



VIOLENCE AT GERMAN SCHOOLS

FINDINGS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a summary description of findings regarding school violence in Germany. After a discussion of key concepts underlying in this line of research and a discussion of the methods used to measure school violence in Germany, a review of the prevalence of school violence in Germany since the early 1990s is given. Differences by gender, age groups and school types are reported. In addition, we summarize correlates, causes and theoretical explanations for school violence in Germany. Here, individual level as well as contextual explanations and correlates are considered. Also, we provide a short overview of intervention and prevention programs utilized in Germany. Finally, we discuss shortcomings und future challenges of the research on school violence.

KEY WORDS

School violence; prevalence; methodology; explanation; prevention; Germany.

ORIGINS OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

The current line of research on violence at schools initiated in the early 1990s after an expertise mandated by the German federal government on violence in society stated that the knowledge regarding violence at schools – among other facets – was rather unsatisfactory (Schwind et al. 1990). Also, several intensively violent incidences at German schools, that caught the attention of the media, and which raised questions from the general public as well as from the regional ministries of education on the extent of violence at German schools, contributed to increased research activities in this field (Schubarth 1999).

Nevertheless, the evolving discussion on violence at schools in the early 1990s has not been new. Since the 1970s several studies have focused on school violence in single municipalities or individual schools (e.g. Brusten & Hurrelmann 1973; Fend et al. 1975; Holtappels 1983) and on certain facets of violence, especially vandalism (e.g., Klockhaus & Habermann-Morbey 1986; Klockhaus & Trapp-Michel 1988). Prior to this phase of research, the problem has rather been addressed in the context of school discipline problems. Since the 1970s, the focus on pupils as violent perpetrators has characterized the research on violence at schools. While in other countries primary and secondary school students have been addressed as victims of school violence, in the German context they were predominantly seen as offenders. This specific focus has consequences for the selection of the theoretical models used. Today, most theoretical reasoning is taken from the literature on juvenile delinquency and criminology (see section 3 for details).

The scientific discussion on violence at schools is not directly connected to the assessment of discipline problems during class hours or to school achievement research and also only loosely related to indicators on the students' health. So far, the majority of the studies assess violence at schools as youth-specific delinquent behavior which breaches general societal rules. Thus, school violence has been addressed as a serious social problem because if juvenile delinquency would penetrate key socialization institutions, like schools, it would endanger the continuance of basic societal norms and values. Also, the general public has feared that students who were raised in a violent school setting would adopt violent patterns and behaviors for future live.

DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS OF VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

Even though, the various scientific enterprises and public discourses on this topic make use of similar terminology (“violence at schools”), it should be pointed out, that violence at schools is a heterogeneous phenomenon in the German discussion (Nunner-Winkler 2004). The research topics cover a wide range of behaviors: from intentional physical attacks including the use of weapons (Funk 1995; Fuchs, 1995), gang violence (Fuchs 1995a; 1 Wetzstein et al., 2003) and sexual assaults to less serious behaviors like beating and slapping, to relatively harmless kicks and puffs (Tillmann et al. 1999; Fuchs et al., 1996, 2001, 2008). In addition to physical violence against fellow students, various types of damage to property and vandalism at school as well as verbal aggression and other non-physical types of aggression are included in respective studies, like harassment, coercion, and mobbing. The focus of the existing literature is predominantly on lighter forms of penologic behaviors as well as on behaviors below the threshold of the criminal law. Some studies make use of a definition by Lösel and colleagues (1999), others rely the bullying concept (Olweus, 2004); however, the majority of the studies have developed their own definitions and concepts. In part, this heterogeneity strengthens the validity of the findings: Even when using a multiplicity of concepts and instruments most studies report similar low levels of violence in German schools (indicating that these finding are not bound to the specifics of a particular study). In addition to the lack of a common concept and definition of violence at schools, there is no consensus regarding the definition of high intensity perpetrators who are responsible for most of the violent incidence in German schools (see also Krumm 1997). However, in order to allow comparisons across states, regions and points in time a universal concept of violence in schools seems desirable (see also section 8 of this paper).

