

## JUVENILE VIOLENCE AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

### *Trends, Media Attention and Societal Response*

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*This article challenges the view that juvenile violence is rapidly increasing in Western Europe. The studies portraying such an increase are far too reliant on official crime statistics. In countries where alternative data are available, these often present a different picture. It is thus possible that the way violence is viewed in society and the subsequent response to juvenile offending have changed, leading to a deviancy amplification spiral. This hypothesis is examined using results from two Swedish studies, the one on changes in the media treatment of violence, the other on changes in schools' reaction to violence. The concluding discussion highlights the role of the media as actor and arena respectively in the creation of this altered reaction.*

Violent juvenile offending stands out historically as one of, if not the, most prominent of the social problems associated with the field of youth and deviant behaviour (Pearson 1983; Davies and Pearson 1999). As we enter the new millennium, academics, the media, politicians and the public seem for once to be in agreement, that the number of youths committing violent offences is increasing rapidly in Europe (see for example Home Office 1997; Pfeiffer 1998; *Sunday Times* 1998).<sup>1</sup> Opinions as to the causes underlying this increase are divided, depending on the ideological perspective of the individual in question. Some feel that family breakdown is to blame (Smith 1995; Rutter et al. 1998) whilst others instead point to the disintegration of the European welfare state (Young 1999). The present article chooses to ignore the question of cause and instead, using the results from a comprehensive study of juvenile crime as a social problem (Estrada 1999), challenges the validity of the picture of violent juvenile offending in Europe as having undergone a rapid increase over the past two decades.

#### *Juvenile Crime Trends in Post-War Western Europe*

Post-war criminological research into crime trends has been dominated by descriptions of an ever-increasing population of young offenders (see for example Wilson and Herrnstein 1985; Smith 1995). In more recent times, however, an alternative description highlighting a levelling off in this trend during the 1970s has gained currency in some circles (Kyvsgaard 1991; von Hofer 1995; Estrada 1997; Balvig 2000a). Figures 1 and 2 present these two alternatives.

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<sup>1</sup> At the 51st Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology (Toronto 1999) a seminar was arranged (session 378) for a number of prominent criminologists to discuss the steep increase in violent juvenile offending in Europe.

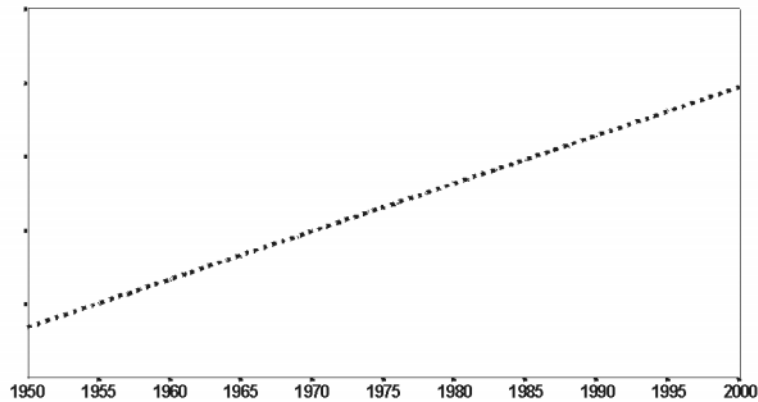


FIG. 1 Alternative 1. Linear increase in juvenile offending 1950–2000

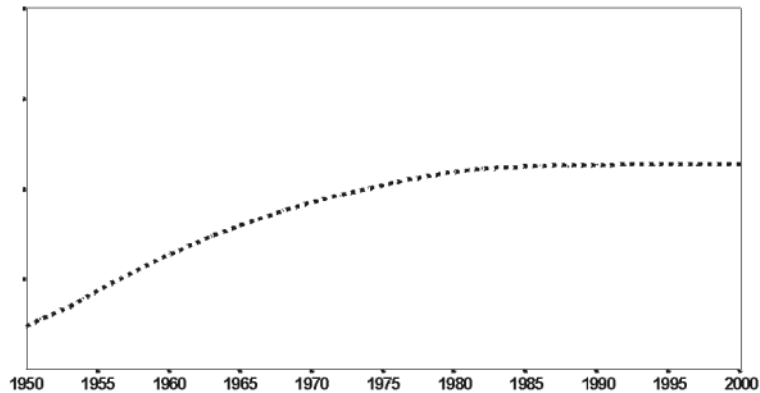


FIG. 2 Alternative 2. Juvenile offending levelling off 1950–2000

A survey of studies produced in ten Western European countries shows that the second alternative is that which best describes the trends in the majority of the countries analysed (Estrada 1997). England and Germany stand out as important exceptions, however. In these two countries, juvenile offending has increased more or less continually during the post-war period (Farrington 1992; Pfeiffer 1998). These results mean that in the majority of Western Europe, the accepted picture of youth as a continually more criminal population does not fit the facts. The same authors who have drawn attention to this levelling off in their analysis of European crime trends (e.g. Junger-Tas 1996; Rutter et al. 1998; Pfeiffer 1998) emphasize that trends in violent offending present a quite different picture:

