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Violence in German schools.

**Its determinants and its prevention
in the scope of community crime pre-
vention schemes**

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1 Violence in schools as a social problem¹

In recent years there have been increasing reports in the German media about increasing brutality and violence among school pupils. This media exposure has rapidly revealed shortcomings in educational and sociological approaches to the issue of violence in schools, and has prompted calls for up-to-date empirical studies. However, this is not an entirely new issue. But until a few years ago, there were no up-to-date scientific data on the current scale of the problem, and in particular there were no data to support the repeated claims in the media that violence in schools was on the increase. The last major empirical findings in the mid-eighties did not lead to comparable follow-up studies which might have allowed scientifically substantiated conclusions to be drawn as to whether violence in schools was increasing or decreasing.

The topic of violence in schools returned to scientific discussion with the work of the German Independent Governmental Commission on the Prevention and Control of Violence, the so called "Violence Commission" in the late eighties (see Schwind et al. 1990). This Commission came to the conclusion "that there is no evidence of a continuous increase in aggressive behaviour among pupils in German schools" (Schwind et al. 1990: 71). However, the renewed focus on the issue of violence in the school setting has led to the widespread initiation of new research projects on the subject.²

2 Description and analysis

German constitution places the entire education system under government supervision, and confers "cultural and educational sovereignty", that is overall responsibility for education policy on the individual States (*Länder*). Therefore to date there have been no quantitative studies representative of Germany as a whole on the issue of violence in schools. The topicality of this issue has admittedly led to a series of local and regional surveys on the subject among head teachers, teachers, pupils, parents, etc. though.³ However, partly because classroom research of this kind is necessarily subject to ministerial approval at the level of the Federal States ("*Bundesländer*"), such surveys have always been limited to the Federal States concerned and can therefore only provide mosaic-like evidence about individual "*Länder*", or in some cases only about certain local authorities.⁴

2.1 Definitions

While the key concepts in the literature in languages other than German are "bullying" and "anti-social behaviour", the debate in Germany has centred on the concept of "violence".⁵ Innumerable diverse definitions of "aggression" and "violence" can be

¹ Revised version of the paper „Verbal Aggression, Physical Violence, and Vandalism in German Schools. Its Determinants and Future Perspectives of Research and Prevention“ presented at the International Conference on Violence in Schools and Public Policies, Paris, Maison de l'UNESCO March 5 - 7 2001.

² For a current state-of-the-art-report of the German research on "violence in schools", see Funk (2000a).

³ For a list of these surveys, with an appraisal of the methodology, see Krumm (1997). The theoretical underpinning of the surveys is examined in Holtappels (1997).

⁴ For information on the German school system, cf. Secretariat of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (2000).

⁵ In fact, in the current German version of Olweus the verb "to bully" is actually translated as "mobben" ("to victimise") and the noun "bully" as "*Gewalttäter*" ("perpetrator of violence") (see Olweus 1996: 11). For a short summary of the German rese-

found in the literature.⁶ Current German studies of violence in schools tend to use the definition provided by Hurrelmann in his special report to the Violence Commission:

“Violence in schools comprises the entire spectrum of activities and acts which result in physical and mental pain or injury to individuals operating in the school setting, or the aim of which is to damage objects on school premises” (Hurrelmann 1990: 365).

This broad definition covers acts of physical violence and verbal or psychological forms of violence – including threatening or sexist - that are committed by or directed at pupils, teachers or other individuals, as well as violence directed at property (vandalism). This relatively abstract definition has been made more specific operationally in empirical studies, i.e. by inquiring about specific acts occurring in the school setting.

2.2 Empirical evidence: Nuremberg Pupils Survey 1994 – Violence in schools⁷

This presentation draws on results from the “Nuremberg Pupils Survey 1994: Violence in Schools”.⁸ In this study 1.458 pupils from the 7th, 8th, and 9th classes out of lower secondary schools (*Hauptschule*), intermediate secondary schools (*Realschule*), and higher secondary schools (*Gymnasium*) were interviewed in spring 1994. The sample consists of 62 classes out of 38 schools and is representative of the city of Nuremberg.⁹

In this study, pupils were asked how often they themselves had committed 20 specific acts of aggression or violence during the previous half of the school year.

Figure 1 summarizes the respective results: Calling other pupils names or subjecting them to verbal abuse was quite clearly the commonest act of violence or transgression (boys 82.9%, girls 74.1%). This finding, which confirms the predicted high frequency of verbally aggressive behaviour patterns, has also emerged in other studies. Fighting with another pupil (boys 48.4%, girls 15.8%), spreading lies about pupils (boys 40.9%, girls 23.0%), verbally abusing teachers, whether or not to their face (boys 35.6%, girls 32.4%), and damaging (boys 40.1 %, girls 27.7%) or dirtying (boys 32.0%, girls 31.6%) school property were also common transgressions. The following transgressions, in contrast, were mentioned relatively rarely: sexually harassing other pupils (boys 6.2%, girls 1.6%), threatening them with weapons (boys 3.9%, girls 0.9%) and in particular sexually harassing teachers (boys 3.1 %, girls 0.9%) or threatening them (boys 3.0%, girls 1.2%).

arch on “bullying” see Funk (1998). Schuster (1999) forces the concept of “bullying” and introduces conceptual and methodological distinctions.

