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Violent Acts by Adolescents in Germany

Data on the Quantitative Development and Distinctions Between Different Types

**Revised version of a paper presented at the
European Intensive Seminar "Juvenile Aggression and Delinquency"
Fachhochschule Braunschweig/Wolfenbüttel, Fachbereich Sozialwesen
Braunschweig, March 10-14, 1997**

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1. Introduction

Many of the German media have reported about an increase of juvenile violence in the last years. And particularly the German police statistics (Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik; see Bundeskriminalamt 1986 to 1997) have been used to document this development. In the following I therefore will deal with these statistics. All data presented in this context refer to Lower Saxony (see Pfeiffer/Brettfeld/Delzer 1997). But the trends identified for this area are, as a rule, quite similar to what happens in all of the old federal states of Germany.

With the second part of this paper I will present some of the first results of a qualitative research project, which show a classification into different types of violent acts committed by adolescents. The persons interviewed in this study belonged to the population of Lower Saxony and Hamburg.

2. Interpretations of the German Police Statistics

Based on the police statistics mentioned above, the two tables below facilitate a comparison of adolescents who are suspected of violent offences (specified as murder, manslaughter, rape, physical injury and robbery) with young persons who are suspected of a crime that does not include violence against other persons: the grand larceny. Both tables show the quantitative development over the last twelve years by using values that refer to 100 000 persons in the same age of Lower Saxony.

Table 1: Adolescents suspected of violent offences (per 100 000 in the population)

Year	Age: 14-17	Age: 18-20
1985	276.94	476.16
1986	297.45	525.32
1987	298.83	498.98
1988	336.36	523.14
1989	377.78	545.95
1990	436.77	593.66
1991	541.21	655.14
1992	584.18	711.66
1993	635.24	736.54
1994	620.87	720.98
1995	771.50	792.35
1996	931.87	899.41

Table 2: Adolescents suspected of grand larceny (per 100 000 in the population)

Year	Age: 14-17	Age: 18-20
1985	929.33	998.09
1986	892.59	981.93
1987	946.43	998.48
1988	936.16	987.00
1989	894.29	867.15
1990	952.24	876.12
1991	918.41	967.91
1992	1065.19	1095.07
1993	1077.35	1211.41
1994	1065.41	1130.62
1995	1189.05	1299.96
1996	1132.15	1206.38

(Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen 1997)

What we find is an increase of violent offences within the category of the 14-17-year-old suspects, that begins with 277 cases per 100 000 in the population of Lower Saxony in the year 1985 and ends up with 932 cases in 1996 - which is more than the triple quantity after a time of twelve years and is equal to a rise of 236.5 percent. The number of the 18-20-year-old persons who are suspected of violent offences has increased by 88.9 percent (476 suspects in 1985 and 899 suspects in 1996), so here we find almost a doubling of the amount.

A look at the "elder generations", which are not included in our statistical tables, shows that the results presented above have to be interpreted as a typical development among the adolescents. In comparison, the number of suspects for violent offences has increased only slightly within the category of persons over 20 years and has almost been constant among the adults older than 30.

On the other hand the increasing amount of young suspects has to be treated as a typical phenomenon within the violent offences. The tables presented above show that the number of the adolescents suspected of grand larceny, who constitute our non-violent control group, has not grown in the same way over the last twelve years. Among the 14-17-year-old suspects it has come to an increase of about 21.8 percent (929 cases in 1985 and 1132 cases in 1996), and the quantity of the 18-20-year-old adolescents who have been suspected of grand larceny has grown by approximately 20.9 percent (998 persons in 1985 and 1206 persons in 1996).

Table 3: 14-17-year-old adolescents suspected of violent offences (per 100 000 in the population)

Year	Male	Female
1985	487.54	56.93
1986	519.51	65.39
1987	523.90	64.45
1988	575.83	85.00
1989	667.89	72.80
1990	741.71	115.29
1991	950.39	110.85
1992	1023.55	120.41
1993	1070.79	173.25
1994	1052.53	163.41
1995	1296.71	214.72
1996	1604.12	221.13

Table 4: 14-17-year-old adolescents suspected of grand larceny (per 100 000 in the population)

Year	Male	Female
1985	1694.22	130.25
1986	1625.95	126.18
1987	1711.80	149.38
1988	1687.78	147.22
1989	1591.61	161.24
1990	1707.03	156.52
1991	1672.34	125.45
1992	1929.85	152.52
1993	1944.83	157.19
1994	1923.39	156.14
1995	2156.49	163.48
1996	2033.75	178.92

(Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen 1997)

A subdivision of the suspects into male and female adolescents generally clarifies that juvenile violence - as well as juvenile delinquency on the whole - obviously is "men's business". As table 3 shows, the amount of girls in the category of 14-17-year-old suspects of violent offences was only 10.5 percent in 1985 and came to 12.1 percent in 1996. And the distribution of male and female 14-17-year-old suspects of grand larceny (see table 4) looks quite similar: 7.1 percent of them were girls in 1985 and 8.1 percent in 1996.