Since the early to mid-1980s, an increase in youth violence has been apparent in the United States and in ten European countries [including Sweden, my observation] . . . In most of these countries rates of youth violence have been increasing even though youth crime rates overall appear to be stable or declining slightly. (Pfeiffer 1998: 255)

. . . several trends are obvious enough to suggest they reflect a real change . . . many European countries [including Sweden, my observation] reported a small but clear rise in violent offenses (including robbery) over the 1980s and 1990s but decreases in burglary, theft, and criminal damage . . . the evidence does suggest that violence by young people is on the increase. (Rutter et al. 1998: 73)

I have a number of objections to raise in respect of the above descriptions of trends in violent offending arising primarily from my own research into the validity of official crime statistics as an indicator of crime trends in Sweden. What makes the Swedish case interesting for a European audience is the fact that Swedish trends follow the same pattern as those indicated by the crime statistics of other Western European countries (Estrada 1997; Pfeiffer 1998). Questioning the validity of Swedish crime statistics as an indicator of crime trends thus implies a challenge to interpretations based on official statistics in other countries.

*The Development of Juvenile Violence*

Current research into developments in juvenile violence in Europe is often based on the various countries' official crime statistics. The reasons for this are reasonably straightforward in that data of this kind are both easily available, and in many countries constitute the only form of information available. As we know, however, interpretations of crime statistics are far from self-evident (see for example Maguire 1994; Coleman and Moynihan 1996; Taylor 1999). Figure 3 shows that the number of youths convicted of assault increased substantially in Sweden during the twentieth century. The increase is particularly marked from the mid-1980s. But does this mean that the level of violence in Sweden has actually increased in such a dramatic fashion? Crime statistics show that hardly any youths were convicted of assault during the 1920s. This does not mean

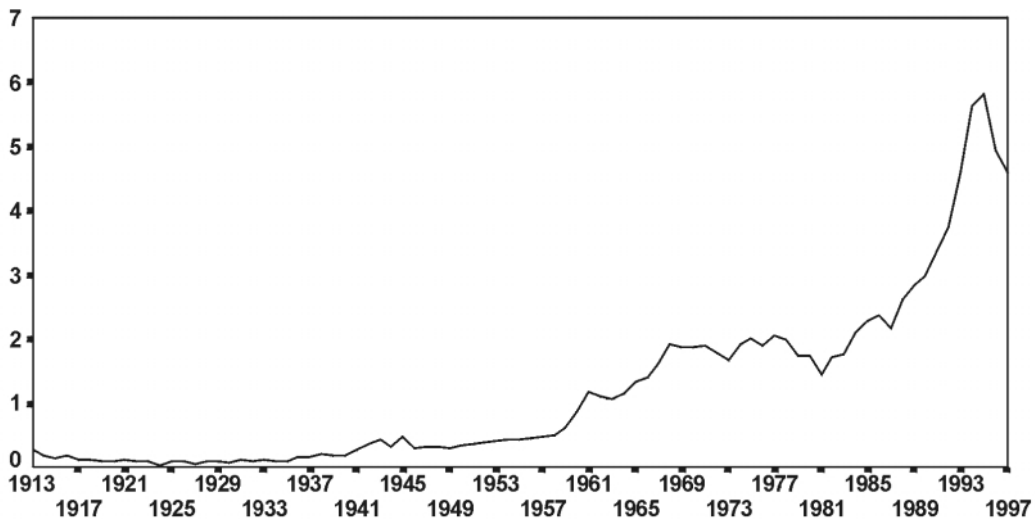


FIG. 3 Assault. Convictions of juveniles (aged 15-17) per 1,000 inhabitants: Sweden, 1913-97

that young people did not commit acts of violence during the 1920s, of course, but rather it suggests that the means of controlling violence have shifted from the informal to the formal arena during the twentieth century (Pearson 1983; von Hofer 1995). Thus crime statistics are sensitive to changes in the view of what constitutes *criminal* violence among youths.

The perspective permeating my work is usually referred to as contextual constructivism, which can be seen as a compromise between objectivism and strict constructivism (Best 1993; Estrada 1999). Unlike objectivism, contextual constructivism does not in the first instance concern itself with exposing the precise extent or evolution of a social problem. Analyses of how social problems are constructed, maintained and legitimized constitute an important part of the research focus of this perspective. This is important since representatives of an objectivist perspective sometimes acknowledge the subjective aspects of social problems without then devoting any research to them. Constructivists on the other hand have sometimes been criticized for focusing purely on the rhetoric and not on what the rhetoric refers to (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985; Young 1994). The difference between contextual and strict constructivism lies therefore in the cultural and social contextualization of the images that surround social problems. Assertions about the nature of reality arise at a specific historical conjuncture; moral entrepreneurs have interests of their own and use rhetoric when they focus attention on a certain situation. This means that the researcher has to take account of the societal context. In concrete terms, this perspective entails an integration of objectivism's emphasis on the actual character of the social problem with the valuable insight made by constructivism that it isn't a problem's objective character that is the only, or even the most important factor in determining its status as a social problem. It is important to note here that the construction of a problem will often have consequences for the indicators that are commonly used to describe the extent of social problems (Kitsuse and Cicourel 1963).

