



Understanding Societal Trends in Adolescent Violence

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Introduction

Adolescent violence is a considerable burden for society worldwide. The economic toll of adolescent violence is high (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2014), and violence-related injuries are a major cause of early death and disability among young people (Gore *et al.*, 2011). The level of adolescent violence in a society varies considerably over time and in different cultural contexts. Violence levels are lower in the Nordic countries compared to many other similar countries around the globe (Tonry, 2014). Yet, violence is still one of the most prevalent types of crime among young people, particularly among boys (Statistics Norway, 2020). Youth violence also receives a great deal of media attention, and when crime rates are on the rise, we often hear voices arguing for »getting tougher on crime« and stricter sentencing (Estrada, 2019). One of the main aims of my PhD thesis (Frøyland, 2020) was to investigate how and why the societal level of adolescent violence changes over time.

1. Trends in Adolescent Violence

Analyses of time trends in crime and violence have long traditions both in Nordic and international criminological research (see e.g., Baumer, Vélez and Rosenfeld, 2018; Eisner, 2003; Estrada, 2001, 2019). The overall impression from existing research is that violence levels among adolescents increased from the mid-1900s into the 1990s and then declined substantially in the first two decades of the 2000s. Today, in most Western countries the level of adolescent violence is close to what it was in the 1960s. Even though a wide range of studies have covered crime trends in general, research on why trends change is less well developed. Knowledge on external sources contributing to trend changes may help us to anticipate changes as well as to understand why they happen when they do.

Three broad causal mechanisms have been suggested as important for understanding trends in crime and violence (Baumer, Vélez and Rosenfeld, 2018). First, changes in factors related to social control may influence the



societal level of crime. Second, the overall propensity or motivation for crime in the population may change over time. And finally, changes in the amount of time spent in criminogenic settings may impact societal crime levels. Studies on how to understand trends in violence often rely on data from an aggregated societal level, for example by combining crime statistics with co-occurring societal changes. Current empirical knowledge on explanatory factors of trends in violence is therefore strongest on factors that are possible to study based on that kind of data. Example factors here are: growth of stronger social institutions, changes in policing strategies and societal security measures, or changes in economic opportunities.

Another strand of criminological research with a long history is investigation of individual risk and protective factors for violent behavior (Baumer, Vélez and Rosenfeld, 2018). A possible approach for studying trends in violence at a societal level is to examine co-occurring changes in factors deemed important for understanding individual risk. Examples are substance use, leisure time habits, and socialization with peers. My PhD thesis draws on knowledge from both research traditions by utilizing repeated cross-sectional surveys for exploring how trend changes in important individual-level risk and protective factors influence overall societal trends in adolescent violence.

At the time of writing the thesis, few studies had explored the possibility of linking the two research traditions. Recently, several studies have contributed with new knowledge on how to understand trends in youth crime and delinquency, analyzing repeated cross-sectional surveys spanning close to two decades in Sweden (Svensson and Oberwittler, 2021) and over two decades in the US (Baumer, Cundiff and Luo, 2021). The studies highlight several important individual-level factors for understanding trends in youth crime, among them changes in social bonds, attitudes towards crime, routine activities, unstructured socializing, and binge drinking. Several of these factors were also highlighted in the analyses of the thesis.

2. Methods and Analyses

I conducted two studies analyzing trends in adolescent violence using four large-scale surveys of Norwegian adolescents. The first study used the two cross-sectional *UngVold* surveys to examine trends in the perpetration of violence among Norwegian adolescents from 2007 to 2015 (Frøyland and von Soest, 2018). Two nationally representative samples of students in the final year of senior high school (2007: $N = 7,033$, response rate = 77%; 2015: $N = 4,530$, response rate = 66%) participated in a survey filled out during two consecutive school hours. The second study continued the investigation of time trends in adolescent violence (Frøyland, Bakken and von Soest, 2020) using two cross-sectional *Young in Oslo* surveys from 2015 and 2018



(2015: $N = 23,381$, response rate = 79%; 2018: $N = 25,287$, response rate = 74%). The analyses covered trends in physical fighting using responses to an online questionnaire completed in class during a school hour by the entire population of students in junior and senior high school in Oslo, the capital of Norway.

