

PREVENTION OF YOUTH VIOLENT CRIMES RELATED TO FIREARMS AND EXPLOSIVES

A MIDDLE-EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCES

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Introduction

In recent times, feelings of shock and surprise seem to prevail in Europe every time a child or an adolescent attempts or commits a crime with a firearm or explosives. On the other hand, such feelings can be observed among Americans only when a school rampage undertaken by a white middle-class teenager occurs, since the chronic gun-related youth violence in the poorest African American or Hispanic inner-city localities throughout the country receive little attention by the majority population and the mass media¹ (Garbarino, 1999).

The global community has witnessed a large increase in the number of savage assaults in American schools during the last two decades; however, Europeans still tend to maintain a false impression of remoteness of such attacks, as the continent has not yet been stricken by a gun violence epidemic; a frequently used term for the 1990s spread of handguns and consequential escalation of violent crime in the United States of America that continues today (Black & Hausman, 2008; Grossman, 2006; Harcourt, 2006; Sugarmann, 2001). This sense of safety might not be present for much longer if two cases from earlier this year are anything to judge by. On 11 March 2009, Tim Kretschmer, an “ordinary pupil ... [with] good reports from school”, rushed into a local high school in the peaceful little town of Winnenden, Germany armed with a pistol, shooting nine pupils and three teachers. Three others were also gunned down during his escape from the crime scene. The gunman finally committed suicide in a shootout with the police (BBC News, 2009). Several days later, another seventeen-year-old student was arrested by the Czech Police Organized-Crime Squad for an attempt to bomb his school in the town of Novy Bydzov. Only then did his schoolmates realise the possible consequences of his alleged verbal threats to “shoot dead the whole class and then kill himself” (CTK, 2009).

¹ Muschert (2009) analyzed the coverage of the Columbine shootings in the news media and concluded that it had significantly influenced public discourse about juvenile delinquency.

As we perceive the problem of gun-related youth violence, which has been chronically afflicting American society, as an imminent threat to the Middle-European youth, we have conducted a brief research of available American literature and provide a literature review on adolescent violence with use of firearms and explosives in this paper.

Youth delinquency and violent behaviour have constantly been occupying the minds of criminal justice theorists and practitioners, as well as the general public. Many questions have arisen but clear answers are unavailable:

- What are the current gun policies, volume of gun-related youth violent crime , and contemporary adolescents' views of guns,
- Which risk factors might affect realizations of maleficent intentions, and otherwise which protective factors keep them from delinquent behaviour, and
- What initiatives should be implemented to avoid the most urgent threats and which should be their underpinning principals?

Tens of thousands of research programs have been implemented and published up to the recent times (Borum, 2003; Altman, 2001), but this paper does not intend to review all of them. Rather, we will be focusing on particular aspects of these broad topics, from the perspective of the new (post-socialistic) European Union member states, aiming to recognize and understand current virtues and threats in their respective societies, as well as to anticipate potential pathways to prevention of violent crime. Adhering to the described approach, theoretical remarks regarding youth gun violence will be presented with a review of the possible risk factors that potentiate gun violence and preventive factors supporting youth's resilience. Finally two urgent security concerns will be drawn, for which preventive interventions should be developed and implemented in families and school communities within the new European Union member countries.

Youth Gun Violence: Theory, Risk and Protective Factors

A pervasive social problem of youth violence has been being captured from various angles. This section commences with a paragraph devoted to gun control debate and research in the United States of America and a brief comparison of the situation with the European Union, providing an overview of the environmental background for further arguments. Furthermore, the leading developmental approaches are reviewed. Finally, bearing in mind extraordinary high concentration of gun violence in American society (Cook & Ludwig, 2000), the perspectives of American authors on the risk factors and protective factors for gun-related violence are illustrated.

Overview of Gun Violence Discussion and Theory

Following the volumes of available literature, it is apparent that the majority of studies are conducted by criminological researchers, although the issue is often discussed by jurists, physicians, psychologists, sociologists and other human scientists. Articles by both gun control supporters and gun freedom advocates are being continuously published, as the gun policy debates have been ongoing for decades. *The Gun Control Debate* (Nibset, 2001), *People For and Against Gun Control* (Bijlefeld, 1999) and *Targeting Guns* (Kleck, 1997) provide comprehensive spectra of diverse opinions and ideas of distinctive practitioners in the United States of America.