Given this backdrop, it makes sense to look to indicators of trends in violent offending that can be considered less sensitive to changes in the propensity to report such offences. Swedish data from a number of such sources are presented below. It is my contention that a reasonable interpretation of trends in violence is only possible once alternative indicators have been studied. To the extent that corresponding data are unavailable in other European countries, this Swedish material becomes of even greater interest.

### *Trends in Sweden*

#### *Victim and self-report surveys*

Since 1978, Statistics Sweden has carried out a nationwide survey asking a representative sample of 16–24-year olds about their exposure to violence. These victim surveys show an increase in the subjective experience of threats and violence. The level of more concrete episodes of victimization on the other hand, and in particular of more serious violence, has remained more or less stable. A more detailed examination of these victim surveys suggests that juvenile violence increased somewhat from the mid-1980s to then level off again during the 1990s at the level of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The statistics from victim surveys thus do not suggest a linear trend.

Since 1972, self-report surveys on drug use have been carried out in Stockholm among all students in year nine (i.e. 15-year olds). Since 1987, these surveys have also included questions on the students' experiences of violence. These surveys indicate that school-children in Stockholm report neither that more of them have been assaulted, nor that more are carrying out assaults, nor even that they have witnessed more acts of violence during the years 1987–98. A reasonable summary of the results of victim and self-report surveys is thus that they do not show a continual increase but rather that violent acts by youths have remained at a more or less stable level since the end of the 1970s (Fig. 4).

*Hospital and cause of death statistics*

Since the end of the 1960s, Sweden has maintained a register of patients admitted to public hospitals. This patient register contains amongst other things details of the number of persons admitted as a result of assaults. Figure 5 below presents the number of hospital admissions for different age groups.<sup>2</sup> There has been no general increase in the numbers admitted for hospital care as a result of violence. The clear rise in numbers seen during the period 1968–73 is probably most correctly interpreted as indicating the



FIG. 4 Percentage of 16–24 year old males who have been the victims of violence resulting in visible physical injuries, or injuries requiring medical attention respectively: Sweden, 1978–98. Percentage of students (aged 15, both sexes) who have themselves struck someone and feel that the victim required attention from a doctor, nurse or dentist, or who have themselves been struck and needed to seek one of these forms of attention: Stockholm, 1987–98

<sup>2</sup> Hospital admission statistics are presented in such a way that the same person being admitted several times during the same year will be counted once for each admission. The figures for 1997 should be regarded with caution since there has been both a change in the classification system and a drop in the quality of reporting.



FIG. 5 Absolute number of hospital admissions as a result of violence: Sweden, 1968–97

length of the start-up phase for the reporting system. It is interesting to note that the trend is reminiscent of the trend curve indicated by the nationwide victim surveys. The higher levels in the 1990s correspond well with those presented during the second half of the 1970s. Here too, the mid-1980s stand out as a low point. If the trends are studied in more detail, we find that the number of admissions among the youngest juveniles has fallen by 25 per cent during the period 1990–96 as compared with 1975–79. For 15–19-year olds, admissions during the 1990s lie at exactly the same level as they did during the second half of the 1970s, and for the older youths there has been a 5 per cent reduction. A reasonable summary is thus that the number of hospital admissions resulting from violence has remained at a more or less stable level since 1973 for youths aged 10–25 years.

The material from the patient register also allows us to follow the trend in the number of cases where the injury resulted from the use of a weapon. These cases obviously constitute a small proportion of the admittances but can be seen as an indicator of trends in more serious violence. The data indicate a tendency towards a fall in the number of knife wounds between 1973 and 1997, whilst the number of firearm injuries has increased somewhat during the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Taken together the number of violent injuries resulting from stabbings or shootings has not increased during the period studied.

Statistics relating to fatal violence are often seen as the most reliable indicator of the trends in violent offending since few cases will be unreported. Trends in fatal violence can therefore be used as verification for trends in types of violent offence characterized by a somewhat larger dark figure (von Hofer 1995; Doob and Spratt 1998). Since the

<sup>3</sup> The number of knife wounds falls among 15–25-year olds from 1975–79 to 1990–96 from 52 to 44 admittances per annum. The number of firearm injuries increases from 6 to 8 per annum. Among adults, the number of knife wounds drops from 107 to 91, whilst firearm injuries increase from 12 to 19 cases per annum.