Most studies focus on violence conducted inside the school limits; only a few include violent student behaviors on the way to school or at other places outside schools (2Wetzels et al. 2000). Most definitions of school violence share the common component according to which violence leads to a physical or psychological harm or damage in a victim or object. The proper delineation of the physical or psychological damage is a key challenge for researchers interested in the incidence and prevalence of violence in schools. While a narrow concept of violence (e. g. with a focus on physical violence against fellow students) amplifies the risk that other serious violent phenomenon are excluded and neglected, a wider concept (e. g. one that includes psychological

harm, verbal aggression and damage to property as well) implies the danger of a catch-all concept that comprises almost every youth-specific behavior with little specificity. Accordingly, some studies have overestimated the prevalence of violence because of a wide definition of the concept, while others who restrict their narrow concept to physical violence have neglected several violent behaviors which in turn lead to lower prevalence rates.

School bullying (Schuster 1999; Scheithauer et al. 2003; Schäfer & Albrecht 2004) and other terminologies (which imply alternative theoretical concepts) have been used as well, however, predominantly in psychological research on violence in schools. In addition, a few projects and publications have adopted alternative perspectives. E.g., the German HBSC project (Becker 2002) has included several items on violence at schools and has linked the results of health indicators. Also the PISA study (Kunter et al. 2002) as well as the IGLU Study (Valitin et al. 2005) have included an item battery on violence at schools. However, both studies were predominantly designed as an assessment of competencies and thus, have reserved only small portions of the questionnaire for violence at schools. In sum, the majority of the projects on school violence in Germany has adopted a rather extensive understanding of violence at schools and has focused on this phenomenon as a variety of juvenile delinquency.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS AND DISCIPLINES CONTRIBUTING TO THE RESEARCH

In the early phase of the current line of research since the early 1990s, most studies were concerned with the extent of violence at schools in order to complement the media flurry with empirical data on the prevalence and incidence of violence at schools. As a consequence, some of the early studies lacked ambitious theoretical concepts and proper methodology. Over the years, however, the methodological and theoretical approaches of the research enterprises have improved (we will address several of these achievements below).

Currently, empirical research is mostly done in sociology, criminology and educational research (Holtappels 2004). Criminology and sociological research focuses on the individual, contextual and societal causes of violence and includes violent incidences below the threshold of the criminal law (Tillmann et al. 1999; Fuchs et al. 1996; 2001; 2008). Also, this line of research has promoted a view on violence at schools that takes the students'

families (Pfeiffer & Wetzels 1997; Bussmann 2001), their peer group (Fuchs 1995a), the socio-economic background and the socio-economic characteristics of their living quarters (Fuchs 2009; Fuchs & Schmalz 2009) into account. Heavily violent subgroups of students have been identified who are responsible for a large share of the recorded violence, e.g. male juveniles from disadvantaged social backgrounds. However, these analyses have not been integrated into a comprehensive theoretical model. By contrast, educational research was mostly concerned with the impact of school climate as well as with prevention and intervention strategies (Tillmann et al. 1999; Schubarth 1999; Arbeitsgruppe Schulevaluation 1998). In the light of this latter research violence originates considerably within schools or is at least increased by poor organizational conditions and the neglect of a positive social climate within a class or school.

METHODOLOGICAL PROPERTIES OF RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

Observational data of violent incidences is rarely used in this field. Instead, most studies rely on self reports of students regarding violent behaviors and victimization (Baier & Pfeiffer 2006; Tillmann et al. 1999; Schubarth 2003; Fuchs et al. 1996, 2001; 2008). Even though this approach might lead to biased estimates of the prevalence and incidence of violence due to social desirability distortion or group dynamic processes during assessment in a class room setting, other approaches have proven to be even less reliable: Observations of violent incidences by teachers or other school personnel are limited to those violent behaviors that come to the attention of the observer. Also, the observation of violence is usually biased since the attention for violent acts and the threshold for noticeable events is heavily driven by individual levels of sensitivity and changing social norms. Thus, a comparison of observed frequencies of violent incidences over time is prone to multiple sources of error. Also, statistical data from insurance companies and local authorities regarding the number of violent incidences are usually not considered since the willingness of victims to report violent events to the police or to insurance companies is an unpredictable source of error related to this data.