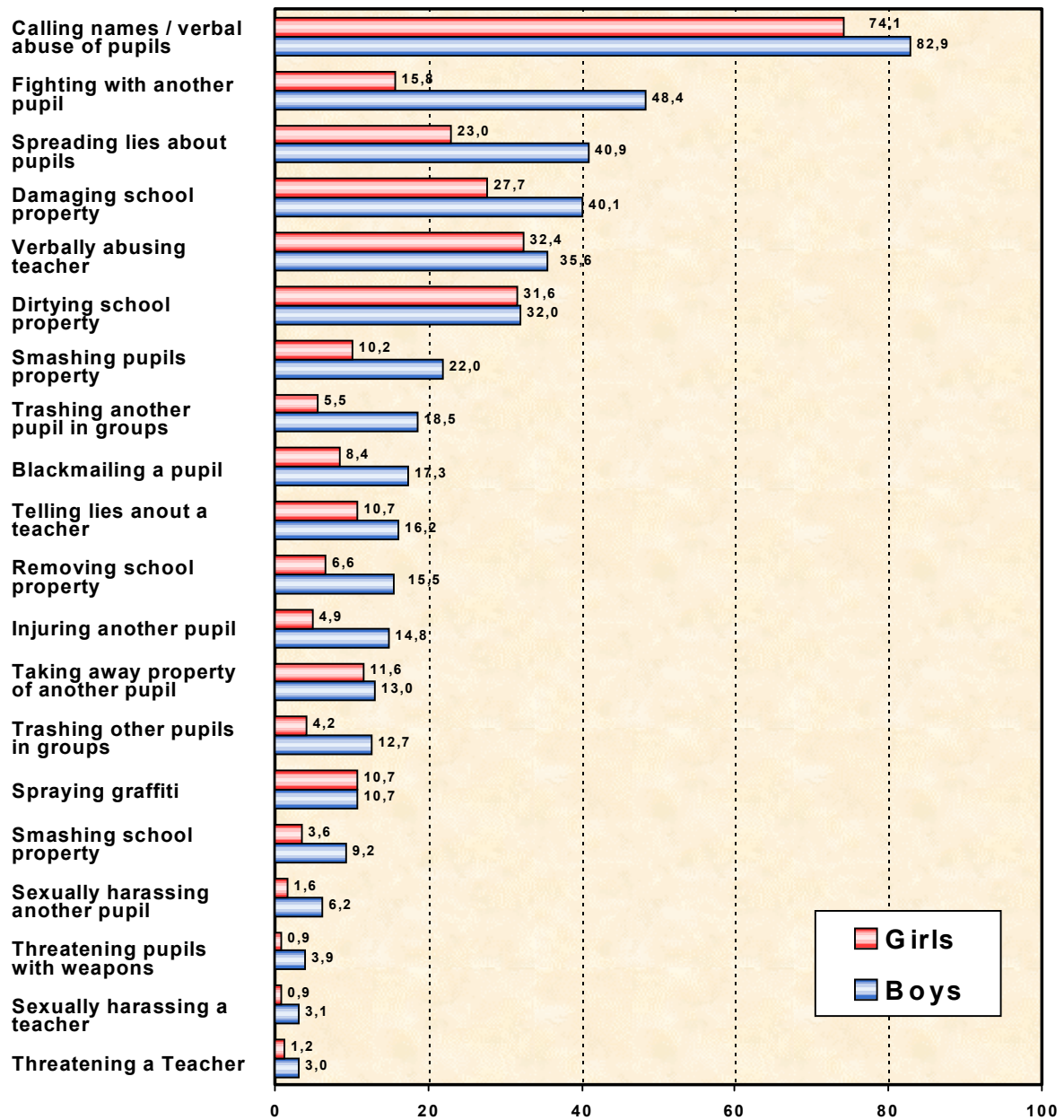
⁶ Schubarth (1993: 31) has noted a broadening, differentiation and pluralisation of the concept of violence in recent years.

⁷ This survey was authorized by the Bavarian State-Ministry for Education, Culture, Science, and Arts (AZ III/9-04106-8/47 124) on 4 April 1994. I would like to express my thanks to the Hans Frisch-Foundation, the Dr. Alfred VinzI-Foundation, the club “Teacher’s Home Nuremberg”, the Department for Schools and Culture of the City of Nuremberg as well as the Savings Bank of the City of Nuremberg for the financial support of this research. I also thank the students of the seminar “violence in schools” for their dedicated collaboration.