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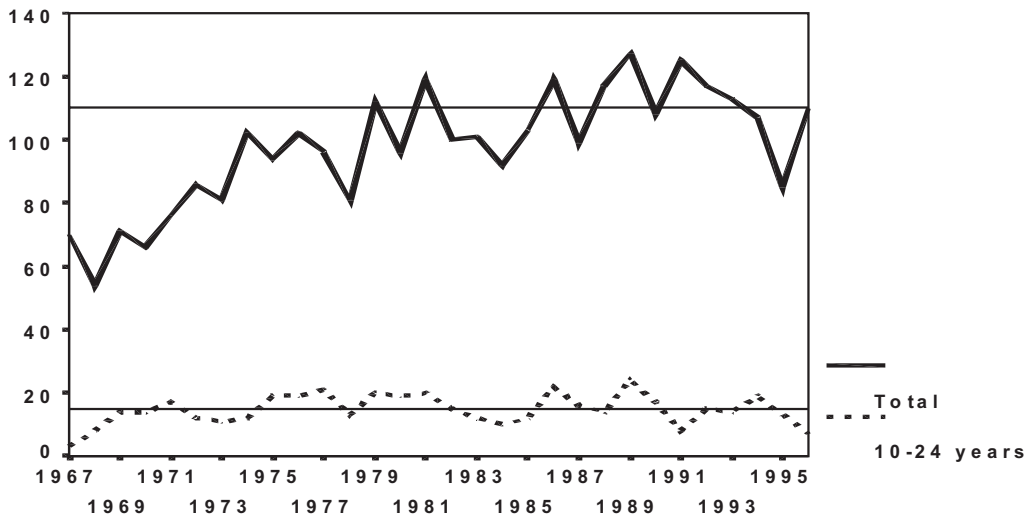


FIG. 6 Number of persons killed as a result of violent crime according to cause of death statistics. Youths (aged 10–24 years, reference line representing 15 deaths) and for the entire population (reference line representing 110 deaths): Sweden, 1967–96 (no data available after 1996)

1970s, violence resulting in death has not increased in terms of either the number of youths who are perpetrators or the number who are victims. This suggests at the very least that any increases in juvenile violence that may have occurred have not affected the levels of the most serious forms of violence.

Viewed together, these alternative indicators present a completely different picture from that given by the crime statistics. To be blunt, there is very little to indicate a substantial increase in Sweden either in the number of youths falling victim to violence, or in the number perpetrating acts of violence on others, apart from crime statistics which are sensitive to changes in the response to violence.

### *The Swedish Case in a European Context*

The comparative research referred to in the introduction has presented Sweden as a country with similar trends in juvenile violence to those of the rest of Europe. What is interesting, of course, is whether this is in fact the case, but in a rather different way from that described in the literature. This is an empirical question that will not be answered in full here. What can be said, however, is that the example provided by Sweden ought to be interpreted as indicating that analyses of trends in violent offending should not be based exclusively on crime statistics. Alternative indicators may provide an important means of confirming the image presented by crime statistics. To the extent that different indicators suggest differences in trends, however, priority ought to be given to those least affected by changes in reporting propensities. As was seen in the presentation of Swedish

trends, such indicators comprise various questionnaire surveys, hospital data and statistics relating to fatal violence.<sup>4</sup>

Viewed in this way, several of the countries whose data on juvenile violence have been interpreted as indicating an increase, present a somewhat less clear picture. In the analyses presented by Pfeiffer (1998) and Rutter et al. (1998: 73) increases in juvenile violence are referred to almost exclusively on the basis of official crime statistics. This is a consequence of the fact that most European countries lack reliable alternative indicators. In this regard, Pfeiffer's study of ten European countries has serious defects; where such alternative data are available, they are either misinterpreted or ignored altogether. Pfeiffer chooses to present the Swedish victim surveys in the following way, for example: 'Representative victim surveys back up the hypothesis that assault offences have increased markedly, especially against young men' (Pfeiffer 1998: 294). Pfeiffer bases his interpretation of the Swedish data on a comparison of the years 1986 and 1995. As has been shown above (Fig. 4) this does not constitute a full picture of the Swedish victim surveys. Unfortunately, Pfeiffer (1998: 287) then makes use of the Swedish material to reject the findings of Danish victim surveys which also show the trend to be stable.<sup>5</sup> Another of the few European countries where alternative indicators of crime trends are available is Holland. Here too, the substantial increase in levels of non-serious violence which are indicated by Dutch crime statistics are not matched by increases in either fatal violence or in the proportion of victim survey respondents saying that they have been threatened (Franke 1994; Junger-Tas 1996). The Dutch victim surveys go so far as to indicate that the number of violent crime experiences have diminished during the 1990s for the population aged 15–24 years (personal communication, Central Bureau of Statistics Netherlands). In addition, Holland administers self-report studies of youths aged 12–18 (Junger-Tas 1996). These studies present a rather divergent impression. In general, the figures for 1988 lie at a lower level than those for 1990–96 (personal communication from Josine Junger-Tas). Between 1990 and 1996 there is a substantial increase in the proportion of youths stating that they have participated in 'riots/fights' (from 6.5 to 14.7 per cent) whilst the proportion who say they have assaulted somebody (between 2.7 and 3.3 per cent) 'injured somebody with arms' and 'made threats for money' respectively (between 0.4 and 1.1 per cent) present no significant trend one way or another. Junger-Tas (1996) has also pointed out that the trends are not easy to interpret.

