Aggression and Delinquency among Juveniles

Analysis of cognitive and social conditions

Spectacular cases of violence at schools, juveniles with criminal careers and an increase of violent offences committed by young people according to the crime statistics since the mid-nineties have made aggression and delinquency among juveniles a central subject of public opinion and of politics. Frequently, various phenomena are indiscriminately subsumed under "violence", mainly monocausal explanations are favoured, individual sources of information are used one-sidedly, and other, inadequate simplifications are made. Empirical research cannot only help to make the discussion more objective; it can also turn the results to practical use - for schools, police, youth offices, the media and crime policy. The Bundeskriminalamt requested Professor Lösel of the Institute for Psychology and Social Science Research Centre at Erlangen-Nürnberg University to make an empirically differentiated analysis of phenomena and causes for aggression and delinquency among juveniles. In cooperation with Prof. Bliesener, Professor for Psychology, currently at the Institute for Psychology at Kiel University, Prof. Lösel carried out a complex conditional analysis of aggressive and violent behaviour by juveniles as well as delinquency and other forms of dissocial behaviour .

The first part of the project consists of a representative cross-sectional survey of more than 1,100 young people (74.4 % of them of German nationality) in grades 7 and 8 at schools providing general education in Erlangen and Nürnberg. The different school types involved are *Hauptschule* (secondary school, lower level), *Realschule* (secondary school, higher level) and *Gymnasium* (grammar school). At the same time this study serves as a screening for a second long-term intensive survey. In that survey, selected groups are questioned again, and more intensively, after two years. It concerns young people who, in the first survey, prove to be typical aggressors (bullies), victimised pupils, pupils with a high degree of social competence or non-aggressive pupils. Data are not only collected by means of questionnaires, but also through behavioural observations, experiments, tests, conflict scenarios and teachers' assessments. Apart from the risks, protective factors and conditions of social competence are also the subject of this study.

Results

Violence at schools is above all characterized by mild forms of physical and verbal aggression, based mainly on temporary developmental problems in puberty.

Girls display less aggressive behaviour and are less likely to be the victims of violent acts.

The stereotype of generally more aggressive and delinquency-prone foreign juveniles cannot be confirmed.

The potential for aggression at *Hauptschule* is slightly higher than at other school types.

The group of the so-called bullies, i.e. those young people who regularly attack or torment others in various forms without becoming victims to an especially large extent themselves, is limited to approx. 5 percent.

The risk group of the bullies display aggressive and delinquent behaviour also outside school and, with a rather high degree of probability, become very active offenders later.

The more risks have accumulated in the course of their development, the more likely and pronounced the aggressive behaviour of juveniles tends to be.

1. The individual results

Violence at schools
Mild and occasional aggression at school prevails over heavy forms of aggression. However, almost two thirds of the young people had kicked or hit a fellow-pupil in the last six months before the survey. About 5 % of the pupils display a tendency toward regular physical aggression. 13 % admit an offence of robbery or extortion, 8 % threaten their victim with a knife or a pistol. Those who attack their fellow-pupils verbally and physically are prone to increased aggression and delinquency outside school as well. The increased occurrence of verbal violence at schools is an indication of a bad interactive climate. The phenomenon that the way young people talk to each other is becoming more and more "brutal" has a signal function since verbally aggressive juveniles do not only approve of violence, but also use it more often.

Sex-specific differences

Girls clearly use less physical violence whereas - as far as verbal forms of aggression are concerned - differences between sexes are considerably smaller. Surveys regarding the delinquency of girls in the field of property crime show less pronounced differences in comparison to boys. Regarding delinquency associated with status or social withdrawal (drug use, „playing truant" or „hanging around" in bad company or places), there are no significant differences.

German and non-German pupils
There are only small differences between German and non-German pupils as far as bullying is concerned. Non-German nationals tend to be found more often among the especially aggressive pupils. As far as deviant behaviour outside school is concerned, the only important factor resulting from the comparison is an increased social withdrawal delinquency of non-German pupils.

Influence of the school types
More aggression is reported from *Hauptschule* than from *Gymnasium*, while *Realschule* ranks in between. These findings might result from the fact that pupils from *Hauptschule* make up a relatively high percentage of the study (38 %).

Victims
Girls are less often victims, especially of physical violence. German boys are distinctly more often victimized than non-Germans. About 5 % of the young people are regularly victims of aggression, their own behaviour being less aggressive. A little more than 2 % frequently alternate their roles as victim or offender.