Studies from different scientific perspectives broaden the scope on the issue and provide stimulating findings. The American Academy of Pediatrics is one of the leading bodies that attend gun control debate in America from a medicinal perspective. Being aware of the rapid increase of gun-related injuries among children, they urge the public health policy-makers to implement various developmental and situational strategies in order to restrain the amount of guns in society, and thus the amount of gun violence and injuries (Widome, 1997). Similarly, Rivara and Kellermann (2007) have outlined potential educational, youth violence prevention, engineering and law enforcement interventions to prevent injuries and deaths from firearms. *Gun violence: the real costs* by Cook and Ludwig (2000) provides a deep insight into the economic effects of various aspects of gun-related violence in the United States of America (e.g. victimization, incarceration, overall quality of communal life, and preventive and safety interventions). Harcourt's (2006) semiotic research on the relations

juvenile delinquents bear with firearms can be found amongst the noteworthy works in this field. Three different types of such relations were identified, and the author described their sensual, moral and political dimensions. Additionally, he reviewed his findings through linguistic methodologies and mapped law and public policies on gun issues.

Altogether, most research circles around the principal question of the relation between the amount of guns and the level of violent crime in respective societies. The United States of America maintain gun deregulation policy outlined in the Constitution. While some research blames it for the highest levels of gun crime among industrialized nations (for rates among children see CDCP, 1997), others condemn it as a misleading hypothesis (Kates & Mauser, 2007). On the contrary, European Union member states' legislations² perceive "the right to own and bear firearms" as an administrative provision, granted by respective national authorities upon the fulfilment of legally-required criteria. Moreover, statutory requirements impose limitations on the exercise of this right and failure to comply with set tight rules often leads to its deprivation. There is a vast literature on the gun control legislation and debate available in the respective European Union member states, which will not be discussed in this paper.

Examination of outcomes of longitudinal studies of criminal behaviour in the latter half of the twentieth century gave rise to life-course theories that have refined contemporary developmental criminology (Thornberry, 2005). Implications of general theories on criminal behaviour and career across the life-course, such as Sampson and Laub's (2005) views on the importance of informal social control and the meaning of turning points in one's life or Thornberry's (2005) description on interactions between a child on one side and parents, teachers and peers on the other side, are being utilized in detailed youth violence research and prevention programming. Elliot and Tolan (1999) provide solid theoretical underpinnings of effective violence prevention and intervention strategies on the basis of the life course developmental-ecological paradigm. Embry and Flannery (1999) further exert this paradigm on research of individual and community level assets and risk factors for violence. Additionally, Rushforth and Flannery (1999) review epidemiological, ecological and case-control studies on the role of firearms in youth violence and their criticism.

² EU Council Directive 91/477/EEC of 18 June 1991 on control of the acquisition and possession of weapons adumbrated the efforts to harmonize the rationale of particular state legislations on control of firearms and ammunition. However, broader harmonization has not yet been accomplished.

Risk and Protective Factors for Violent Gun-Related Crime

Marshall and Watt (1999) outline the basic definitions and characteristics of factors that increase the risk of later antisocial or criminal behaviour in the child's development, and protective factors for healthy development. This section reviews some remarks on the risk and protective factors for youth gun-related delinquency from available literature resources.

There has been extensive research on risks for gun violence in the United States of America. It is advised to perceive the risk factors multidimensionally (Kashani et al, 1999; Widome, 1997). Verlinden and colleagues (2000) comprehensively enumerate and comment the risk factors for youth violence clustered in four groups:

- Individual (e.g. medical and psychiatric condition, temperament and attitudes),
- Family (e.g. poor monitoring and parenting, neglect/abuse and marital conflicts),
- School/Peers (e.g. low school commitment, peer rejection and bullying), and
- Societal/environmental (e.g. poverty, neighbourhood disorganization, media violence, access to weapons and cultural norms).