Again, it is difficult to know to what extent the rise in violent crime is real. Some complicating and interacting factors are a growing sensitivity to, and intolerance of, violence of different kinds . . . My conclusion is that all things considered there probably has been *a moderate increase* in the less serious violent crimes. (Junger-Tas 1996: 55, emphasis added)

<sup>4</sup> As regards fatal violence, it is essential to differentiate between cases where a homicide has been attempted and those actually resulting in death. These categories are combined far too often. The point of using fatal violence as an indicator is its robustness in relation to changes in the way society reacts to violence. Attempted murder is a typical example of an arbitrary categorization sensitive to changes in the perspective on violent acts.

<sup>5</sup> In addition, there are other alternative indicators from Denmark which show a stable trend as compared with that indicated by police data (Kvysgaard 2000). Brink et al. (1997) present an analysis of hospital data for the years 1982, 1988 and 1994. Their results show that juvenile violence has neither increased nor become more serious. What has increased, however, is the reporting propensity for youths (aged 15–19). Fatal violence presents no increase either. Danish self-report studies among 14–15 year old students indicate less violence 1999 than 1979 (Balvig 2000a). Finland and Norway show the same pattern as Sweden and Denmark, i.e. dramatic increases in juvenile violence as reflected in crime statistics, but a more or less stable level as recorded in victim surveys (Estrada 1997; Falck 2000).

In a recent analysis of the development of juvenile violence in Switzerland, Eisner (1998) draws quite similar conclusions. His empirical analyses suggest that the debate on juvenile violence in Swiss society triggered a more intensive registration of juvenile violence in the crime statistics. It is likely that acts of juvenile violence have increased in Switzerland, but to a lesser extent than the official statistics suggest. A more exact assessment is not possible due to the lack of comprehensive data sets. Pfeiffer's contention that 'when longitudinal data are available from victim surveys, they support the inference from police and judicial data that violent crime among young people has been *rising rapidly*' (1998: 298, emphasis added) is quite simply mistaken. Of the ten European countries analysed by Pfeiffer, it is only in England that victim surveys indicate a rapid increase. Thus England, and perhaps also Germany (see Estrada 1997), stand out as the exception with regard to Western European trends in juvenile crime.

Integrating these interpretations of data from alternative sources and crime statistics leads to the following hypothesis regarding youth violence in Europe. Trends in juvenile crime do not constitute the primary explanation for the rapid rise in the number of youths registered by the criminal justice system during the 1990s. This rise is rather the result of a marked shift in the way society reacts to the actions of young people (von Hofer 1995). In recent years, we hypothesize that the attention focused on violent acts carried out by young people has increased. This increase in attention has occurred in parallel with an ideological shift, from treatment to just desert (Tham 1995; Garland 1996; O'Malley 1999), affecting the politics of the social control of youth. Together, these tendencies have led to an increasing propensity to report acts of juvenile violence, which in turn has led to situations exhibiting all the classic characteristics of a deviancy amplification spiral (Hall et al. 1978).

The following is a summary presentation of two Swedish studies testing this hypothesis. The first focuses on the media attention around the issue of juvenile crime during the period 1950–94. The second looks at the concrete effects that changes in reporting propensities can have on the registration of juvenile violence in official crime statistics.

### *Juvenile Violence: The Discovery of a Social Problem*

#### *Media attention 1950–94*

In order to answer the question of whether the current focus on juvenile violence reflects an increase in such violence, or if it is rather that this attention has affected public sensitivity to the issue and thus the propensity to report, a study was made of the attention focused on juvenile crime in the Swedish daily press during the period 1950–94 (Estrada 1999). The study was carried out by means of an analysis of the content of six of Sweden's national daily newspapers. The material shows that the attention focused on juvenile offending in editorials underwent a marked shift (Fig. 7). Until the mid-1960s, articles focusing on theft offences committed by juveniles clearly dominate. From 1970 significantly less is written about juvenile theft, and this type of offending as good as disappears from editorial pages. We also see that during the period from 1950 to 1985 not very much is written about juveniles and violence. This trend is broken abruptly in 1986. Violent offending by young people suddenly becomes the focus for a great deal of attention.