Most studies apply a survey design methodology asking violent and non-violent students in a class room setting to fill in paper questionnaires. The surveys are usually administered by the principal or a teacher who gets

detailed instructions regarding the selection of the specific class and the administration of the survey. However, doubts have been raised that teachers or principals interfere with the survey in order to make their school look either more peaceful or more violent than it actually is. Most studies focus on secondary schools, since violence at schools is usually discussed as a youth-specific phenomenon. However, some studies were conducted in elementary schools as well (Schäfer & Albrecht 2004); tertiary educational institutions have not been included so far.

In the early days of this line of research many projects were conducted swiftly under the pressure of dooming media coverage and the general public's perceptions of dramatic violent excesses at schools and also in order to satisfy the school administration's need for data on the prevalence and incidence of violence at schools. Thus, several projects were conducted with less than optimal sampling plans or were otherwise limited in terms of their methodology. Since then, the quality of the projects has improved. Today most studies are designed and conducted with diligence and attention to standard data quality indicators. Usually they achieve high response rates and they apply carefully designed disproportionally stratified cluster sampling plans in order to obtain representative samples of students for a given municipality or state.

Also the questionnaire design has improved. While in the beginning school violence was measured using a few selected indicators only, today the measurement of this concept is usually based on scales that are comprised of multiple indicators for each dimension measured. Nevertheless, the scales used today could benefit from a rigorous evaluation – the validity and the reliability of the items used are seldom assessed. Especially longitudinal studies that started out many years ago and still use their initial measurement instrument in order to allow for comparisons of the prevalence of violence at schools over time are questionable with respect to the quality of measurement instruments.

As long as regional school authorities supported the research agenda on violence at schools, typically school principals were motivated to adhere to the researchers' requests to take part in the surveys, resulting in high response rate on the school level. Since principals asked their teachers to comply with the research requests and teachers encouraged students and parents to take part in the surveys most studies achieve high response rates on the individually level as well. However, with more and more surveys conducted in schools, the cooperation rate has dropped considerably. In

recent years, schools got overwhelmed by research projects asking for permission to conduct surveys and other studies. In addition, another factor contributes to the declining response rates: In the past, parents' consent for underage students could be acquired passively – they were informed in writing and if they did not refuse on behalf of their children the students took part in the survey. However, recent studies had to actively seek written consent from parents which harms response rates significantly.

In addition to the considerable number of regional and local studies, representative samples for various states of Germany have been conducted (Niebel et al. 1993; Baier et al. 2006; Fuchs et al. 1996; 2001; Becker 2002). Also some longitudinal studies have been introduced (Sturzenbecher 2001). This provides reliable data concerning the long-term development of the prevalence rates. The most extended trend study in Germany covers 10 years (1994 to 2004) for the state of Bavaria (Fuchs et al. 2008).

Also, in recent studies sophisticated statistical models have been applied in the analysis. These models did not only consider the cluster design of the sample in the computation of standard errors but also took into account contextual effects and causes for the prevalence and incidence of violence in multilevel analyses (Simonson 2008; Fuchs 2009; Fuchs & Schmalz 2009). Even though, these multilevel model seem to be especially fruitful with respect to the development of advanced explanatory theories, the measurement procedures for contextual variables remain to be improved – this is one of the key methodological challenges since future studies will not only rely on responses from the individual students in order to determine the characteristics of the classes, schools, living quarters, neighborhoods, but also on administrative data regarding these entities from external sources. Proper procedures that protect the privacy of respondents when matching contextual data to the individual survey responses are not yet fully developed.

KEY FINDINGS – THE PREVALENCE AND INCIDENCE OF VIOLENCE IN GERMAN SCHOOLS

(1) *Prevalence*: The available literature documents a wide range of consistent findings regarding the prevalence of violence at schools in Germany (Sturzenbecher 2001; Baier & Wetzels 2006; Fuchs et al. 1996; 2001; 2008; Wetzels et al. 1999; Tillmann et al. 1999). Generally speaking the prevalence of violent behaviors is rather low, at least far lower than expected based on the considerable attention devoted to this topic in the media and in

the general public. Also, findings suggest no sustainable increase of the violence over the past 15 years (Fuchs et al. 2008) – especially not for severe physical violence (Lamnek 2000) – which is also in contrast to the general public's perception.

