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## **Socially pathological manifestations among children <sup>1</sup>**

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### **Extended summary**

One of the alarming developments since 1989 has been the indisputably general increase in criminality and criminality among young people in particular.<sup>2</sup> Between 1989 and 1998, the absolute number of children prosecuted went up approximately two and a half times and the number of juveniles roughly doubled and this increase cannot be ascribed to a rise in the population in these age categories. The number of children <sup>3</sup> who committed a criminal offence recorded by the police in 1998 represents 0.75% of the total population in this age group. The number of juveniles <sup>4</sup> who committed a criminal offence cleared up by the police in the same year represents 1.8% of the total population in this age group. Looked at from a different angle, this data means that in 1998 persons under the age of 18 constituted 15% of the total number of persons investigated. In absolute terms these were 19,373 individuals, of whom 8,824 were children and 10,549 juveniles. These facts undoubtedly raise the question of what can be done to halt or at least mitigate negative trends in the field of criminality or pre-criminality because the criminogenous development of an individual is conditioned by a conglomerate of very different phenomena of a biological, psychological and also social nature. Effective anti-criminogenous intervention must be based on the one hand on a good knowledge of the external and internal problems of young people on this slippery slope and on the other hand also on an inventory of viable possibilities in society for confronting problems as they arise.

To contribute to understanding of the characteristics of children so endangered was the subject of an extensive research project on the topic of “Criminological aspects of socially pathological manifestations among children”. The research started from the generally recognised view that the longer term perspective for restricting criminality in our country is linked above all to adequate socialisation of the youngest generation. For this reason the research was conceived in such a way that it would be possible to identify and analyse the main negative factors arising and operating in the socialisation of a child in danger of developing into a delinquent. The research is aimed at children of up to 15, for attempts to socialise and resocialise at a later age are, as is known, less effective and furthermore incomparably more demanding in all respects.

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<sup>1</sup> Večerka, K., Holas, J., Štěchová, M., Diblíková, S. External cooperators: Žárský, M., Neumann, J., Malinová, K., Netík, K., Štěpichinová, Vverková, L., Želásko, P. Socially pathological manifestations among children. Prague: ICSP, 2000. 215 pages. Summary.

<sup>2</sup> Marešová, A., Kadeřábková, D., Martinková, M: Criminality in 1998, ICSP, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Children older than 6 and younger than 15 are regarded in statistical records as offenders committing an otherwise criminal offence.

<sup>4</sup> Person who at the time the criminal offence was committed had reached the age of fifteen and had not completed the eighteenth year of his/her life.

Research interest was centred on children who, during a one-year period, had been placed in institutional or protective education<sup>1</sup> by a court as a result of behavioural problems. The aim of the research was to find out the life history of the children before their placement in reform schools. For this purpose not only were various documentary materials compiled in connection with court proceedings on the protective or institutional education of the child perused but also a battery of research procedures were set up, which led to a deeper understanding of the reasons for the subjects' social malfunctioning.

The research was conceived in two research phases, which of course were closely linked, an extensive phase and an intensive phase.

In the design of the extensive research we strove to compile information – as far as possible – on all children in the Czech Republic for whom a court had ordered protective or institutional care during the period of one year, because of (or also for) problems connected with behavioural disorders<sup>2</sup>. We worked with all OPD<sup>3</sup> of all districts. We asked them to complete a case history questionnaire on a child who had been placed in protective or institutional education<sup>4</sup> in the defined period. District (local area) authority social services departments sent us completed record sheets on 464 children whose placement met the stipulated criteria.

We also worked with child diagnostic institutions (DDÚ) throughout the Czech Republic in which the obligatory diagnosis of the subjects we studied had been performed. Here we obtained further – often control – data on our subjects, not only concerning their family situation but also information on their level of knowledge at school and on their personal characteristics. We were able to obtain research materials on 221 children from child diagnostic institutions. In addition, as part of the investigation, diagnostic institution psychologists carried out special psychological tests submitted by us and together with other DDÚ specialists (ethopedagogues, teachers and social workers) completed the child record sheets we sent.

Data from this first phase were processed statistically, first and second level sorting was performed and cluster analysis was used to select typical subjects.

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<sup>1</sup> If a child's education is seriously threatened or seriously disrupted and other educational measures (for example, reprimands, supervision, restraints) have not led to improvement or if for other serious reasons the parents cannot ensure education of the child, a court may order **institutional education** even if there have been no previous educational measures (§ 46 of the Family Act No. 94/1963 Coll. as amended).

The conditions for placement under **protective education** are stipulated in § 84 para. 1(a) of Criminal Law No. 140/1961 Coll. as amended:

- proper care has not been taken of a juvenile's education
- there has been neglect in the education of a juvenile hitherto or
- the environment in which the juvenile lives requires this

The basic condition for placement in protective education in criminal proceedings is conviction, ie acknowledgement of guilt for a criminal offence

<sup>2</sup> Information was received about a total of 464 clients, which was the sample entered in statistical processing

<sup>3</sup> Where we speak of OPD in the following passages we have in mind all agencies for the social and legal protection of children legally concerned with children's family and personal problems in the district

<sup>4</sup> Here it is necessary to point out that we made every effort to ensure that the group of children thus defined was as complete as possible. The team assistant sent repeated requests for cooperation to individual districts and checked the completeness of the material received. Nevertheless, it should be noted that it was not within the research team's powers to ensure "conscientiousness" and "responsibility" in the cooperation.