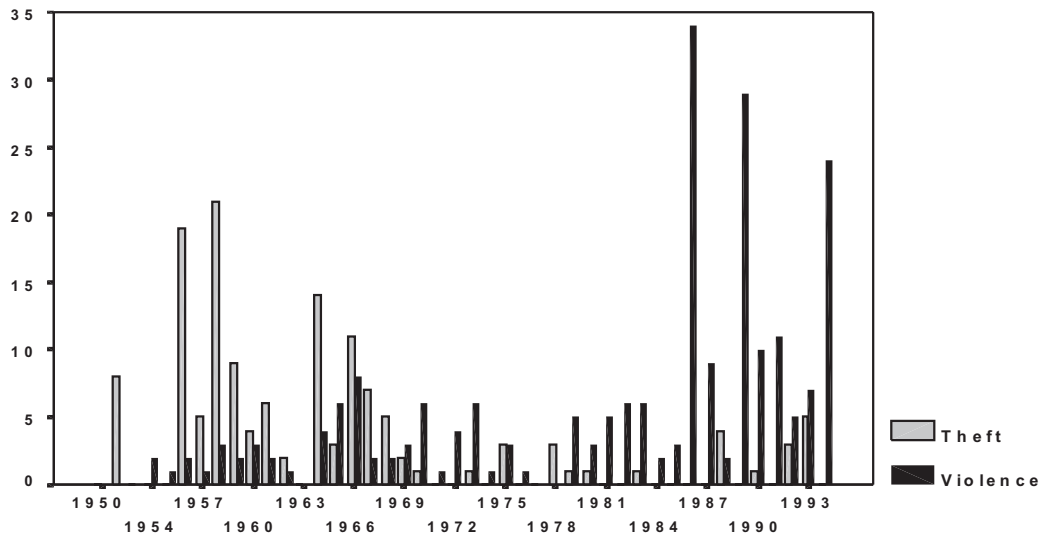


FIG. 7 Editorials on juvenile offending: offending of violence and theft: Sweden, 1950–94

Since the mid-1980s, the issue of juvenile crime in Sweden has primarily revolved around the question of violent offending (see also Åkerström 1998).

A closer examination of what was written about juvenile violence prior to, during and after the issue's sudden breakthrough in 1986 indicates marked qualitative changes in the attention focused on this violence. The articles dealing with juvenile violence between 1980 and 1985 often address the issue of the sentences passed on youths convicted of serious violent offences. These acts are not referred to as an indication of increases in the level or seriousness of juvenile offending. The young offender is portrayed as a problem child with a difficult family background.

In the summer of 1986, the vast majority of articles describe violence as more serious and/or on the increase. A new image is presented of the young perpetrator. He is portrayed as polite, emotionally cold and unpredictable. He assaults others for kicks. The social factors are pushed into the background. Over the following years, 1987–92, explicit references to increasing violence are less frequent. The pattern displayed by the trends is less important since juvenile violence is already an established part of the agenda. The image of the juvenile offender is that of a calculating 'super-predator', a hardened young delinquent whom society needs to protect itself against. It is inevitably more difficult to show understanding for youths who to an ever increasing degree 'choose' to commit offences rather than being 'compelled' to do so by other factors, and it consequently becomes easier to profess outrage. Is it really likely that the character of juvenile offending in the summer of 1986 differed so greatly from that of the period before and after? If not, then there are good grounds to contend that a new image of juvenile offending was constructed in Sweden during the summer of 1986. As we know, crime statistics are sensitive to such changes. The analysis of the attention focused on juvenile offending by the daily press concludes therefore that the mid-1980s represent a

critical point in Sweden with regard to changes in the view of what constitutes a 'reportable' act of violence (see also Åkerström 1998). The next study illustrates the effects that such a shift in reaction can have on official crime statistics.

*Violence in Schools: Societal Response and Crime Trends*

In order to illustrate how important the societal reaction to juvenile violence can be, the reaction of Swedish schools to problems of violence and disorder has been studied during the period 1980–97 (Estrada 1999). The study was carried out in two stages. The first stage deals with the question of the ways in which attention has been focused on problems of violence and disorder in schools during the period of the study. One question of particular interest was whether there had been a shift in opinions regarding the way such problems should be dealt with. This was studied by means of an analysis of the content of a professional journal for school employees. In the second stage, a sample (every second) of police offence reports relating to assaults on individuals aged 7–14 were examined. The analysis of these reports provides the basis for a description of changes in reporting practices and in the seriousness of the incidents reported.

*Responses to violence in schools*

During the period 1980–97, there are no qualitative changes in the portrayal of disciplinary problems in schools. At least since 1980, the professional journal for school employees *Skolvärlden* (*School World*), has conveyed an image of schools as characterized by extensive violence, harassment and vandalism, with teachers wanting to quit as a result. Over the years between 1980 and 1997, three distinct periods stand out where violence in schools has received more attention than usual. In two of these instances, the increased attention is associated with a school-related murder (1980 and 1995), whilst the third relates to a wave of attention focusing on juvenile violence in general and the question of the teacher's right to intervene in conflict situations in particular (during the years 1986–90). This suggests that the focus of attention on school violence is reactive, i.e. such problems are taken up only after extreme events have occurred or when the issue has become identified as a social problem in other arenas. Coupled with the fact that very few editorials in the *School World* take up this particular problem, the reactivity suggests that violence in schools is not seen as a central concern by those working in Swedish schools on a daily basis.