⁸ For the theoretical introduction to this study and its methodology, see Funk (1995a).

⁹ Nuremberg is located in the northern part of the Federal State of Bavaria and has approx. 500.000 inhabitants.

Percentage of “violent“ pupils by sex (in %)

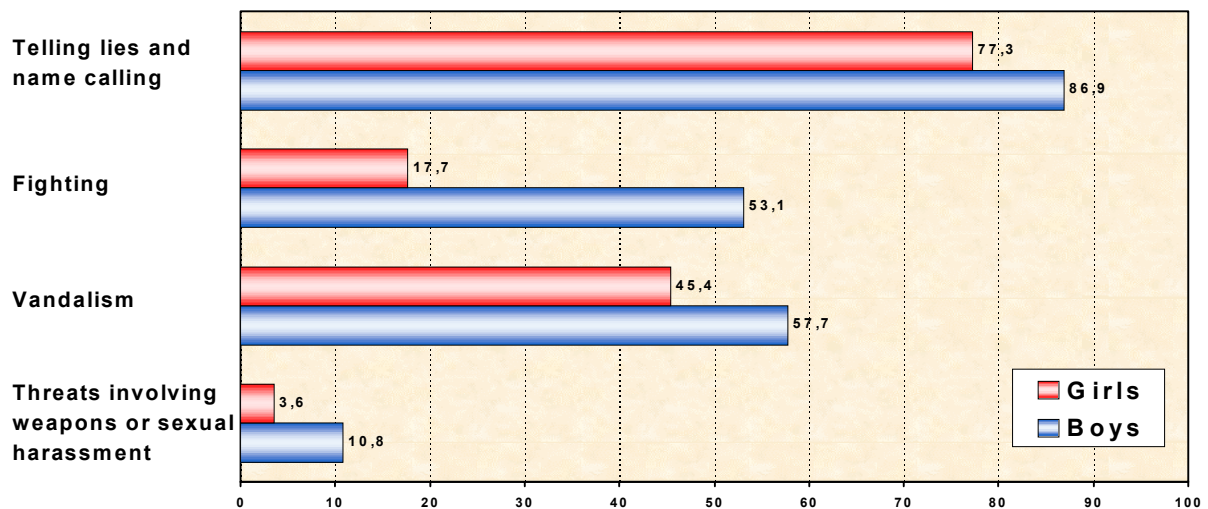


Nuremberg Pupils Survey 1994
Institute for Empirical Sociology Nuremberg

Figure 1

Using factor analysis, the reported transgressions and acts of violence are summarized under the following four headings (see figure 2):

Percentage of pupils admitting aggressive violent actions (in %)



Nuremberg Pupils Survey 1994

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Figure 2

- telling lies and name-calling / verbal aggression;
- fighting / physical violence;
- vandalism; and
- threats involving weapons or sexual harassment.

