

# Juvenile delinquency: evolution and lessons for prevention

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Thank you very much for this invitation, it is an honour for me to introduce your conference. I will speak only about the French situation, the only one I think I know a little, but with the conviction that many problems and many ways of thinking those problems present some similarities in various European countries.

Nowadays, let me say that a kind of univocal thought and political correctness (“pensée unique” in French) has succeeded in dominate our minds, especially in some political discourses and media representations. According to this univocal thought, (and I’m not speaking, we put “quotation marks” on each sentence I’m going to take in example):

- “juvenile delinquent are more and more young and more and more violent”
- “they now don’t have any more moral structures or values”
- “they used to be only boys, now they are also girls”
- “they used to appear only in large cities, now they appear also in small towns and in the campaign”

This is for the so-call diagnosis, let see now the so-call explanations:

- “their parents had given up, renounce to their educational responsibility”
- “teachers at school don’t do their job anymore and don’t transmit the values” “
- “we used to do prevention since thirty years but it doesn’t work”
- “youth justice is lax or overliberal”

And so the conclusion is “we have to change all we used to think, we have to return to order and to a stronger institutional control of juvenile delinquency”, that’s mean “we have to vote new acts, to employ new policemen, to oblige the judges to give more harder sentences and, at last, to build new prisons”.

What is, ladies and gentlemen, the deep meaning of this discourse? I have to say that, in fact, it seems to me as the good all “street corner café” discourse, saying that everything is worse

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day after day, that it was so different “when we where young” and that we are losing everything in our strange post-modernity.

And I think we can do better. As professionals I think you *must* do better. This is moralization, this is not an analysis. And, if the moralization cam certainly help to wine an election or to have great “score” of “audience” for a TV channel, it don’t help to build a good diagnosis, so it cannot help to face together the true problems and to find not miraculous solutions (they don’t exist), but good plans to work for the present and for the future.

### **1) What are the evolutions of juvenile delinquency since the 1970’?**

Juvenile delinquency is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. One cannot seriously say that there is something call juvenile delinquency and say that it increase or decrease, yes or no. A theft of car is a theft of car, it is not a theft of a DVD in a music’ shop, it is not a Tag, it is not an insult, it is not a assault in school recreation areas, it is not a rape, it is not a murder. And there are different sorts of murder, different sorts of rape, etcetera. We cannot here enter in too many details, but, once again, it is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon.

Then, to try to measure an evolution through time, we have to use three very different sorts of data: administrative statistics (police and justice statistics), victimization surveys, self-reported delinquency surveys. Those statistics speak about very different points of view, both true. Police statistics is not a “statistic of delinquency” as it is used to say in the public debate. It is the result of police procedures for the small part of delinquency elucidated by the police and passed on to Justice. Victimization surveys are very more nearby to the reality but they don’t say anything about authors. Last bur not least, self-reported delinquency surveys are very important, they show the large part of juvenile delinquency that is not treated by the penal institutions and they show many filters and some discriminations from the police but not only from the police.

Trying to set out a short synthesis, I will distinguish three different sorts of delinquencies:

#### ***1) thefts and attacks on goods.***

In the 1960’, thefts and all attacks on goods was represented 75 % of juvenile delinquency. This proportion has decreased but those delinquencies are still the majority. And there is here a strong link between delinquency and the consumer society. Cars and scooters are still often robbed, sometimes just for the fun or as a “loan” (for an evening or a night). Young people are still doing many thefts in shops and supermarkets, despite the very strong development of

private security (and girls are still robbed first make-up tools). Then, juvenile delinquency is first and above all the fact that some young people (essentially boys) rob some others young people, and rob the consumer goods they all desire: music walkmans, mobile phones, I-pod, MP 3, etc.