By contrast, according to subjective perceptions of teachers and other school personnel the proportion of violent students and the intensity of their violent acts have increased (Hanewinkel & Eichler 1999). However, these subjective perceptions contradict not only results of the surveys in the student population mentioned above but also findings from an analysis of insurance data which suggests a decreasing prevalence of violence at schools over the course of 1993 through 2003 (Bundesverband Unfallkassen 2005).

(2) *Types of violence*: Using a wide definition of violence at schools that includes verbal aggression, bullying and vandalism in addition to physical violence, the majority of the students is somehow actively involved in violence at schools. Only about 15% of the students are not related to any kind of violence (Fuchs et al. 2008). However, this is predominantly due to the high prevalence of verbal aggression and rude language. By contrast, physical violence occurs less often – about 50% of the students refrains completely from physical violence (Rostampour & Schubarth 1997; Fuchs et al. 2001). This is especially true for serious violent behaviors; only about 5% are involved in serious fights or other forms of violent behavior that have the potential to seriously harm fellow students (Schwind et al. 1990). Nevertheless significant portions of the students participate in studio wrestling, show fights and other not so serious physical encounters (Fuchs et al. 2008).

(3) *Intensive Perpetrators*: Research has identified a small group of serious offenders that is responsible for the majority of the serious violent acts. The size of this group varies depending on the definitions applied. However, several studies have estimated this group to consist of 3% to 9% of German students (Wetzels et al. 1999; Fuchs et al. 2001).

(4) *Gender*: Almost every study has pointed out, that male students are more violent compared to female students (Möller, 2001; Fuchs & Luedtke, 2003; Luedtke, 2008). This is especially true for physical violence; in the case of verbal aggression the difference is smaller, nevertheless it is still visible. Surely female students are not only involved as victims, however, the more serious the violence gets, the smaller their proportion among the perpetrators (Popp 2004; Fuchs et al. 2001; 2008). This is in part due to traditional

masculine role stereotypes in the lower educational classes (Möller 2008), but also due to gender-specific reactions to social change: Males more often exhibit physical violence when challenged in their traditional masculinity, e.g., by transformations in the educational system or on the labor market (Findeisen & Kersten 1999). Also, it has been assumed that violence is a mechanism among young males to restore their reputation and honor when it was damaged or impaired, e.g., by a verbal offense – especially among children and juveniles with immigrant background (Kersten 1998; Tertilt 1997). Recently, Meuser (2008) proposed that physical violence is an integral component of male role play in order to establish and maintain hierarchies (see also Luedtke 2008). Currently, the discussion of male and female students in the context of violence at schools has been reframed: Males are no longer seen as aggressive perpetrators only and females are no longer assumed to be victims. Instead, the specifics of violence conducted by female students have been analyzed in greater detail (Lamnek & Boatcă 2003; Bruhns 2003; Heiland 2003).

(5) *Differences by school type*: The German educational system is a tracked system with respect to secondary schools. The lower and intermediate secondary school tracks lead to apprenticeships while the upper track secondary schools provide higher education entry qualification. Admission to upper track secondary schools is highly socially selective – children whose parents hold an academic degree have far better educational chances. Violence occurs more often in schools on the lower educational track, while the grammar schools and other types of upper track schools are less prone to it – even though they are not free from violence. Especially when it comes to physical violence, lower track schools show higher prevalence rates while for verbal aggression fewer differences occur (Tillmann et al. 1999; Lösel et al. 1999). Several explanations for this effect are offered in the literature: (a) It is assumed that higher track schools execute more control and thus leave less room for violent student behaviors (Heitmeyer & Ulbrich-Herrmann 2004). (b) By contrast, it has been argued that the composition of the student body in the lower track schools is characterized by a higher proportion of children and juveniles from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds which in turn evokes higher levels of violence (Tillmann et al. 1999; Reißig 2001).