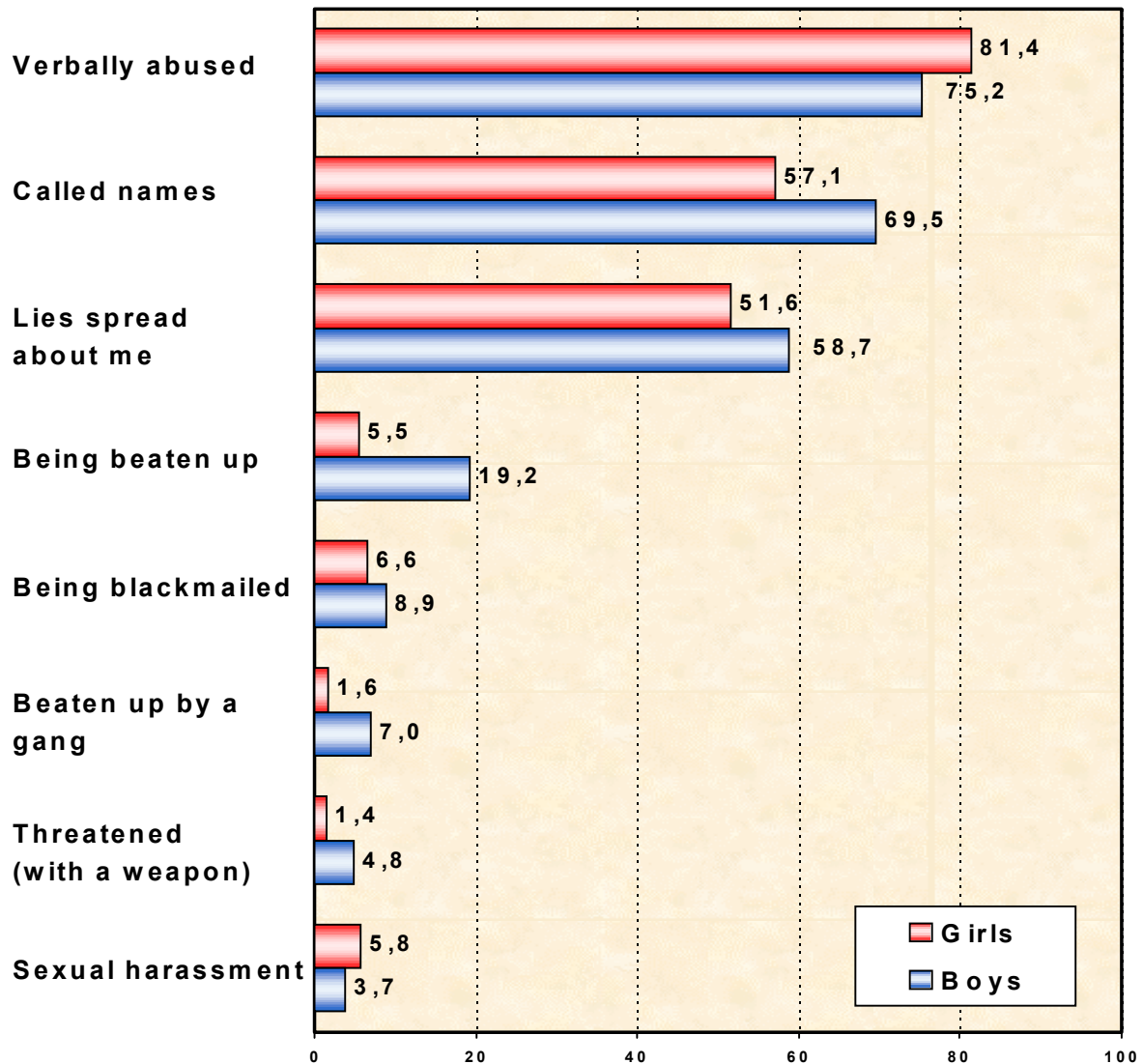
Over three-quarters of the girls in the Nuremberg study (77.3%) and nine out of ten of the boys (86.9%) admitted having lied to other pupils or called them names. More than half of the boys (53.1 %), but only one girl in six (17.7%), admitted to having been involved in fights. Over half of the boys (57.7%) and nearly half of the girls (45.4%) admitted to having committed acts of vandalism, and as many as one boy in ten (10.8%) - but fewer than one girl in twenty (3.6%) - reported having threatened others with weapons or having sexually harassed other pupils (see Funk 1995b: 52).

“Victim experiences” in schools

On the basis of statements by pupils, the Nuremberg Pupils Survey distinguished between “victim experiences”

- of a verbal kind (being verbally abused, lied about, called names or insulted) and those
- of a non-verbal kind (being beaten up, bullied, threatened with weapons or sexually harassed).

Percentage of pupils victimized (in %)



Nuremberg Pupils Survey 1994

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Figure 3

While girls (81.4%) claimed notably more often than boys (75.2%) that they had suffered verbal abuse and also sexual harassment (girls 5.8%, boys 3.7%), in the case of all other offences it was boys who reported "victim experiences" more often than girls (cf. figure 3 and Funk 1995b: 54).¹⁰

¹⁰ Boys vs. girls: "Called names/verbally abused", 69.5% vs. 57.1%; "Lies spread about me", 58.7% vs. 51.6%; "Beaten up", 19.2% vs. 5.5%; "Blackmailed", 8.9% vs. 6.6%; "Beaten up by a gang", 7.0% vs. 1.6%; "Threatened (with a weapon)", 4.8% vs. 1.4% (cf. Funk 1995b: 54).

Research on violence in schools knows that perpetrators of violence often report corresponding victim experiences of their own, and vice versa. This finding is backed up by the correlations between “lying about other pupils or calling them names” and “being lied about or called names by other pupils” (with a Pearson $r = .39$), and between “beating up other pupils” and “being beaten up oneself” ($r = .31$) in the Nuremberg Pupils Survey (Funk 1995b: 59).¹¹

2.3 Supposed causes of violence in schools

In a very broad view, Hurrelmann seeks the causes of violence among pupils wherever a “clear reduction in self-esteem and in opportunities for later personal development [is] perceived” (1990: 368).

In my own research I identify the following specific factors as influencing young people’s aggressive or violent behaviour: individual personality traits, family background, peer group, school, and exposure to media (cf. figure 4 and Funk 1995a: 13ff.). The Nuremberg Pupils Survey 1994 follows a structural-individualistic approach, focusing theoretically on the acting person (that is the pupil) but also considering the structural aspects of the embeddedness of the pupil in relevant social relations (see Büschges et al. 1998).