Finally there is evidence of a change in the way acts of violence in school are viewed and in attitudes toward the kind of responses such acts should be met with. During the first half of the 1980s, a fairly clear line is drawn between more and less serious forms of physical violence. Less serious incidents would in general not be reported to the police, but would rather be dealt with internally by the school. During the second half of the decade, on the other hand, there is already evidence of a tendency to advocate contacting the police even in the event of less serious forms of disorder. During the 1990s, this tendency becomes more pronounced. It is almost unanimously argued that the school itself should no longer decide what in fact constitutes a less serious offence, but should rather leave this judgment to the police. Two statements, the first from the

then solicitor-in-chief at the schools authority, and the second from the current holder of the post, serve to illustrate this point.

There is no general requirement to report an offence that has already been committed to the police . . . The schools authority does not recommend making a report to the police as a matter of course in such a situation . . . It is better for the matter to be cleared up on a more personal basis in the school, if this is possible—the school after all bears a heavy responsibility for the pupils. (Frank Nordberg 1990)

When something happens, it should be reported at once. One should not first decide whether or not it constitutes an offence. That is a matter for the police. (Göte Appelberg 1998)

All things considered, the analysis of the *School World* indicates that responses to problems of violence and disorder in school underwent a transformation at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s.

### *The analysis of assault reports*

The second stage of the study shows that the number of cases of school violence reported to the police has increased substantially since the 1980s, and in particular since 1993 (+300 per cent). The significance of this fact for the analysis of the police reports is that the description of changes should not in the first instance focus on differences in numbers, since *we already know that the number of reported incidents has increased dramatically*, but rather on *relative changes in the type of offences reported*. An obvious starting point would thus be a comparison of the types of offences reported prior to the increase in the number of reports of violent offences with those reported after this increase. Changes that might be explained by a shift in reporting propensities are of particular interest. The analysis of the police reports indicates that the explanation for the increase lies primarily in an increased reporting propensity. Significant changes have taken place in reporting routines (Table 1).

From being the notifier in less than a third of recorded incidents, schools came to be responsible for half such reports. The increase in the number of incidents reported by schools accounts for more than 80 per cent of the increase in recorded cases. During the 1990s there are incidents where the report is made to the police against the express wishes of the putative victim. It is not unusual in such cases for the individual listed as the offender to counter by bringing similar charges against the other party. Another scenario with no counterpart during the 1980s is where the school reports both parties to a fight as suspected offenders and victims respectively. This fight is then counted as two incidents in the crime statistics. During the 1990s an increasing number of violent incidents were reported by phone or fax using a standard report form. School representatives no longer had to waste time visiting a police station during the latter part of the 1990s. It is likely that this change has made it easier to report incidents. It is also clearly evident that the increase in reporting is not evenly distributed across the different categories of seriousness. During the 1980s it was very unusual for schools in Stockholm to report students for assault. A large proportion of the assaults reported during the 1990s relates to fights where the injuries are no more excessive than a few bruises requiring no medical attention. The increase in reporting tends to be less marked as the assault becomes more serious. The dramatic increase in the level of reported violence in schools is thus largely explained by increases in the number of reports of

TABLE 1 *Violence in schools. Assaults on 7–14 year olds reported to the police. A sample of variables: Stockholm, 1981–97 (%)*

	1981–92	1993–7	Proportion of increase
Notifier			
Reported by victim or family	67	39	17
Reported by school	29	60	83
Method of notification			
Reported via visit to police station	67	39	21
Police called at school	19	9	2
Reported by phone, fax, other	14	51	77
Seriousness of assault			
Non-serious violence; violence leading to bruising, not requiring medical attention	33	49	61
Assault; violence leading to bleeding or requiring medical attention	46	41	37
Serious violence; violence leading to serious injury or emergency medical attention	21	10	2
Number of incidents	80–98	194–230	

$p < .01$  (for each variable). Variations in the number of incidents are due to missing data for the respective variables.

minor assaults.<sup>6</sup> During the 1980s there wasn't a single case of a school reporting an offence which would be judged as minor, using the criteria employed in the study. During the 1990s, the number of minor offences reported by schools exceeds the total number of reports made during the 1980s.

The combined results from these two studies thus support the hypothesis formulated earlier. In *Sweden* there has clearly been a shift in the way society responds to youths committing acts of violence. This shift has found expression both in the increase in media attention focused on violent offending by juveniles and in a steep increase in the level of reporting of acts of violence committed by children and youths. It would be valuable to find out to what extent the situation in other countries is similar. As has been indicated above, it is likely that a change in the forms of response could be found in other countries than Sweden. Finally, it is important to pose the difficult question of how this shift in response might be understood. I will limit myself here to a discussion of the role of the media.

#### *The Media Politics of Juvenile Violence*

Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972) coined the concept of the moral panic, which has since had an enormous impact on research into the responses to deviant behaviour. Today the criminological literature contains any number of examples of situations being analysed using the moral panics concept. In Sweden, the murder of

<sup>6</sup> This contradicts Pfeiffer's (1998: 271) contention that 'it was primarily severe assaults [in Sweden, my observation] that led to increased criminal prosecutions and, accordingly, to the steep rise in juvenile convictions for such offenses'.

Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986 has been seen as one reason for the increase in sensitivity to violence. Can the emergence of a moral panic around the issue of juvenile violence serve as an explanation for the shift in response?

There are a number of factors which suggest that this may be the case. Several of the characteristics described by Cohen fit the pattern of the emergent attention focused on juvenile violence in Sweden. This wave of attention blew up suddenly and the media presented an emotionally charged image for the public and the authorities to react to. At the same time though, an explanation of this kind does present certain problems. As was shown above, several countries in Europe have noted a similar dramatic increase in the number of youths being registered in connection with violent offences, and increases in the level of attention/sensitivity focusing on this issue. This suggests that a moral panic at the national level, triggered, for example, by the murder of Olof Palme, would not constitute an adequate explanation. In addition, there is an obvious problem with the concept itself; namely the question of specifying what is to be considered an over-reaction or panic (Åkerström 1998). It is above all on this point that the concept's explanatory value becomes problematical. At what point does the attention focused on the issue reach the proportions necessary to be considered a moral panic?<sup>7</sup> This hesitancy regarding the moral panics concept does not however mean that 'real' crime trends are to be regarded as an adequate explanation of societal responses. It is very likely that *perceptions* as to the character of 'real' crime trends are more important (Beckett 1997). If the message conveyed portrays juvenile crime as on the increase, and juvenile violence as becoming increasingly serious, then this becomes the 'reality' requiring some kind of response.

Over the last ten years, the theme of 'rising juvenile violence' has become widely pervasive in general social discourse around Europe. From a social constructivist perspective, one explanation might therefore be that the greater focus on juvenile violence in the public in general is perceived as a reflection of the real underlying trend. It is then of less importance whether or not the actual trend takes the form ascribed to it. When criminologists find it so difficult to arrive at a consistent interpretation of underlying trends, it is difficult to demand that the public have a 'correct' perception of the bigger picture. In this way, the (more or less erroneous) portrayal of juvenile crime as continually on the increase in fact comes to be seen as reflecting reality. In all essentials, responses will then be the same as if they were guided by real increases in the level of juvenile violence. This does not however mean that the constructed images of juvenile crime ought to be perceived as objective descriptions of reality, but rather as images with ideological content. In today's society, the mass media have a key position

<sup>7</sup> Waddington (1986) takes up this problem in a much-cited article. His starting point is the modern classic *Policing the Crisis* by Hall et al. (1978). Waddington argues that there was in fact good reason for concern and action in 1972–73. Thus for Waddington, the fundamental criterion for labelling a response as a moral panic—a lack of proportionality—was not in fact present. Waddington goes on to contend that all that remains once this criterion is removed, is an unmeasurable and highly emotive concept. Waddington's criticism concerning the description of crime trends is legitimate. Contending that the response is 'at odds with the scale of the threat' (Hall et al. 1978: 17) is problematic. At the same time though I feel that Waddington's criticisms are in some ways a little wide of the mark since the moral panic concept is not essential to the objectives outlined by Hall et al. Waddington's description of linear crime trends does not explain why 'mugging' was suddenly perceived as a social problem at a particular point in time. In addition, Hall et al. were prepared for the type of criticism levelled at them by Waddington: 'No doubt someone will shortly write the book telling us exactly how many "muggings" were perpetrated, who were the victims and whom the aggressors. Our account attempts, not to shore up a shaky set of starting propositions, but to interrogate the matter from its most problematic side. Why does society react to "mugging" as it does, when it does? To what, exactly, is this a reaction?' (Hall et al. 1978: 183).

with regard to the images of reality that are conveyed to the public. Media research has indicated that as a result of their obvious news value, crime reports have long been an important constituent in news reporting. One thing that has changed of course is the sheer size of the flow of news in the media. We are now able to follow police as they work to catch criminals more or less live from the safety of our living rooms, something which has involved both a quantitative and a qualitative shift in the attention focused on crime (Sparks 1992). All this suggests that part of any explanation ought to be sought at the level of the media itself viewed as an actor.

At the same time it is clear that the content of the media's news reporting cannot be separated from the surrounding society, i.e. the media also constitute an *arena*. As was shown above, the attention focused on juvenile violence in the Swedish media increased in the mid-1980s, and descriptions of juvenile offending altered in character, becoming less understanding and more punitive. The juvenile offender has gone from being perceived as a victim of a poor upbringing and a difficult environment, to being a 'super-predator' who assaults other people out of choice. This last change is one whose explanation, just as Hall et al. (1978) and Pearson (1983), commendably showed, probably ought to be sought outside the mass media. In this area, researchers such as Tham (1995), Garland (1996), Beckett (1997), O'Malley (1999), Young (1999) and Balvig (2000b) have set in motion a stimulating discussion which once again emphasizes the central role played by ideology in focusing attention on 'rising crime' whilst at the same time also drawing attention to the importance of the socio-economic changes taking place in Western societies at the start of a new century. This question is an important one and ought to occupy an important place in future research into juvenile violence.

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