(6) *Age*: Violence at schools is a passage – like many other forms of violence and deviant behaviors. Beginning at the age 12 the prevalence of violence at schools increases. It reaches its maximum around age 16; afterwards the rate drops slowly to a lower level (Meier & Tillman 2000; Fuchs et al. 2008). Only

for a small portion of the violent students violence consolidates into an everyday pattern (Eckert 2000), most violent students refrain from violence once they get older and they leave school.

(7) *Reciprocal violence*: Typically, violence – especially physical violence against fellow student – is reciprocal. Those who attack others become victims themselves or have been prone to victimization before. Also, several studies have demonstrated a correlation of the number and the intensity of the violent behaviors conducted by students and the frequency and intensity of their victimization at schools (Wetzels et al. 1999; Mansel 2001; Fuchs et al. 2008).

CORRELATES, CAUSES AND EXPLANATIONS

Several studies have assessed the impact of individual characteristics of the perpetrator on the prevalence of violence at schools. In fact, most of the research has assumed a rather etiologic stand since they focused on these individual characteristics as key causes of violence at schools. Following is a list of selected causes that have been associated with the occurrence of violent school behavior:

(1) *Violence in the family*: Domestic violence has been identified to stimulate violence at school. This correlation has been demonstrated for aggressive patterns among the parents and also – even more pronounced – for parental violence against their children (3Mansel, 2001; 4Fuchs & Schmalz, 2009).

(2) *Socio-economic status*: Children of families in severely underprivileged socio-economic conditions have been proven to be more violent than children raised in better-off families (Fuchs & Schmalz, 2009a). This is especially true for children whose parents are out of work or draw local welfare support. However, given the literature at hand it is not clear whether this effect results directly from the absolute socio-economic disadvantage or whether the relative deprivation compared to better-off class mates stimulates violent behaviors by these children.

(3) *Youth-specific norms and cultures*: Several studies have demonstrated the impact of external factors, of violence intruding the school from the outside. In particular, the schools are increasingly faced with invading juvenile sub-cultures and norms. The clash of school-specific and youth-specific values,

norms and cultures is perceived to be more severe since schools are opening up to the students free time activities (Zinnecker, 2004).

(4) *Gangs and violent peer groups*: Several of the highly violent students are members of a violent peer groups (Fuchs, 1995a; Wetzstein et al., 2003; Fuchs & Luedtke, 2008). This has raised the question to what extent the interaction with a gang might stimulate violent behaviors at school (Luedtke 2001). However, it should be noted that the causal direction is not yet confirmed – it might also well be that violent students chose to enter a violent peer group because they themselves are prone to aggressive behaviors.

(5) *Impact of the media*: Since the early days of the research on violence at schools, the consumption of or exposure to violent content in TV programs has been assessed (Kristen 2005; Pfeiffer & Kleinmann 2006). In recent years, online gaming and game pads have been included in the analysis (Baier & Pfeiffer 2007). However, this research focuses on violence at schools as a consequence of violent media content is still in its infancies (Frindte & Obwexer 2003; Baier et al. 2006). Also, the respective studies have problems determining the causal direction (Fuchs 2003). Given the research designs at hand it is hard to prove that the consumption of violent media content actually evokes individual violent behavior. It might well be, that student who are violent because of other reasons are especially interested in violent PC games or aggressive online. This issue remains to be resolved in future research.

(6) *Integration of immigrant students*: The prevalence of school violence among students with an immigrant background has been assessed in several studies (Baier & Pfeiffer 2008; Feltes & Goldberg 2006). Overall the findings suggest a moderately higher prevalence rate of immigrant students with respect to vandalism (Funk 1995; Fuchs 2004); for other aspects of school violence heterogeneous findings exist. However, dominantly it is assumed that immigrant students – especially male students – are prone to higher prevalence rates of physical violence (Pfeiffer & Wetzels 2000; Toprak 2008). The higher average degrees of domestic violence in these families, the higher likelihood of authoritarian family structures as well as a lack of social and economic integration have been identified as relevant factors contributing to the higher prevalence of school violence among juvenile immigrants (Halm 2000). However, the key problem in this assessment is the lack of proper control variables in the analyses. Since autochthon and immigrant students differ with respect to multiple socio-economic and individual characteristics, for a proper comparison the respective variables should be included in the

analyses as controls. Like for the general crime rate, this is hard to achieve in the context of studies on school violence.