As shown in figure 4 attention is drawn on the interdisciplinary view emphasizing

- the acting pupil (demography, attitudes, personal characteristics),
- its social relation to others *outside* school (family¹², labour force participation in the context of the household, peers, etc.),
- its social relation to others *inside* school (fellow pupils, teachers),
- its membership in the institution “school” (possibilities of participation),¹³
- its embeddedness in the social ecology of the neighbourhood,
- its nationality¹⁴ and
- its media consumption (television, video)

¹¹ Since almost all empirical studies are designed as cross-sectional studies, i.e. the questions are only asked at a single moment in time, no conclusions can be drawn about the direction of causality - in other words, it is not possible to conclude that pupils only become violent after having had victim experiences of their own.

¹² Problem factors in the young person’s family background include: poor family relationships (“lack of warmth”); parental separation and divorce; absence of siblings; poverty and deprivation; a changeable, aggressive, over-strict or over-permissive parental approach to upbringing; lack of supervision; the parents (or single parent) being away at work; etc. (cf. Funk 1995c, 1996; BaySUKWK 1994: 17; Hurrelmann 1990: 367). Cramped living conditions are also mentioned in connection with the family situation (cf. BaySUKWK 1994: 17).

¹³ Environmental or organisational factors in the school, a poor working atmosphere among the teaching staff, the quality of the teacher-pupil relationship, alienation from or lack of commitment to school norms and values, and poor school performance are also identified as predictors of violence (cf. Hurrelmann 1990: 367ff., 1991: 106ff.; BaySUKWK 1994: 17, 18ff.; Funk 1995a: 13ff.).

¹⁴ Among pupils from ethnic minorities, “living in two different worlds” is seen as an additional problem. That is living by the prevailing German norms outside the family, and inhabiting a world of “traditional structures, frequently with an authoritarian pattern, in the family home, the extended family and the religious community” (BaySUKWK 1994: 18).