The subdivision of the 18-20-year-old suspects into men and women leads to the following results: The amount of young women in the category of the adolescents suspected of violent offences was 7.3 percent in the year 1985 and decreased to 6.1 percent in 1996 (see table 5). And since we find a corresponding decrease within the group of adolescents suspected of grand larceny beginning with 7.1 percent in 1985 and ending up with 5.9 percent in 1996 (see table 6), the whole distribution of the data shown in the tables 3 to 6 show quite a coherent structure.

Table 5: 18-20-year-old adolescents suspected of violent offences (per 100 000 in the population)

Year	Male	Female
1985	861.35	67.58
1986	959.14	66.71
1987	908.95	66.16
1988	947.08	74.57
1989	988.24	78.18
1990	1082.85	78.07
1991	1190.60	90.54
1992	1306.22	91.76
1993	1335.75	113.54
1994	1336.61	85.61
1995	1467.15	93.84
1996	1657.89	107.74

Table 6: 18-20-year-old adolescents suspected of grand larceny (per 100 000 in the population)

Year	Male	Female
1985	1808.63	138.31
1986	1801.59	115.43
1987	1842.36	107.58
1988	1815.68	110.16
1989	1579.58	113.66
1990	1597.77	115.52
1991	1773.72	118.24
1992	2023.42	127.16
1993	2237.64	144.44
1994	2121.04	108.43
1995	2411.06	149.81
1996	2228.79	139.23

(Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen 1997)

All in all, the female adolescents come to a very small amount among the suspects of violent offences as well as among the suspects of grand larceny, their percentages varying from 6% to 12%. Within the group of the 14-17-year-old suspects there is a slight increase of the girls' percentages over the last twelve years and in the category of the 18-20-year-old suspects we find a slight decrease in comparison. But since small

differences like these cannot show any statistical significance it is of no practical use to elaborate further interpretations at this point.

To emphasize the major trend shown with the data of the German police statistics we can say that the increase of juvenile violence is obviously mainly caused by the 14-17-year-old boys, whose violent offences (per 100 000 persons in the population) were less than 500 in the year 1985 and rose to more than 1600 in 1996. They are on the best way to "overtake" the elder generation of the 18-20-year-old male adolescents whose acts of violence were less than 900 in 1985 and increased as well to over 1600 in 1996.

But, and this is a point of great importance, all interpretations of the German police statistics have to take into account that their data do not directly refer to the criminality or the violence as it happened "really". There are a lot of factors which cause distortions of the "reality" shown in these statistics. In the following I am going to mention the five important ones (see also Böttger 1995b):

- 1) The police statistics only refer to such events which have been recognized by other persons as criminal offences. But if nobody is able to make out the criminal quality of a certain event - if, for example, a murder has been perceived as an accident by all persons on the scene (except the murderer, of course) - the offence does not occur in the police statistics.
- 2) However, not even all events recognized as criminal offences are registered in the police statistics. Only those cases are taken into account which have been noticed by or told to the police and which have been examined by them. If, for example, the victims or the witnesses of a crime (or both) do not consider it necessary to report the matter to the police - or if they are too frightened to do so - the police statistics do not report this case.
- 3) The police statistics include the data of the registered offences in the way they have been sent from the police stations. If the police in certain areas wanted to document an exceptional high work-load - or a very high rate of solved crimes - they could increase their amount of offences by manipulating the statistical data, for example, by counting a murder in concomitance with a robbery as two offences, which leads to an additional distortion of the statistics.

4) Offences examined by a prosecutor without involving the police - we call this a "simplified inquiry" - on principle do not occur in the police statistics.

5) And the last factor has already been mentioned above: the police statistics include data which only refer to the *suspects* of offences. If a suspect turns out to be innocent in trial or if the judges cannot prove his guilt, the data of the police statistics will not be corrected.

So, all together, we find that there is probably a great difference between the data of the German police statistics and what happened "in reality". The increase of the juvenile violence - particularly among the 14-17-year-old boys - shown in the tables above might not only be caused by a growing violence exerted by the individuals, but also by other factors like an increase of the willingness of the population to report offences to the police or of the willingness of the police officers to examine certain events and send their data to the statistic-department.