Mediation analyses using both the product-of-coefficients method and the counterfactual framework were performed for investigating co-occurring trends in violence and potential explanatory factors in the realms of sociodemographic background, personality characteristics, mental health, substance use, social relationships, and leisure activities. The analyses identified whether co-occurring trends in the explanatory factors contributed to statistically reducing the magnitude of observed time trends in violent behavior, but no causal inferences can be inferred due to the cross-sectional nature of the data material.

Detailed information on the surveys, methods, and analyses in the thesis can be found in Frøyland (2020).

3. Results

The analyses revealed shifting trends in violence among Norwegian adolescents in the period from 2007 to 2018. The first paper found a decline in physical violence of almost 50% from 2007 to 2015 among students in the final year of senior high school, whereas the second paper showed an increase in physical fighting of over 30% in just three years from 2015 to 2018 among adolescents in junior and senior high school in Oslo (see Figure 1). The trends correspond with numbers from official statistics on violent crime among young people (Statistics Norway, 2020).



Figure 1. Trends in physical violence among students in the final year of Norwegian senior high school (A; Frøyland and von Soest, 2018) and in physical fighting among students in junior and senior high school in Oslo, Norway (B; Frøyland, Bakken and von Soest, 2020).



A main aim of the analyses was to investigate how trends in adolescent violence co-occurred with trends in a range of possible individual-level risk and protective factors for violent behavior identified in previous research. Overall, the most important findings in the thesis for understanding shifting trends in adolescent violence can be grouped into three areas: alcohol and substance use, digital media use, and adult supervision of leisure time activities.

Changes in substance use, and especially alcohol use, have been suggested as important for understanding declining trends in violence and crime (Baumer, Vélez and Rosenfeld, 2018). Alcohol use is hypothesized to influence an individual's propensity for violence due to pharmacological effects of alcohol, but the amount of time adolescents spend in criminogenic settings may also vary according to alcohol use. The hypothesis on the importance of alcohol use for understanding variations in societal violence levels was corroborated by an observed association between declines in problematic alcohol use and adolescent violence in the first paper in the thesis. Similar findings on associations between binge drinking and trends in youth crime have subsequently been reported both in Sweden (Svensson and Oberwittler, 2021) and the US (Baumer, Cundiff and Luo, 2021) using repeated cross-sectional studies over a longer time span, further highlighting the important role alcohol plays when it comes to understanding trends in adolescent crime and violence. The analyses in the second paper in the thesis also linked an increase in cannabis use to an increase in physical fighting.

The associations between digital media use and violence are more intricate but were elaborated on in a paper by Green (2016). A proposed mechanism is that digital media use was an important factor in why the level of adolescent violence and other problematic behavior plummeted in the years around 2010: As young people were spending time at home in front of a screen, they were no longer spending time in settings where problem behavior occurred. Svensson and Oberwittler (2021) further discuss how the routine activities of young people have changed due to the digitalization of leisure time activities. The advent of the smartphone and cheap data traffic has mitigated this development, however, as young people no longer need to stay at home to use digital media services (Green, 2016). Others have also suggested that social media may function as an arena for bullying and conflict (Cannon, Liggett and Ueberall, 2015), which accords with an association observed in the thesis between increases in social media use and in physical fighting.

A final aspect in the thesis related to the shifting trends in adolescent violence was co-occurring changes in leisure time spent with peers and the absence of adult supervision in these situations. A suggestion is that the lack of social control from adults in such settings leads to an increase in violence and other forms of problem behavior (Baumer, Cundiff and Lao, 2021; Svensson and Oberwittler, 2021). In line with this suggestion, the second paper of the thesis identified associations between an increase in leisure time spent outside of home and an increase in adolescent physical fighting. Svensson



and Oberwittler (2021) also highlight how a considerable decline in the time adolescents spend out with friends and in unstructured socializing is one of the most important factors for understanding why the level of youth crime plummeted in Sweden from 1999 to 2017. Similar conclusions are drawn regarding US adolescents (Baumer, Cundiff and Luo, 2021).