Although most of the described factors may be found applicable to all Western societies, we further highlight American specifics. Easy accessibility of firearms for children (Newman and Fox, 2009; Rushforth & Flannery, 1999; Moore et al., 2003), and American gun culture in general (Garbarino, 1999) is often criticized. Within the scope of gang-related gun violence, Sheley and Wright (1995) pay attention to drug scenes and demographics. Regarding school lethal violence, Newman and Fox (2009) add social marginality, individual predisposing factors, cultural scripts and failure of the surveillance system. According to Garbarino (1999), exposure to vicarious violence and crude sexuality are especially poisonous for vulnerable children and adolescents, as they are highly sensitive to these negative influences of the American lifestyle. The author assumes that peculiar American competitiveness is also one of the risk factors for youth violence. As youth is aware that there always are winners and losers, those who perceive themselves as losers in life challenges may turn to violence, if they do not manage to cope with their failures. Garbarino further describes accumulation of threats throughout youth's life course as a downward spiral on which way violence is being expelled from one's moral circle, and thus legitimized. This negative pathway can be sometimes signalled by immersion in sinister ideologies (e.g. Satanism).

One of the heavily discussed issues regarding developmental risk factors for juvenile delinquency is the influence of the media over youth behaviour. The question on whether violent films and videogames support child's criminal behaviour or rather the misbehaved children tend to be naturally attracted by violent images has not yet been clearly answered in the literature. Slater and colleagues (2003) argue that both relationships are mutually reinforcing each other in "a downward spiral model". The American Academy of Pediatrics (2001, p. 20) claimed in a policy statement that:

"More than 1000 scientific studies and reviews conclude that significant exposure to media violence increases the risk of aggressive behavior in certain children and adolescents, desensitizes them to violence, and makes them believe that the world is 'meaner and scarier' place than it is. Violence appears in various forms of media entertainment, such as movies, video games, and television news. Research has shown that news reports of bombings, natural disasters, murders, and other violent crimes have potential to traumatize young children."

Furthermore, the Academy studies the impact of sexual content and appearance of tobacco and alcohol in the media on youth behaviour and the effects of media on obesity and school performance. The academics conclude that exposure to the mass media in larger amount potentiates serious dangers. They recommend implementing "media education" in school curricula, which could help young people to become less vulnerable to negative impacts of the media.

Levin (2001) has conducted a research on violence marketing to children and its impact on child development and behaviour. The author describes an increase in displaying violence and concurrent child exposure to violence in media in the last few decades. She further depicts the outcomes of this phenomenon, especially targeting the effects of media deregulation in the United States of America in 1984. Finally, Levin acknowledges media violence as one of the problems that threaten the wellbeing of children, families and all of society, and urges parents, schools, entertainment industries and government to find effective solutions for it.

Studies on violence in the media in America are especially important for Middle-European juvenile delinquency research. Displays of violence on television were marginal and restricted to child viewers in the socialism era. However, films, shows, music videos and computer games with violent and sexual content have been overflowing former Eastern-block societies since the beginning of 1990s, consequentially influencing the home production. Thus, the American experience may provide good rationale for analyses of the correlation between media violence and recent enormous increase in youth violent and antisocial behaviour within European nations.

Analogous to the risk factors, research of the protective factors should be conducted on various levels. McGee (2007, p. 309) argues that “there is evidence to suggest that prevention programs aimed at strengthening protective factors would be more effective in reducing risk factors by considering variations in coping strategies utilized by adolescents.”

Garbarino (1999) devotes a large portion of his volume on youth violence to a discussion about protective factors for juvenile violent delinquency. He introduces a theory of three “anchors” that claim young boys before they get “lost” and may possibly reclaim juvenile offenders. Psychological anchors are underlying resilience in youth that “[develops] a positive sense of self, a capacity for intimacy, and a feeling that life is meaningful” (Ibid, p. 163). Among the resilience factors, stable positive emotional relationship with at least one devoted person, ability to actively cope with stress rather than just reacting to it, intelligence, authentic self-esteem, social support from persons or institutions outside the family and androgyny are enumerated. The importance of embedding the temperamentally vulnerable youth in healthy relationships with peers and adults that “help boys compensate for early experiences of emotional deprivation and trauma and protect them from the influences of social toxicity, negative peer groups, mass media violence, and the crass [and superficial] materialism of our culture” (Ibid, p. 149) is repeatedly underlined. The author clearly warns against parents neglecting the child’s emotional life (emphasizing the role of fathers in the development of boys in American society), as it may induce them to develop relations with peers that are models of misbehaviour and violence. Secure and healthy families, schools, and communities, where “adults are encouraged and rewarded for investing time in engaging in cooperative activities with children” (Ibid, p. 172), provide social anchors for the contemporary youth. Garbarino condemns shallow American