(7) *Macro-social developments*: In addition to the micro-social factors mentioned so far, several macro-social processes and general societal developments have been identified to contribute to violence at schools. (a) Among others it has been stated that juveniles in present day Germany gain more independency from adults compared to previous generations. They decide more independently on personal issues, such as dress code, free time activities, friends and peers and they possess significant amounts of money. Thus, the relative impact of the adult society on the norms and values on juvenile lifestyle declines and gives room for behaviors that are considered deviant by adults. (b) Also, unemployment and poverty have lead to social disintegration of certain subgroups in the population which in turn has caused uncertainty regarding social goals and behaviors. In light of this disintegration theory, violence has become a strategy that allegedly provides certainty when dealing with problems and challenges (Heitmeyer et al. 1995). (c) Finally, anomie theory has been applied to explain the occurrence of school violence. Based on this theory it has been proposed that students from less privileged families lack the resources and skills in order to achieve the social goals in terms of educational achievements, in terms of expensive displays and also more generally in terms of success in live (Fuchs 2003a). Because these students lack proper means and resources for achieving these societal goals they try to overcome the discrepancy using alternative strategies including violent patterns. In light of this theoretical approach school violence by juveniles would be a reaction to the mismatch of societal goals and resources available.

In recent years, a few studies have emerged that aim at identifying the impact of contextual properties on the prevalence and incidence of violence at German schools (e.g., Funk & Passenberg 2004; Simonson 2008; Fuchs 009). In these studies it is assumed that perpetrators do not only act violently based on individual characteristics, instead violence evolves in interaction with the properties of the social environment and also with other individuals (Fuchs & Schmalz 2009). For example, in a socially integrated setting a low intensity violent behavior or provocation by one student might well be absorbed by fellow students who are not familiar with violent conflict solving strategies. By contrast, in a more violent social setting the very same behavior might be answered by a violent response by another student which in turn will wind up the level of violence until excessive aggression occurs. Thus, the

micro-social context of the individual violent offenders is seen as a potentially boosting or alleviative factor. This view is supported by findings from the HBSC study which has demonstrated that violence and small crime is related to social disintegration in the neighborhood and the living quarters of juveniles (Feltes, 2003; Hermann & Laue, 2003). In this line of the research on contextual factor two relevant levels of the micro-social context are differentiated:

(1) *School climate*: Most importantly, the social climate in class and in school is assumed to have a significant effect on the prevalence of violence (Arbeitsgruppe Schulevaluation 1998; Tillmann et al. 1999; Nunner-Winkler et al. 2005). Also, given the gender-specific differences in the individual propensity to act violently, it could be shown that classes with a high proportion of female students function as an absorbing context, reducing the likelihood of violent behaviors by both male and female individuals (Fuchs 2009). Finally, it has been demonstrated that the proportion of students in a class who have experienced parental violence significantly affects individual violence (Fuchs & Schmalz 2009).

(2) *Living quarter and municipality*: In addition, properties of the wider school context were considered. It has been proven that the students' behavior is affected by the overall presence of crime and violence in the surroundings of the school (Simonson 2008; Fuchs 2009). Other aspects of social disintegration in the living quarters and municipalities – like the activities of the Youth Welfare Office, the support of local authorities for juveniles free time activities, and social neglect – have also been assessed.

INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Since the late 1990s, the discussion on intervention and prevention programs regarding school violence has intensified (see Melzer, Schubarth & Ehninger 2004 for an overview). The discussion of school violence has become part of further training sessions for teachers and schools are generally more open to adopt intervention and prevention programs – earlier they were reluctant to adopt such strategies since this would give the impression that a particular school exhibits high levels of school violence. Today, several programs that address teachers are available (Dann, 2004; Hinsch & Uberschär 1998) in addition to programs that aim at an improvement of the organizational culture in a given school as a whole (Melzer & Ehninger, 2002).