Bullying
Bullying is a specific syndrome of problematic behaviour by juveniles, including violent and property crime, drug crime, playing truant, non-criminal aggression, extensive abuse of dangerous substances (smoking, liquor, narcotic drugs, medicine), reckless driving and other externalizing behavioural patterns. Aggression from bullies is not only directed against like-minded young people, i.e. other bullies, but also against non-aggressive victims. Bullies are aggressive not only in the narrower and broader context of school; they often display dissocial behaviour elsewhere as well. They constitute the most distinctive risk group for a criminal career.

2. Risk factors

Cumulative risk model
The risk factors for delinquent behaviour cannot be considered from an isolated point of view, but must be seen as a whole and in combination with each other. If several conditional factors coincide and produce a chain reaction, the risk of delinquent behaviour multiplies. If there are four to five risk areas, the probability of belonging to the group of bullies is twelve times as high. With more than five risk areas, this probability is 35 times as high. Most of the non-aggressive and socially competent young people are confronted with zero to three risk areas only.

Family structures
The origin from a lower-class family suffering from structural problems (divorce of parents, unemployment, etc.) certainly increases the risk of aggression and delinquency. A much more negative effect is, however, produced by the functional criteria in the family, especially the way parents bring up their children and their interaction with them (strict and contradictory parenting methods without emotional warmth).

Personal characteristics and social competence
Aggressive and delinquent young people are more impulsive, socially less competent and more dominant than others. They more often have identity problems and are less attentive.

Social information processing (acquired thought and perception patterns)
Especially bullies tend to ascribe hostility to their interaction partners. The social environment is perceived in a way as if it were directed against the bullies themselves. It is implied that others have aggressive motives, with the result that a situation is too quickly seen as an alleged danger. Owing to a lack of means of communication, the reaction against this presumed danger is violence/aggression. There is no readiness or ability to understand other people's problems and feelings (empathy), and the actual clarification of the situation is neglected. Negative consequences of aggressive behaviour are generally viewed as positive.

School-related risks

Schools and classes with a relatively large number of pupils do not further aggression against fellow-pupils significantly.

What is of importance, however, is the socio-emotional school and class climate experienced. Aggression is furthered by a feeling of anonymity and pressure to produce good results at school. The individual school careers of delinquent pupils are characterized by worse marks in the main subjects and playing truant frequently.

Peer groups
The great influence of groups of young people of approximately the same age on delinquency and aggression of juveniles can be confirmed. Aggressive and delinquent young people are more often part of a clique and have more intensive contact with each other. The peer group serves to offset deficiencies in the family. Acceptance and security, lacking at home, are found in this group of young people of approximately the same age. Neutralization techniques, i.e. refusal of self-criticism and feelings of guilt, are acquired and corroborated by the experiences in the peer groups.

Leisure-time behaviour
Delinquent young people tend to spend their leisure time in a more consumer-oriented rather than in a structured way. Their leisure-time behaviour is characterized by "hanging around", preferably at meeting places for juveniles. The intensity of both sports activities and the time spent in front of the computer has no influence on delinquency.

The media and the use of (dangerous) substances
Whereas there is only little correlation between the amount of time taken up by the general media and aggressive and delinquent behaviour, this is very distinctly the case for the time spent watching violent video films, movies and TV films. A violence-promoting effect of the media seems to be likely when there is no, or only little, supporting family structure.

There is a significant correlation between aggressive and delinquent behaviour and the use of (dangerous) substances, especially liquor and illegal narcotic drugs.

3. Protective factors

For the Bundeskriminalamt as the authority on whose behalf the study is carried out, it is of special interest to search for protective factors which might prevent young people from developing aggressive behaviour if the overall risk to do so is high. In a further analysis, less aggressive young people are thus compared with bullies, the groups having four development risks each. The bullies' deficiencies in social information processing are clearly confirmed in the second study. Norm violation scenarios show that bullies follow social norms least and approve or advocate the deviant behaviour of protagonists the most. As a result, less aggressive young people have fewer impulsiveness and attention problems, use no aggression-specific patterns as far as social information processing is concerned and are less inclined to use (dangerous) substances. The conclusion is that juveniles with a potential risk can definitely undergo a positive development if they possess self-control and have differentiated schemes for behaviour regulation at their disposal.