4. Relevance for Nordic Criminology

The findings in the thesis contribute towards revitalizing the discussion on how to understand trend changes in violence and crime among adolescents and highlight the importance of utilizing individual-level data for increasing our understanding of these changes. Even though large-scale societal changes, such as increased securitization in modern societies, may be vital for understanding long-term trends in violence, changes in behavioral factors closer to the individual are just as important to consider. The thesis also highlights how knowledge on individual-level risk and protective factors is important for understanding shifting trends in violence on a societal level. It also contributes a novel methodological approach for analyzing trend data using mediation analyses on co-occurring trends in repeated cross-sectional surveys, thereby paving the way for future inquiries on the topic.

The distinct focus on understanding individual risk of criminal behavior in modern criminology has been highlighted as unfortunate, as knowledge on societal crime trends and individual characteristics in combination is what makes it possible to answer many important criminological questions (Baumer, Vélez and Rosenfeld, 2018). Examples are how overall trends vary according to individual characteristics such as age and gender, geography, and socioeconomic resources. The findings in my thesis highlight how changes in behavioral characteristics of individuals also may impact societal trends. The analyses identified several promising factors for understanding trends in adolescent violence that should be further scrutinized in future research, among them the role of substance use, adult supervision, and digital media use. Recent studies have accordingly highlighted the first two factors as important for understanding trends in youth crime (Baumer, Cundiff and Lao, 2021; Svensson and Oberwittler, 2021). Concerning digital media in particular, the co-occurrence of increases in social media use and violence is an important issue for future investigation.

5. Relevance for Criminal Policy

Creating effective and precise prevention efforts is a vital part of the development of new criminal policy. By enhancing our knowledge on why trends in adolescent violence change, it is possible to design prevention efforts that target relevant factors for mitigating or strengthening the development, the-



reby also affecting the societal level of adolescent violence. The findings in the thesis particularly highlight the importance of developing prevention efforts targeting adolescent substance use and of providing arenas for adolescent leisure activities with adult presence, both physically and in the digital world.

An important aspect when designing criminal policy is to make new policy relevant and understandable for parties affected by it. This can also be extended to the designing of prevention efforts. The findings in this thesis promote the design of prevention efforts that target changes in individual-level characteristics. For practitioners working in the field, this may translate into prevention efforts that are easier to work with, compared to working with prevention efforts aimed at alleviating large-scale societal trends. This further highlights the importance of increasing our knowledge on individual characteristics related to societal trends in adolescent violence.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the responsibility of governmental agencies to provide steady and reliable financing of long-term data collections enabling comprehensive analyses of trends in adolescent crime and violence and related explanatory factors. This echo demands from Baumer, Vélez and Rosenfeld (2018) in the US. Analyses of individual-level data enables scrutinization of explanatory factors normally not possible to study using crime statistics at an aggregated societal level. By facilitating data collections like the ones used in my thesis, by Svensson and Oberwittler (2021) in Sweden, and Baumer, Cundiff and Lao (2021) in the US, governmental agencies would increase the evidence base used for designing criminal policy, thereby paving the road for creating better and more effective prevention efforts.

6. Concluding Remarks

Overall, my thesis has contributed toward revitalizing discussion in the Nordic countries on a core criminological question with long traditions – how to understand trends in crime and violence. Using repeated cross-sectional surveys for analyzing co-occurring trends in individual-level factors has provided a novel approach to the question and identified several important characteristics that need further examination in future research. Recent studies have particularly highlighted the importance of changes in the routine activities of adolescents and in problematic alcohol use (Baumer, Cundiff and Lao, 2021; Svensson and Oberwittler, 2021), thereby strengthening the conclusions from the thesis. The thesis also contains suggestions for a methodological approach for conducting this research, which hopefully will be of use for both Nordic criminologists and other scientists.

Kontaktoplysninger

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