Also, school development has been seen as a factor reducing the prevalence of school violence (Melzer, 2000; Schubarth, 2000).

With respect to the violence offenders, several programs have been developed ranging from professional social workers at schools (Klees, Marz & Moning-Konter, 2003) to networking approaches (Balsler, Schrewe & Schaaf, 2001). Even though, the Olweus program has been implemented at several schools (Olweus, 2004; Hanewinkel & Knaack, 2004), it has not gained predominance like in other countries. In Germany, rather a wider range of trainings and programs has been used: Anti-aggression trainings and confrontational programs (Pöhlker, 1999), coolness trainings (Weidner, Kilb & Jehn 2003) and mediation programs (Walker, 2001; Simsa & Schubarth, 2001).

SHORTCOMINGS OF CURRENT RESEARCH AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

So far, the research on violence at schools lacks a clear theoretical model. Even though a rational choice approach (Funk 1995; Krumm 2004) and also disintegration theory (Heitmeyer et al. 1995) have been pursued in several studies, many research projects have limited themselves to a detailed and reliable description of the extent of school violence. A comprehensive theory-based explanation that includes variables beyond gender, age, socio-economic status and educational aspiration is not yet fully developed. The use of contextual factors in the explanation of violence at schools is currently the most promising approach, since it suggests that violence – like other societal problems, too – evolves within a micro-social setting and might be affected by factors beyond the individual perpetrator's characteristics.

In addition, from an empirical point of view, many analyses conducted so far lack a proper modeling of the sample design typically being used in school-based surveys. Due to cost constraints and lack of a reasonable sampling frame for simple random sampling, two-stage cluster samples are usually drawn in order to collect survey responses from large numbers of students at reasonable cost: First, schools are drawn at random from a list (primary sampling units). Then, all students from the selected schools or a subsample of them (typically one or multiple classes within each school) are asked to fill in a questionnaire including self-reports on violence and victimization. This type of data requires analysts to consider design effects when estimating parameters and testing for significance. Since the sampling variance is used to

determine standard errors, both, the size of confidence limits of point estimates and correlations as well as significance testing are affected by design effects larger than 1.0. Typically, the design effects of these cluster samples are in the range of 2.0 to 3.0 which has a dramatic effect of the variance estimation and on the effective sample size (see Fuchs 2009 for a more detailed discussion). Even though several studies already apply proper statistical modeling and testing this should be adopted as a standard procedure. This is especially valuable, since cluster samples also provide researchers with the opportunity to assess the effects of contextual factors on the prevalence of school violence (see Funk & Passenberger 2004; Simonson 2009 and Fuchs & Schmalz 2009 for examples).

In recent years many studies on school violence have been conducted in various parts of Germany. Unfortunately, most studies adopted their own concept of violence and thus make use of a questionnaire that does not allow full comparisons with other studies across geographic areas and point in time (see section 2 of this paper). Also, some studies have focused on special school types and have neglected others. Thus, the overview given in this paper is based on multiple studies with diverse theoretical approaches and methodological designs. This limits the scope and generalizability of results. Accordingly, a national study would be desirable that makes use of a comprehensive standard instrument for the measurement of violence at schools and that covers the whole territory and all types of schools.

In addition, only a few studies have adopted a longitudinal approach, thus our knowledge regarding the development of violence over time is weak. Even though, some trend studies are available, they usually do not cover extended periods of time and typically just one state or even smaller areas.

Finally, not all prevention and intervention strategies adopted by schools underwent serious evaluation studies in the field. A key challenge for the proper selection of reasonable intervention programs is its reliable assessment in a German context – results of evaluations studies conducted abroad should not be assumed valid for the German context without further replication. Some evaluation studies do not even apply an experimental design or on a pre-post design. Other evaluation studies rely on subjective indicators, like retrospective satisfaction of participants with the prevention program. Thus, the research on the prevalence and incidence of violence at schools should be integrated with an evaluative approach of intervention and prevention programs.

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