4. Consequences for prevention and intervention

Multimodal approach
Because aggressive and dissocial behaviour by juveniles becomes more pronounced as risks accumulate over the years, multimodal (coordinated) programs have to be simultaneously started in the various risk areas. Through their positive influence on the cognitive, emotional and behavioural level, these measures - along with the parallel involvement of parents, teachers, the police, etc. - aim at breaking firmly established negative behavioural patterns and misled chain reactions with regard to the way such young people deal with their problems. Since the conditions for juvenile aggressiveness are very complex, it is hardly expected that prompt and successful steering instruments can be found. Thus, for each preventive measure, it is all the more necessary to consider carefully the extent to which it is in fact empirically founded and evaluated or if it is only of a symbolic nature.

Measures with respect to social information processing and self-control
Specific methods of social information processing and deficiencies in the control of their actions constitute the central characteristics of the bullies. Measures of prevention and intervention should thus be devoted above all to these key risks, all the more since they are more easily influenced by programs than long-term situational problems/conditions within the family or society. The aim of this package of measures should be to reduce

aggression-promoting perception, thought and action patterns, to control impulsive behaviour and to build up positive social competence.

Family and child-related prevention
Since it is rather functional than structural deficiencies in the family that constitute a risk of aggressive and deviant behaviour, the cognitive and social development of the children in the family must be furthered by targeted, child-oriented programs at the earliest possible stage. What is desirable and promising is a combination of these measures with offers of parental training and courses to further their parenting competence. A problem faced by the family-related programs is that exactly those parents are most difficult to access where numerous difficulties have accumulated.

School-related prevention
In order to evaluate measures of school-related prevention of violence in Germany, quality assurance strategies are needed. For the prevention of aggression, it is undoubtedly important to have a positive school and class climate, based on the following principles: a) Warm-heartedness, interest and commitment of the teachers, b) rigid limits for unacceptable behaviour of the pupils, c) consistent, but not hostile reactions to breaches of rules, d) a certain degree of observation and control, and e) adults who also exercise authority. The individual measures of the program should involve the school level (e.g. improved supervision during school breaks, further training of teachers, discussion of rules of conduct between parents and teachers), the class level (e.g. rules against disturbing and aggressive behaviour, mediation of disputes, role play to achieve social problem solutions, cooperative forms of learning) and the level of the individual pupil (e.g. serious talks with individual pupils and their parents, specific assistance to victims, psychological measures at school). Measures at school and class level have an influence on above all mild forms of bullying. In addition, they can strengthen cohesion among pupils and thus make the victims more resistant to attacks by the bullies.

Peer groups and educational measures during leisure time
Educational measures during the pupils' leisure time and socio-educational measures should offer possibilities of learning which reduce empirically founded risks and strengthen the positive aspects of relations between young people of approximately the same age. Mere adventure and sports programs - some of them organized by the police - have proved to be of little effect. Efforts should be made to offer well-structured leisure-time activities in which not only high-risk pupils come together who are negative examples for each other, the result being that their behavioural problems increase through their being together. Aggressive young people should receive suggestions from a social education worker (as a person in a position of trust) in order to recognize their own problematic attitudes and to be able to deal with them.

Media-related approach
A wholesale condemnation of violent films or computer games is not a cure-all. There is rather a need for consistent measures in the field of protection of juveniles and the field of media policy. Parents have to be made aware of the fact that their children may be cut off from family life by devoting too much time to the media.

Community-related prevention
Family and situation-related programs, school-related and other programs can be united in an overall community-related concept. Representatives from the local administration, youth welfare services, schools, the police, parents' associations, local transport services, organizations, etc. discuss the most important local crime problems at the so-called "round table". After a risk analysis has been carried out, a network of measures is built up. This joint concept aims at creating a community climate of commitment where aggressive and unacceptable behaviour are not ignored.

Recommendations

Formation of so-called action alliances and creation of concurrent information channels between all involved, i.e. establishing links between school, parents, children/young people and the police

Promoting a positive school and class climate through behavioural training and compliance with the jointly established rules

Improvement of parenting competence by offering parental training programs and family counselling in the case of parenting problems

Furthering the cognitive and social competence of children/young people, especially in the field of social information processing and self-control

Training and use of police officers as contact officers

Offers of well-structured leisure-time activities with integrating effect, not only for risk groups

Targeted use of the media as an educational instrument

Setting-up of "round tables" at local level

Controlled evaluation of prevention and intervention measures instead of mere actionism

Orders

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