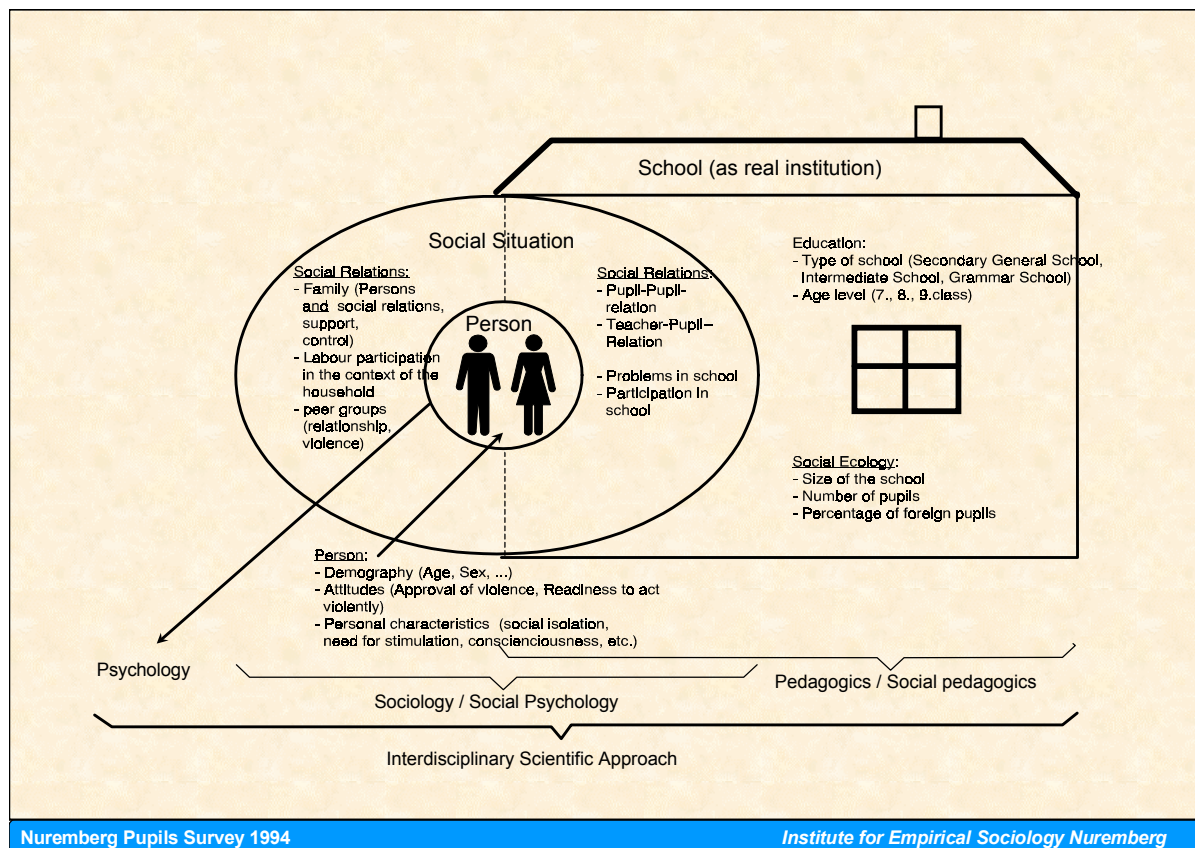


Figure 4

3 Determinants of verbal aggression, physical violence, and vandalism in schools

Let's now ask for the determinants of verbal aggression, physical violence, and vandalism in schools and consider them as dependent variables in multiple linear regression analyses.¹⁵ The independent variables I consider are located on the "levels" or in the "spheres" I already introduced: that is

- the person itself,
- the social context of his family,
- his peer group,
- the housing conditions,
- the school situation,
- the media consumption, and
- the nationality.

I will now present all of the actual regression coefficients, and also display the significant results in a coloured way with a red cell indicating that this variable is intensifying a certain aspect of pupil aggression or violence and a green cell indicating that this variable has a lowering influence on a certain aspect of pupil aggression or vio-

¹⁵ Since the fourth factor reported, that is "threats involving weapons or sexual harassment" is not distributed like a bell curve, no multivariate analyses may be computed with this factor. For more detailed results of the following regression analyses cf. Funk (2000b).

lence. Please note, that this kind of analysis explicitly assumes a certain direction of influence (causality), that is: independent variables influencing dependent variables. Since the study I am presenting here is a cross-section, this assumption is not always clear and without doubt (cf. figure 5).

Figure 5: Significant regression results of verbal aggression, physical violence, and vandalism of pupils

Predictor variables		Indices of different aspects of violence		
		Lying / Name calling	Fighting	Vandalism
		Standardized regression coefficients beta		
Person	Approval of violence	.1202 ***	.1523 ***	.0937 **
	Readiness to act violently		.1793 ***	.0787 *
	Age of the pupil		-.0661 **	.0728 **
	Sex of the pupil	.1227 ***	.2147 ***	
	Social isolation			
	Need for stimulation	.1035 ***	.0634 *	.1133 ***
Family	Controlling upbringing			
	Assisting upbringing			
	Good relationship to parents	-.1001 ***		-.1011 ***
	Single parent household			
Peer group	Peers most important		-.1000 **	
	Single friends most important		-.1131 ***	
	Relationship to peers			
	Violence of peers	.2690 ***	.2185 ***	.1783 ***
Housing	Quality of flat / house	.0927 **		
	Quality of town / suburb			
School	Pupil-pupil-relation			
	Teacher-pupil-relation	-.1388 ***	-.0613 *	
	School problems			
	School participation			-.0804 **
	Lower secondary school		.0967 ***	-.1812 ***
	Intermediate secondary school			-.1593 ***
Media	Media: action films			
	Media: horror films			.0715 *
Foreign nationality		-.0559 *		-.0543 *
Intercept		.1481 **	.1029	.1239
Multiple R		.52118	.63153	.56202
R ²		.27163	.39883	.31587
R ² Adjusted		.26607	.39309	.30804

* = significant on 95%-level, ** = significant on 99%-level, *** = significant on 99.9%-level

Figure 5

3.1 Determinants of lying and name calling

First let's have a look at the column explaining the verbal aggression of pupils, or in other words the lying and name calling. Obviously on the level of the pupil itself, his approval of violence, his sex (that is being male) and his need for stimulation significantly intensify his verbal aggression. Good relations to the parents on the other hand have a lowering influence on lying and name calling. The more violent his peer group the more a pupil is lying and calling names on others. Good relations between teachers and pupils again have a lowering influence on lying and name calling. The same is true for being a foreigner. Speaking statistically, 26.6% of the variation of the factor "lying / name calling" on the level of the individual pupils can be explained by the combination of the independent variables introduced.

3.2 Determinants of fighting / physical violence

A look at the column explaining the fighting or physical violence of pupils reveals the following significant causal relations: On the level of the pupil itself, again his approval of violence, and also his readiness to act violently significantly intensify his involvement in fighting. While older pupils seem to be less involved in fights, boys again significantly act more violently. Also, the need for stimulation again significantly intensifies the fighting of a pupil. Since no significant determinants can be found on the family level, naming peers or single friends as being most important both lowers the score on the index of fighting or physical violence.¹⁶ Again, the more violent his peer group the more a pupil is involved in fights. Also again the good relations between teachers and pupils have a lowering influence on physical violence. And, last but not least, visiting a lower secondary school is intensifying the pupil's involvement in fights. With the independent variables introduced, about 39.3% of the variation of the index "fighting" can be explained.