materialism and calls for broader economic equality and commitment to human rights. Finally, spiritual anchors should not be omitted for effective therapy. Rather than a repressive and harsh penitentiary approach, the author proposes the adoption of monastery principles of poverty, chastity and obedience within corrective programs, in order to reinforce positive development.

Similarly, Sheley and Wright (1995) surveyed youth in the inner-city neighbourhoods to reveal how they appertain guns and concluded that more attention needed to be given to social and cultural forces that promote demand for firearms among youth, rather than relying on stricter legal restrictions.

Massive call for gun regulation and interventions on both individual and social level, which should focus on children's personal development within the social context, is apparent in much of the studied literature. Sheley and Wright (1995) have studied the role of guns in American urban environment and advised to focus on alteration of youths' demand for guns, together with finding effective ways to disrupt gun and drug markets and gang environments. Flannery and Huff (1999) draw implications for successful prevention and interventions, focusing on clinical practice and social policy. They recommend employing measures to precise clinical evaluations of violent symptoms, strengthening support for families and gung involvement prevention and desistance, implementing Hawkins and Catalano's "healthy communities" approach and controlling youth access to firearms. Similarly, the American Academy of Pediatrics (Widome, 1997) highlights the role of paediatricians in clinical, school and public counselling on gun safety interventions.

Rivara and Kellermann (2007, p. 316) have arranged potential interventions to prevent injuries and deaths from guns in a compendious table:

- Educational interventions (e.g. school-based suicide-prevention programs, promotion of safe storage of guns),
- Youth violence prevention programs (e.g. nurse home visiting, therapies),
- Engineering interventions (e.g. safe storage technologies, redesigning guns to reduce the risk of unintended discharge, nonlethal adjuncts for self-defence, environmental design),

- Enforcement of laws to reduce illegal carrying and/or use of firearms (e.g. right-to-carry laws, enhancing sentences, problem-oriented policing),
- Decreasing the supply of firearms (e.g. sale regulations, buyback programs, restrictive licensing, background checks).

***Application of the American knowledge to the Middle-European Environment:
Two Urgent Issues***

To compare the research of gun-related violence in the United States of America described above, we should further focus on the European approach outcomes. Fortunately, we have not yet observed the phenomenon of armed youth gangs in Middle Europe, nor do we predict it to emerge in the near future. Although the latest police and secret service analyses indicate increases in the popularity of left-wing and right-wing extremist groups among teenagers, law enforcement and preventive strategies have been enhanced to repress their influence over vulnerable teenagers (MISR, 2006). For those already operating at the lowest ranks of radical organizations, it is unlikely that they are able to obtain access to larger amounts of firearms and ammunition and potentially engage in open combats between hostile groups. Occurrence of the described behaviour is also unexpected within different crime-types oriented juvenile gangs (such as organized car thieves, street robbers, etc.).³

Although the positive effects of gun control in the Middle-European countries are reflected in the very low level of youth gun violence, some urgent issues worthy of the attention of policy-makers, and experts in security and policing, and developmental prevention, have emerged. Firstly, the potential threat of random killing/shooting sprees especially in educational facilities. Secondly, the alarming boost of easily accessible dangerous content on the Internet related to hazardous materials and explosives. The following subsections describe and explore each of these issues, particularly in relation to the Middle-European context.

