



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

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Trends in Juvenile Violence in European Countries

Based on a presentation by Christian Pfeiffer, Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen (Hanover, Germany)

At the request of the government of the Netherlands, researchers studied trends in juvenile crime and violence in member states of the European Union. The study was organized around two key issues:

- Patterns and changes in juvenile crime—in particular, such violent crimes as robbery, assault, rape, and homicide—as recorded by law enforcement bodies in several European Union countries. The researchers solicited data and analyses from responsible agencies in each country.
- The state of knowledge and research about the causes of juvenile crime and violence. The researchers conducted a literature review and solicited unpublished material from international colleagues in criminology and related fields.

Comparing the data on juvenile crime rates was challenging because most of the countries used different ways to define “juvenile,” define “violent crimes,” classify crimes, and measure crime rates. Therefore, the researchers generally restricted themselves to comparing trends based on police figures of arrests and convictions. Also, historical data were not uniformly available for every European Union country. Thus, most of the research emphasized crime trends from the early or mid-1980s to the mid-1990s.

Juvenile crime rates increased across the European Union

In every country studied, the rate of juvenile violence rose sharply in the mid-1980s or early 1990s. In some countries, the official figures increased between 50 and 100 percent. In England and Wales (counted together) in

1986, for example, approximately 360 of every 100,000 youths ages 14–16 were “convicted or cautioned by the police” for violent crimes; in 1994, that figure had climbed to approximately 580 per 100,000. In Germany the growth rate was even higher. In 1984, the number of 14- to 18-year-olds suspected of violent crime in the former West Germany was approximately 300 per 100,000; by 1995, that figure had more than doubled, to approximately 760 per 100,000. Rates in the former East Germany were between 60 and 80 percent higher.

Nonviolent crimes committed by juveniles also increased significantly. For example, property crimes committed by juveniles (ages 14–17) in Italy more than doubled between 1986 and 1993 (from approximately 320 per 100,000 to approximately 650 per 100,000).

In general, the victims of violent crimes committed by juveniles were other juveniles, as evidenced by victimization trends in the European Union countries surveyed. For example, in the Netherlands in 1995, young people ages 15–17 were four times more likely than adults (25 and older) to be the victims of assault. Juveniles in Germany were also more likely to be the victims of violent crime than were members of other age groups. The victimization rates from 1984 to 1995 for young children (birth to age 14) and adults (ages 21–60 and age 60 and older) were relatively stable for each age group. However, the victimization rates for teenagers (ages 14–18) and young adults (ages 18–21) climbed precipitously, from approximately 300 per 100,000 in each age group in 1984 to approximately 750 per 100,000 in 1995.

The research revealed significant gender differences for both victims and offenders. While data were not available for every country, the numbers indicated that young men were far more likely than young women to be crime victims. Offense rates also rose far more sharply among young men than among young women.

In most countries the crime rate among adults either remained stable across the years or increased moderately. In no country did the increase in the adult crime rate parallel that for juveniles. Thus, the increase in violent crime among juveniles cannot simply be seen as part of an overall trend in crime rates.

Socioeconomic conditions linked with rates of juvenile crime

It has become axiomatic over the past 20 years that neighborhoods with depressed socioeconomic conditions—particularly in urban areas—suffer higher crime rates than neighborhoods with a healthy economy. Since crime in general has been correlated with socioeconomic conditions, it is no surprise that juvenile crime is also connected to these factors. In most of the European Union countries surveyed, the rising juvenile crime rate accompanied rising unemployment and poverty rates.

In some countries—France and Germany, for example—the problem of unemployment was exacerbated in the early 1990s by an influx of immigrants from countries that had been under Communist rule. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, thousands of people crossed the borders into Western European nations. The researchers found that those immigrants who could not overcome language and culture barriers in order to find employment were more likely to engage in criminal activity than were those who found jobs and became integrated into society.

Social integration and socioeconomic status are not the sole determinants for an individual's involvement in violent crimes, however. German officials recorded an increase in the use of alcohol and other drugs in the last decade, and firearms became somewhat more available after the fall of the Berlin Wall than they had been in the past. However, the researchers attached greater significance to the findings from interviews with 100 young German men who were arrested for violent crimes. While many came from low-income households, the most common thread in their life histories is that they

came from families where violence was common: They were beaten, their siblings were beaten, or one of their parents was beaten.

Directions for future research: Individual responses to violence

Recognizing that violence may breed further violence, the researchers are undertaking an ambitious project in German jails. They are interviewing 500 to 700 young men who are being imprisoned for the first time. Followup interviews will be conducted 1 week before they leave prison, 3 months after release, 1 year later, 2 years later, and so on. The researchers hope to develop biographies of these individuals that will explore their responses to prison and identify how they cope with the culture of violence.

In a separate effort, the researchers are conducting a victimization study of 11,000 young people (ages 15 and 16) in four large German cities, asking whether the teenagers have ever been victimized and, if so, how they responded to the attack. The researchers hope to amass a bank of data describing where the attacks occurred, where the victims turned for help, and what effect the attacks had on the victims. They will also attempt to isolate any connections between victims and their attackers, identifying possible relationships and reasons for the attack. This study should yield information about the origins of juvenile violence and possible ways to address the growing problems associated with such violence.

This Research Preview is based on a presentation by Christian Pfeiffer, Ph.D., the director of the Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen in Hanover, Germany. As part of NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series, Dr. Pfeiffer discussed his study with an audience of researchers and criminal justice professionals and practitioners. A 60-minute VHS videotape, *Trends in Juvenile Violence in European Countries*, is available for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape, NCJ 167029, and any of the others available in NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series.

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