***2) violence and all attacks on persons.***

This is one of the great fears of contemporary France. And we must distinguish here at least three things. First, homicide is not increasing, it is perfectly stable over the three last decades. Second, in police and justice statistics, the strong elevation of criminal cases is due only to rapes, to sexual violence, that mainly happen not in the street but into families. But we can do the same report about adults of any ages. So, in fact, the question here is: how to interpret this phenomenon? Is it a new violence? For us, I mean for social scientist, the answer is no: sexual violence is not new but her denunciation is. Our societies are leaving a great transformation on the status of violence. More about this in one minute. The rest is less important but very more frequent physical violence, all those assaults and batteries that happened mainly between boys and mainly between boys that know well (sometimes very well) each others because they leave in the same district or go to the same school. Surveys on Self-reported delinquency show that this classical violence is still important for adolescents.

***3) Problems of public order (drug, vandalism, violence against the institutions).***

Probably the most important evolution in France since 30 years is the development of problems of public order and violence against the institutions. The question of vandalism is very old but still strongly actual. The question of drug has reappeared in the 1980'. In fact, drugs came back in French society by the way of underground movements and the hippy movement, that's mean from youth who belong mainly to middle and upper classes. But in the 1980', drugs arrived massively in young people from popular classes, first as consumptions then as traffics. And today, in the context of a massive unemployment rate for young people from popular classes and without school gratifications, the small traffic ("business") is the way of survival in everyday life. Last, since the end of the 1970, and strongly since 1990-1991, a new question became more and more important from the public order point of view: the question of violence against the institutions, the question of the everyday relationships between young people from popular or ghettoized neighbourhoods and the police, and finally the question of riots. For the French governments, since fifteen years, this is in fact the main preoccupation.

Finally, and I will conclude that point on this idea, if we put together those three questions: theft, violence and ghettoization, we can say that, for the State the main problem is public order (both in everyday life and during the always intensive but short times of riots), but for citizens in everyday life, the main problem is thefts and especially violent thefts that happened when the victim resist do the theft. This is an unknown evidence from researches: in large suburbs like Paris area, half of the violence of every sorts denounced by victims are in fact violent theft or attempt to. And this also a social problem as we can see that the majority of victims came from middle and upper classes, like the majority of the authors came ghettoized neighbourhoods.

## **2) What is the more increasing: youth violence or/and the intolerance of society against youth disorders?**

It has become impossible do separate the two questions. From a sociological point of view, the main changes over the last three decades are not youth behaviours but the way our societies react to those behaviours. In fact, two very important societal evolutions are more and more transforming the question of crime and delinquency.

The first is the transformation of violence status. We have the feeling that violence is increasing more and more day after day, and it is clear that the media and the political discourses strongly participate to this feeling. But the truth is that, in fact, all the statistical indicators we have show that violent behaviours are stable over the three last decades. So the feeling is not the direct translation of reality, this is not true. So, how to explain this gap?

This central point must be stressed: a pacifying process is working in our societies and its primary consequence is the stigmatization, and the delegitimization of violence. Whence a paradox, but only an apparent one: the general impression that violent behaviour is increasing may very well go along with a trend toward more denunciation, but also with stagnation, or even a drop in their actual frequency. In fact, our society no longer tolerates violence, no longer considers it legitimate or meaningful. Our threshold of tolerance is lower and lower, the outcome being that *the status of this behaviour changes*. What was previously regarded as “normal” or “exaggerated but acceptable” becomes abnormal and intolerable. What was a “private affair” becomes a public affair. Public eyes probe places formerly subjected to the discretionary power of a head: father, teacher, vacation camp monitor, supervisor of the schoolyard, and so on. The result is that interpersonal violence that is not new is denounced; it has a new status. This is massively true of sexual violence and various forms of harassment (including the most ritualized, or even institutionalized forms such as hazing freshmen). And

this is enlarging progressively to every sorts of physical violence, and even now to verbal violence: insults and attempts to the dignity.