³ The stated implications are derived from the police reports and strategies, and based on the author's experiences from field and inquiries addressed to the police authorities in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Phenomenon of School Shootings

The spate of rampage shootings in American schools in the last two decades attracted significant attention of researchers and security experts throughout the country (Reddy et al. 2001; Newman & Fox, 2009). Particular aspects of this rare, but extremely serious (Moore et al., 2003) and traumatizing (Fox and Harding, 2005) type of crime have been observed from different angles; mostly concentrating on the typology of the active shooter (for a definition see Greenberg, 2007), risk assessment (Reddy et al., 2001) and preventive interventions.

McGee and DeBernardo (1999) drew a behavioural profile from the twelve rampage shooters, who targeted their respective schools out of “traditional” gun violence localities. The authors revealed most of shooters were significantly depressed and frustrated from family dysfunction, were negatively perceived by their peers, and had problems with social bonding, although their psychological distress had not been readily apparent prior to the attacks. Other traits, such as academic performance, world-views and preoccupations, were also described, and the authors highlighted occurrences of psychosocial stressors that acted as triggers for the school shootings. Garbarino (1999) also recognizes problems with depression as a common prelude to youths’ lethal crimes. Recent research by Newman and Fox (2009) reveals shift of some features of rampage shootings in this decade. The shooters are older, some of them belong to ethnic minorities and they are typically suffering from developed mental illnesses. However, Vossekuil and colleagues’ (2002) report condemned active shooter’s profiling on the grounds of the diverse features and traits of the school shooting perpetrators they had observed in their research.

For the developmental prevention purposes, risk and protective factors for school shootings would be of the highest concern. Verlinden, Hersen and Thomas (2000) conducted a comprehensive review of nine school shootings, identifying common individual, family, school/peer, societal and environmental, and situational risk factors and attack-related behaviours. They concluded that “risk factors for school shootings appear to differ in a number of ways from the sets of factors associated with other forms of aggressive and violence behavior” (Ibid, p. 47). Similarly, Moore and colleagues (2003) contradict componential relationship between school shootings and other forms of violence, on the basis of their ample research of six rampage shootings in the United States of America. On

the contrary, Garbarino (1999, p. 288) disputes that adolescent offenders from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and middle-class active shooters may have resembling traits:

“[W]hen we look deeply, we can see the fundamental human similarity between the violent boys from the inner-city war zones and the lost boys from “good families” and “good communities”. All violent boys share a common sense of inner crisis, a crisis of shame and emptiness.”

Surely, there might exist differences between these two types of juvenile perpetrators committing crime with firearms, as their social backgrounds vary. We would also anticipate diverse motives and expectations that actually led them to commit crime.⁴ However, the above-mentioned risk and protective factors for gun violence on all levels may provide good guidelines for a developmental perspective on prevention in the early stage of life course of potential juvenile gun offenders. Hence “knowledge about the antecedents, motives, idea development, communications, and planning behaviours of all known perpetrators of targeted school violence” (Reddy et al., 2001, p. 170) must be considered pivotal for successful preventive initiatives, and which should also be based on “a multifaceted, clinical-empirical approach to assessment along with risk communications that are descriptive, categorical, and prescriptive” (Verlinden et al., 2000, p. 49).

As already mentioned, the preventive strategies have to embrace all youth social institutions. Regarding school shootings, Fox and Harding (2005) argue that, as the offenders’ rage against educational institutions and potential risks had failed to be recognized by school staff despite multiple warning signs, school shootings can be perceived as an instance of organizational deviance. Mere intelligence-led approach to assessing threats on schools (such as the *Safe School Initiative*, Vossekul et al., 2002) does not lead to core solutions of the problem. Findings of such researches suggest some underpinning traits, although their scope is limited to imminent realization of school-based attacks. On the contrary, schools must make efforts to identify and deal with social, emotional and psychological needs of students besides pursuing the academic requirements early enough to steer them away from committing maleficent acts, as they cannot over-rely on the

⁴ Garbarino (1999) noticed that, as school shooters Kinkel and Wurst both had popular and successful older sisters, they might have resorted to lethal crimes as a means to get the attention they had demanded.

parental responsibilities towards children (Fox and Harding, 2005). As a practical measure, for instance, Garbarino (1999) suggests limiting the size of high schools, where marginal students would be more likely to feel integrated and interested in their environment.

