible to establish a degree of specialisation within delinquent careers with increasing age.

Dark-field studies

In 1999, Oberwittler et al. [14] carried out dark-field interviews to establish the delinquency rate among pupils of years 8 to 10 (N = 5300) in Cologne and Freiburg which produced the following data:

- Cumulative prevalence: 70% of boys and 50% of girls stated that they had committed a criminal offence on at least one occasion.
- Annual prevalence: 60% of boys and 40% of girls reported an offence committed within the previous twelve months.
- Intensive offenders: ca. 9% of boys and 5% of girls were responsible for half of all offences committed by the fellow members of their gender. Around 5% of these young persons fulfilled the criteria of an intensive offender (a minimum of seven serious offences within the previous twelve months: burglary, vehicle theft, drug dealing or violent crime).
- There was an above-average occurrence of intensive offenders among lower secondary and special needs schools.
- Versatility: there was a correlation between the number of offences committed by a young person and the number of different forms of offence and a correlation of 0.69 ($p < .001$) between the number of different offences and the rates of incidence and versatility. The versatility rate records how many different types of offences were committed by a single offender. Polytropic criminal offenders display a wide range of committed offences and/or a wide range of versatility.



- Violent crime: a total of slightly less than 30% of boys reported having committed at least one offence involving violence within the previous year: the corresponding figure for girls was just under 12%. A breakdown of the different types of violent offences committed showed that 77% of the young persons had committed between one and five offences involving violence and slightly less than a quarter had committed a minimum of six offences.

Baier [1] evaluated the violent behaviour of young persons on the basis of two dark-field studies undertaken by the KFN [Criminological Research Institute in Lower Saxony] carried out in four West German cities in 1998 (N=7205) and 2005 (N=8490) involving pupils in year 9 and investigated the influence of conditional factors over a period of time:

- Annual prevalence: 25% of the young males in the sample from 2005 committed one or more violent crimes during the previous year. 7.2% of these individuals were multiple offenders who had committed a minimum of five offences during this period. The corresponding rates for young females were 9% and 1.8% respectively.
- Incidence according to type of offences: broken down into individual types of violent crimes, offences involving bodily harm were the most frequent (53.7% without a weapon and 15.2 with a weapon), followed by sexual violence (15.6%) and robbery (10.6%).
- Annual prevalence in a comparison 1998 vs. 2005: The rates of violent crime displayed a slight decrease (male offenders: 29.1% vs. 25.0% and female offenders: 10.9% vs. 9.0%). The proportion of offences involving bodily harm displayed a relative increase whereas crimes involving robbery and blackmail had decreased.
- Conditional factors: according to regression models, the reduction in the prevalence of violence (1998 vs. 2005) could be correlated with the reduction in the acceptance of violence on the part of the young persons, a greater intensity of social control on the part of peers condemning violence and also environmental intervention, in particular on the part of teachers. Incomplete family structures, an inconsistent education and experience of violence within the family environment encouraged the violent behaviour of young persons, but the degree of emotional care on the part of parents proved to have no influence.

To summarise, criminological investigative research has confirmed a high rate of general criminal offences and crimes involving violence among young persons. For the most part, this criminal activity is generated by episodic, self-limiting and anti-social behaviour. During the past few decades, the registered criminal rate among young persons has soared. Alongside a concrete increase in delinquency, it appears that the willingness to report crimes and therefore the formal social control has also increased. It was not possible to establish a continuing increase in violent crime for more recent periods of time in dark-field studies. On the other hand, there were indications for a higher relative rate of crimes involving bodily harm. The existence of a sub-group of intensively delinquent young persons was observed in both light- and dark-field studies. This sub-group is characterised by a higher frequency of criminal offences, a higher proportion of



violent crime and a longer active period of delinquent behaviour. The high degree of versatility, including the frequency of a joint occurrence of violent- and non-violent offences, is typical for this age-group. Specific delinquent patterns – also for crimes involving violence – only emerged increasingly during the transition phase into adulthood. Influential factors affecting the development of the prevalence of violent behaviour according to dark-field studies were highlighted as being the strengths and/or weaknesses of family structures and the manifestation of informal social control.

This last-mentioned factor could form the starting point for preventative measures which would encourage the acceptance and valuation of non-violent communication and the rejection of violent behaviour within the school environment and the interrelationships between young peers at the earliest possible stage.

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NOVEMBER 3 - 7, 2010

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