3.3 Determinants of vandalism in schools

Finally, vandalism in schools shall be explained. As you can see, again both a pupil's approval of violence and his readiness to act violently significantly intensify his violent actions against school equipment. The older a pupil the more he commits acts of vandalism. As already known from both of the aspects of violence against persons, the need for stimulation again intensifies the extent of vandalism. But as a new significant predictor, conscientiousness is significantly lowering it. The same is true for a good relationship to the parents. Also already well known is the intensifying effect of violent peers on committing acts of vandalism. The more a pupil sees possibilities for participation (or co-determination) in school, the less he commits acts of vandalism. This surely gives school experts a convenient instrument for the prevention of acts of vandalism in schools. Quite an interesting aspect is displayed by the effect of the school level: Visiting a lower secondary school or an intermediate secondary school both lowers the acts of vandalism in schools. With grammar schools being the residual category, this means that pupils visiting grammar schools are significantly more

¹⁶ The residual category of the original variable was "friends in clubs [*Vereinen*] being most important". This means, that the characteristic "friends in clubs" is supposed to intensify the pupil's involvement in fights.

vandalizing the school premises.¹⁷ A new significant predictor intensifying vandalism in schools is the consumption of films and videos with horror elements. Finally, foreign students seem to vandalize less than their German counterparts. This time 30.8% of the variation of the index “vandalism” can be explained by the independent variables introduced.

4 Summary of the results and conclusions

4.1 Summary of the regression results

As a result of this regression analyses the following aspects should be emphasized:

- Clearly, boys are more aggressive and violent than girls.
- The influence of age towards aggression or violence is not the same for all aspects of aggression or violence.
- There is a strong link between attitudes, that is “approval of violence” and “readiness to act violently”, and overt aggressive or violent behaviour of pupils.
- Clearly, the quality of the social relations has an impact on the three factors of aggressive or violent behaviour in school: The better the social relations towards the parents or the teachers, the less violent actions are reported by the pupils.
- This influence is hardly transferable to the peer group relations since aggressive pupils can have good relations to violent gangs as well as less aggressive pupils can have good relations to non-violent peer groups. However, what can be said without doubt is, that the more violent the peer group is, the more violent the single pupil behaves in school. But even though this is the strongest predictor for “lying / name calling” and “fighting”, the direction of influence in this case is not at all clear. We do not really know whether a violent peer group influences a pupil to commit more violent actions or if a violent pupil is just looking for like-minded violent peers!
- It is really hard to proof the influence of the media on aggressive or violent behaviour of pupils, since regression analyses report so called isolated or partialized coefficients, holding all other influences constant. Researchers expect media influences in social situations where there is a cumulation of problematic aspects in social relations or the embeddedness of a pupil. These cumulations would have to be modelled via so called interaction terms.

4.2 Which conclusions can be drawn from this results?

In my opinion only interventions or prevention activities on multiple levels are likely to succeed in tackling the different aspects of aggression and violence in the school setting. Other research I have not presented today, clearly refers on the class and the school context of the pupils (see Funk and Passenberger 1997 or Mooij 1996). But: Violence in school is not an isolated problem of the schools. School life is just a part of a pupils life. Boys and girls are also embedded in other social contexts of which influences of different quality must be considered in action plans to tackle vio-

¹⁷ There are some ad hoc explanations possible for this surprising finding: One might assume a stronger shyness among pupils at grammar schools to act violently against other pupils. Or one might assume that in grammar school there is just a better opportunity structure, this means there are just more things (computers, overheads, etc.) to damage or vandalize. After all, I have to admit that this are just vague assumptions.

lence in schools. Obviously the social relations and the improvement of school participation are a most promising point of departure for adequate prevention activities in schools since they are most easily to influence by school personnel.

Since the responsibility for school affairs in Germany is located on the level of the federal states (*Länder*), the extent of the political response and the extent of measures to tackle violence or prevention activities is different on the levels of the federal state, the level of the *Länder*, the local level and the level of the schools.¹⁸ Examples of the many school activities on preventing violence in school can be found in Stadt Nürnberg (1993), Balsler, Schrewe and Wegricht (1997) or Balsler, Schrewe and Schaaf (1997). The cooperation of schools and public youth service institutions ("*Jugendhilfe*") is discussed in Schubarth (2000). The broader view on delinquency or crime prevention is covered in Arbeitsstelle Kinder- und Jugendkriminalitätsprävention (1998, 2000).

5 Community based crime prevention as basis for the prevention of violence at schools

The presented results can be summarized shortly as follows (cf. Tillmann et al. 1999: 300):

- Firstly: There is no single main causal cause of problematic pupil behaviour in schools, there is rather a complex structure of causes, therefore comprising many participants. Any mono-causal explanation would be misleading.
- Secondly: There is a considerable amount of determinants of aggressive pupil-behaviour coming from outside school, so called imported violence. But, there explicitly are also inner-school factors that provoke or facilitate aggressive or violent behaviour of school children.