But, nevertheless, the enormous increase of the 14-17-year-old suspects of violent offences must have a large "nucleus" consisting of an increasing juvenile violence. A growth of more than 200 percent within twelve years cannot only have been caused by distorting factors like the ones mentioned above. So we really have to take this problem seriously and we have to concentrate our social research and our social work on the causes and conditions of this development.

3. A Qualitative Approach to Juvenile Violence

Since 1995 we have been carrying out a research project on the biographies of violent adolescents (see Böttger 1995a) in the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony (Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen)¹. During the course of this project 100 adolescents from Lower Saxony and Hamburg told us about their life-histories - and particularly about their violence - in qualitative biographical interviews lasting about three hours on average. Before I am going to present a few of the first results of this study, let me briefly discuss the theoretical background of the concept of

¹ Besides the author, Susanne Gluch, Brigitte Insel, and Mirja Silkenbeumer have been working on this research project, which has been sponsored by the German Research Council (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). The study is associated with a similar research project on juvenile delinquency in China, sponsored by the Volkswagen-Stiftung (see Pfeiffer/Böttger/Negt/Liang 1995).

violence we used in this project and some methodological implications of the way we carried out our interviews.

3.1 The Concept of Violence

To avoid a lack of conceptual clarity, we first followed Otthein Rammstedt's definition (1989, p. 49), saying that violence is just "the exertion of physical strength". With this circumscription we did not mean to neglect phenomena like psychological, verbal or structural violence, but we did not want to subsume acts like these into our concept of violence.

However, we could not follow Rammstedt's further suggestion that the mere threat of the exertion of physical strength should be defined as "social violence" (1989, p. 49). In our (sociological) view, the exertion as well as the threat of violence principally is a social act, as long as it is directed against persons or against objects which belong to certain persons. But there is one restriction we want to introduce at this point: If the threat to exert physical strength lasts longer than the social situation (with the social roles and context conditions being constant) in which it has started - for example in a case of racketeering (defined as the continued extortion of money from restaurant owners) - we do not call this a violent act any more; cases like these we subsume into the concept of social power (Macht) as developed by Luhmann (see 1991, p. 230), because they are characterized by a continuous subordination of the victim to the offender. As violent acts we define only such threats of exerted strength, which do not last longer than the social situation in which they have started. An example is a robbery, after that the offender and the victim have been in no further contact with each other.

Finally, we take it for a necessary feature of a violent act that it is committed by intention (see also Schneider 1994, p. 13). For example, we do not call an injury happening by mistake a violent act, as long as there is no offender who intends to injure another person.

So, all in all, we come to the following definition (see also Böttger/Liang 1996):

Violence is the intentional exertion of physical strength by individuals or groups which is directed against other persons or objects which belong to them, as well as the threat of such an exertion of physical strength within an single social situation.

This definition shows that our concept does not include a legal, moral, or social judgement on violent acts. Violence does not necessarily have to be immoral, illegal, anti-social or just "wrong". For example, we consider the exertion of physical strength by a police officer arresting an offender who puts up resistance as well as the fight of two opposing hooligans against each other to be violent acts. But, of course, we distinguish between legal violence exerted by police officers or certain sportsmen (like boxers, kick-boxers etc.) and illegal violence, which violates the law.

And this distinction is also the theoretical background of the composition of the sample of persons having been interviewed within our study: 70 of them were adolescents who have frequently committed illegal violent offences (as hooligans, right-wing radicals, punks, members of other violent groups and young ones who did not belong to groups like these), 20 were young police officers or adolescents who regularly exerted a violent form of sport, and 10 were such boys and girls, who usually did not exert violence at all (a non-violent control group).

3.2 The "Reconstructive Interview"

As already mentioned above, the method of research we chose in our project was a qualitative biographical interview. Looking at the studies presented by social scientists during the last twenty years, we find that particularly within the biographical research a very "open" type of qualitative interview has been used, the so-called "narrative interview" whose idea it is, to encourage the interviewed persons to produce unprepared, improvised "off-the-cuff-stories" (see Schütze 1976; 1983). It was assumed that with stories of this kind the interviewees would give us an almost undistorted version of their biographical events - in simple terms: that they would tell us their life-stories as they had really experienced them. And the interviewers were required not to interrupt an ongoing story of this type in the main part of a narrative interview.

However, when we tested the narrative interview by asking violent adolescents to tell us their biographies, we had to find that they frequently did not produce stories which only included events like they had experienced them at the time they had happened. In this pretest the interviewees often omitted relevant events in their biographies (we noticed this, because we, for example, had received information about their biographies from persons who got to know them - particularly from social workers) or they added fictional passages to their stories which had nothing to do with the events that really had happened.