The U.S. Secret Service (2002) reports that most of the active shooters in the United States of America had access to firearms prior to preparing and executing rampage shootings. Although children and juveniles under 21 years of age are legally prohibited from accessing handguns without qualified supervision in both the United States of America and the European Union, it may not be an impassable problem for many of them to gain such access. As a matter of fact, guns are much more available to youth in America; many of them are being able to obtain one in a very short period of time (Garbarino, 1999). However, we should not overvalue strict European statutory provisions and lower amount of guns among citizens, as there *are* handguns in our society, especially in residences of police and army members, prosecutors, businessmen etc., which can be stolen by youths. Moreover, as we will see in the second example, restricted access to handguns set forth in European states' legislations, may not automatically prevent the troubled youths from committing deadly assaults in their school or other living environments.

Threat of Homemade Explosives

We have found that the issue of youth's relations with explosives is neglected and unexplored in the literature. Research is usually limited to prevention of fireworks-related injuries (such as Wildome, 1997; Chan et al., 2004) and perception of use of explosives as the collateral means in combat (Elizur & Yishay-Krien, 2009) or gang-related (NGCRC, 2001) attacks. Winters (2008) argues that security experts pay little attention to homemade explosives, although they can cause devastating damage, if used in a terrorist attack. Importantly, a reference to bomb-making was found in the McGee and DeBernardo's (1999) paper among the out-of-school activities of some school rampage shooters. Tonso (2009) mentions use of homemade bombs in the Columbine school shooting.

However, from time to time reports show up in the global media, describing youths' injuries inflicted from the malfunction or misuse of hazardous substances when attempting to construct a bomb. On 6 March 2009, four young men set off two homemade explosive

devices in plastic bottles in the city of Darwin, Australia. Fortunately, the accidents did not cause any injuries or severe damage to property. Nevertheless, the police stated that “the fire service cannot stress enough the stupidity and potential danger caused by doing these acts, [and that] the potential loss of life, injury and property destruction far out weighs any perceived fun the offenders may find in their actions.” (AAP, 2009)

At the present time it is impossible to estimate the volume of occurrence of such behavior within youth, unless a serious accident happens, as there is no available research on the problem. For instance, a member of the Pyrotechnic Service of the Slovak Police Corps has admitted the police have had no sufficient knowledge on how many homemade bombs might have been produced by youth that have not caused any harm. They only assume the number has lowered, as have the reported incidents in the last years. Though this hypothesis is feasible, it has not yet been scientifically validated.

In most Western jurisdictions, production, possession and/or use of explosives constitute a criminal offence, regardless of innocuous intentions. Although only a small proportion of offences is reported and prosecuted (mostly when an accident has already occurred), their potential consequences in loss of life, mutilation, injury and property damage are serious enough for some action to be taken.

Thus, it is a duty of law enforcement and prevention experts from various fields to seek measures for effective interventions, aiming to minimize the threat of causing death or inflicting serious injury to an offender himself or to others. We assume the above-reviewed knowledge on risk and protective factors for youth violent behaviour applicable to the crime of explosives possession to some extent and we suggest bearing it in mind in further research and considered interventions, which shall be able to educate youth in dangers of manipulation with hazardous substances and discourage them from such activities. A clear message from chemistry teachers, pyrotechnic experts and also already-stricken peers willing to cooperate should be delivered to children through school-based educational and preventive programs. Parents should be constantly advised to be aware and become involved in their children’s activities (e.g. through various family-oriented programs and the media).

Conclusion

New challenges in developmental crime prevention coined by significant political and social changes in Middle Europe in the 1990s need to be addressed. We have been experiencing a pervasive growth of youth violence that had never been seen before. Although we do not automatically blame American society for infecting European youth with role-models of aggression and violence, we assume there might exist certain correlations between the negative influences of vicious trends in the United States of America, which are constantly overflowing the media, and the behaviour of the contemporary Middle-European youth. We have reviewed literature on the developmental and other approaches to youth violence, paying special attention to gun-related juvenile delinquency. We have further discussed two urgent threats that emerged in the Middle-European societies. Altogether, we have concluded that interventions should have been developed and implemented, incorporating the extensive knowledge of the American criminological researchers and practitioners.

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