So why do we emphasize and concentrate on the social context of schools, when we deal with the scientific research on juvenile aggression and anti-social behaviour? My hypothesis is, that this context is not chosen by chance. Rather this highly institutionalized social context presents itself as an excellent field of research, because our children and youth compulsory visit this institution day in day out several hours a day and, in the sum of the years, a considerably period of their lives. Besides this, the organisation of schools in age-classes also offers the empirical orientated scientist solid benefits concerning the access to the field and the coverage of a sample.

Despite this advantages I become suspicious that the point of view on violence in schools expresses an inadmissible contraction of the real problem. My hypothesis is that children and youth who make a bad impression in schools by acting aggressively, violently or vandalistically will, with some probability, behave quite the same outside school (cf. Lösel, Bliesener and Averbek 1999). Anti-social behaviour, aggression and violence of children and youth is not the sole problem of our schools. Therefore not our educational institutions alone have to take responsibility for appropriate prevention and intervention. Rather this ought to be defined as a task for the wide range of many societal institutions, like families, clubs, parishes, political par-

¹⁸ Cf. Funk (1997) for a cursory summary.

ties, unions, local or city institutions, public youth service institutions ("*Jugendhilfe*") or the police.

A current study of the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention comes to the conclusion: "The real problem area is not the school itself but the world our children return to after the dismissal bell rings" (Bilchik 1999: 1). In the U. S. "... serious violent crime committed by juveniles peak() in the hours immediately after the close of school" (Bilchik 1999: 1). Also this is the time when "... youth are more vulnerable and more likely to be exploited, injured, and even killed" (Bilchik 1999: 1). So there is a strong need for schools and communities to cooperate, to develop strategies to tackle youth violence. The report cited demands schools and communities "... to consider initiating or expanding recreational sports, employment, mentoring, tutoring, arts, and homework programs as positive alternatives to unsupervised time in a child's day" (Bilchik 1999: 1).

Besides the documented engagement of children and youth in aggressive or violent action at schools, police crime records show significantly increasing crime rates for this age groups. However, criminologists have a big argument about the pitfalls of official German crime records and their consequences for the measurement of juvenile delinquency (cf. Pfeiffer and Wetzels 1999; Heinz 1997a; Kiehl 1996; Pfeiffer 1996; Walter 1996a; 1996b).¹⁹

On the other hand, community surveys on safety or criminality issues show the precarious situation of our young people living in an atmosphere of fear of criminality or being frightened of becoming a victim of crime. For example, we can prove, that because of the high mobility of the youth, they are highly exposed to criminality, become a victim of crimes more often, show a definite behaviour of avoiding certain places, so called "spots of fear", and also show a marked cognitive risk assessment (cf. Funk 1999). In the literature young people are therefore suggested as a prime target group of crime-preventive measures (cf. Heinz 1997b: 431).

Crime prevention nowadays is understood as the business of the whole of the society. In practise however, crime prevention is explicitly assigned as a task to the institution Police (cf. BKA 2000). Besides this it is most promising practised people-orientated at the level of the community. Practising crime prevention schemes both, the Police and the municipality, today act more offensive in the area of crime prevention and the improvement of the subjective feeling of safety within the scope of community based crime prevention, called "security networks" or "partnerships for safety", etc.

Against this background I call for two main consequences in the scope of the research and prevention of "violence in schools":

- Firstly: Since aggressive or violent behaviour of children and youth in the school setting is definitely not caused by school influences alone, therefore prevention and intervention of violence in schools also should be embedded in youth orientated crime prevention schemes of a broader approach of community based prevention schemes.

¹⁹ For a European perspective see Pfeiffer (1997).

- Secondly: The circle of persons and institutions involved in such a community based crime prevention should be extended far beyond the schools to as many as possible of the relevant societal groups, like families, clubs, parishes, political parties, unions, local or city institutions, public youth service institutions (“*Jugendhilfe*”) or the police. Schools should practise networking and have to open themselves to other institutions, that are all embedded in the same local setting.

Many steps towards this direction have already been gone. The scope is widespread and comprises such diverse activities like

- an action plan of the Nuremberg Police Department to tackle truancy (“*Schulschwänzerprogramm*”) (cf. Stadt Nürnberg and PD Nürnberg 2001),
- being embedded in a broader project to improve the cooperation between the police, the public youth service institutions (“*Jugendhilfe*”) and the social workers (cf. Stadt Nürnberg and PD Nürnberg 1998),
- or a programme of the police inspection Nuremberg West that introduces police officers in on-site school prevention (cf. Mehringer 1999).

I hope many more steps in the scope of community based crime prevention will follow.

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