The second major transformation of our societies that change our perception of violence is a process of “judicialisation”. We are leaving in more and more anonymous societies, in buildings and districts where we don’t know our neighbours. We take our cars where we are alone, or we take bus, trams and metros where we don’t speak to anybody. We belong to this “lonely crowd” as said David Riesman half a century ago. So, when an incident happen, when someone aggress you, when someone try to rob you, there is no more community to react, to help you because she recognize you as one of his member. We are alone. And if we cannot dominate the situation, we don’t have any other choice than to call the police, to go on justice. And, in France, this problem is so hard, that it concern also teachers or educators.

Many disorders of the youth are not new, what is new is the fact that we (parents, teachers, educators, etc.) are so helpless to face those le disorders.

The consequences of those two processes is another process, a process of criminalization, the fact that an incredible accumulation of acts came since the beginning of the 1990, to develop in fact a kind of “zero tolerance” trend of thought with the idea that any juvenile disorder must have a judicial answer. So, I will say that the all society is engaged in a process of delegation to the institutions for answering to all the little conflicts of social life that was, by the past, taken in charge in others ways.

### **3) What is new about the genesis of juvenile delinquent's behaviours? (family, school, peers, etc.)**

To simplify a complex reality, let say there are three sorts of juvenile delinquency that we must be able to distinguish if we want to determine appropriate prevention policies:

- A “pathological” delinquency: family very serious troubles, frequent hard alcoholism, sometimes hard drug addictions, family violence (physical and/or psychological), grave neglected children, etc. A few young people are concerned, but they have serious problem, they have early problems and early deviancies and they can take a part in serious offences alone or in adolescent groups.

- An “initiator” delinquency: who had never fight at school with other boys to see “who his a true man”? Never still anything in a shop? Never cheat in collective transportations? In French self-reported delinquency surveys, 75 % of the adolescent say they have already committed a fraud, 20 to 50 % (depend of the frequency) already used drugs, around 30 % already stolen something or bought stolen goods, around 25 % participated to a fight, around

20 % committed a degradation. It is not “politically correct” (again...) to say that but, to a certain point, this is normal and it is a non sense to pretend that our objective must be to see all this disappear. I think we have to control, to limit, to supervise, to watch how young become adult, but not to call for the definitive end of some deviancies that represent in a way a normal part, a normal stage, of adolescence.

- A “socially disadvantaged” delinquency (or the delinquency of the ghetto). This concerns boys (mainly, again) who don’t have necessarily big family problems. The most frequent factors in their delinquent trajectories, is school failure. They turn to delinquency from adolescence with a strong link with their school situation and the difficulties of their parents to face this situation (that’s means it is needless to accuse them and to prosecute them, we would better think “how to help them to consolidate their parental capacities and their parental legitimacy”). Sometimes, if we don’t prevent this situation, they can join a gang and turn to a true delinquent career more or less long.

#### **4) What principles can we deduce from this to think local prevention?**

Again in a very short synthesis, I will suggest four directions for prevention:

- Prevention on family great disorders (violence, sexual or even just psychological violence, between the parents or also on children) and child in danger for important lacks of education and health.
- Prevention on school failure: a true and major problem that is dramatically not treated like this in France. School failure begin from the start of educational system, at elementary school, it concerns the acquisition of reading, writing, calculation.
- Human control, supervision and mediation of child and adolescents groups (human, not technical control: please, don’t keep up with the fashion of video surveillance that don’t prevent anything and cost a lot), at school, in collective transportation, in leisure areas, at evening, at night sometimes, etc.
- Professional integration. It is still a key, to prevent both enter in and exit from delinquency. The job and the money from the job are still two crucial factors for the youth. Without a job and the money from the job, one cannot leave his parent’s house and cannot think to found his own family. This is the key of the adulthood process. What is the ordinary dream of every young man nowadays? To have a good job, a nice wife, a apartment, a car, a TV and some sweet holidays during summer! Many big problems happen and will happen in the future of we continue to have, like in France nowadays, hundred of thousands adolescents and young adults thinking that they will never reach this “normal life”.