The second phase of the research consisted of intensive psychological case history investigation of selected typical subjects. We strove to acquire more detailed knowledge of the personal characteristics of the child, his/her sphere of interest, peer group contacts and success at school, as well as understanding of the course of his/her life and the situational factors which led to the current position. We attempted to clarify certain family relationships, in particular relationships with a child's own parents and siblings, but also directed our attention to questions of the influence of surrogate carers and siblings who were not the child's own. Nor were characteristics of an economic nature ignored.

**The profile of the sample obtained** was as follows: male 69%, female 31%, average age 13.2.

The proportion of children who had experience of previous institutional care was increased: 7.5% had been placed in a nursery institution, and 11% had been in a children's home. A still higher percentage of children had undergone psychiatric treatment – 23.5%. Among children who have received psychiatric treatment we find a higher occurrence of aggression. Every fifth subject demonstrated clear psychological problems. From other data too it is evident that for children placed in alternative educational care psychiatric traits of their personality plays a significant role.

Placement in collective facilities for the provision of institutional education should be the last step in the sequence of interventions in the interests of a child, a measure when all other educational provisions have failed. However, we find that a full third of the children had not received any previous intervention before placement in a diagnostic institution, nor any examination in an educational psychology consulting clinic (PPP - approximately 35% of the children had been to one of these). It is alarming that according to the data available a full third of the children later placed in institutional education had not received any previous specialist attention (except for action taken by OPD). This is a serious shortcoming in the system of preventive and therapeutic care.

The overwhelming majority of the cases we examined were children for whom institutional education had been proposed (protective education had been proposed in only a few cases); the reason for the proposal was most frequently criminal activity by the subject, truancy and parental failure to control the child's education. In a number of cases social reasons also had a significant influence (in most cases this was a question of families with low economic and cultural status, incapable of ensuring appropriate conditions for a child's education).

A basic factor in family case history is the completeness of the family. Nearly 40% of the subjects in our sample had already lived in an incomplete family at pre-school age. This trend becomes more pronounced in later stages of life and at the time of the research only one in three of the subjects had his/her own complete family. Most of the individuals reviewed were looked after by only their mother, and the father is often only a formal educator.

It is shown that **subjects' families** are evaluated rather critically by curators of young people from the educational point of view, and the educational climate deteriorates in the course of the child's life – at the present time only 6% of these children live in a high quality educational environment. This deteriorates from pre-school age in more than half of the homes. The subjects and their families, however, perceive the family atmosphere fundamentally less critically than social workers.

The subjects' families are substantially below the standard of the population as a whole in terms of educational level. More than three quarters of the mothers have only basic (sometimes uncompleted) education, and two thirds of the fathers are in this group. The proportion of persons who have completed secondary school is around 7%, and not even one mother is a university graduate. Professional classification also corresponds to the educational level (where this could be ascertained, for curators often do not have this information). More than 90% of the fathers and mothers are classed as manual workers, but many of them do not work: only 34% of the mothers and 42% of the fathers are in employment. Around 15% of the families are in job centre records, about 8% are on sickness pension and some of the mothers are on maternity leave; how the remainder support themselves financially is not known (to the respondent). It is therefore not surprising that the attitude of families to work is assessed in a better case as average, while Roma families are assessed as worse.

The pedagogical effectiveness of mothers (as the main agents of education in incomplete but also in formally complete families) is problematic: they are generally inconsistent in education, do not exercise much control over their children and quite often have a tendency to be negligent in caring for them. The educational styles of fathers show similar features – they only punish children more often. Inconsistency in education and forgiving children's transgressions are more evident in Roma families.

The most pathological manifestation of family failure is child maltreatment. This occurred in nearly one fifth of our subjects' families; the commonest victim was the subject him/herself, but sometimes his/her sibling or mother too. Maltreatment most frequently took the form of excessive physical punishment or psychological oppression of the subject, sometimes a combination of the two. Maltreated children do not show a higher incidence of socially deviant behaviour, but are more often psychologically disturbed.

The economic situation of the families studied corresponds to the occupational profile of the families and often to the fact that they are unemployed. Only a little under one tenth of the children come from economically above average families, whereas every fifth child comes from a family well below the average economically. There is no evidence that (as is sometimes claimed) children from very financially secure families where the parents have very little free time are found in more significant numbers in institutional or protective education. But poverty does not seem to be a particularly significant criminogenous factor – children from socially deprived families do not display a higher level of delinquency. Overcrowding of the flat in which a family lives is also related to lower economic status.

Another subject of research interest was the **socio-psychological profile of the subject**. A highly important category in the criminogenetic concepts is a person's intellectual capacity. Here we made an interesting discovery. 56% of the subjects show below average or even substantially below average intellectual performance, and only one tenth are above the average level for the population. There is no doubt that it is this reduced level of analytical and evaluative capabilities that is at the root of many behavioural disorders; but it must also be allowed that it is this intellectual deficiency of the subjects that may be the cause of their identification by state authorities and their delivery into institutional education.

Young Roma coming under the care of diagnostic institutions display, according to the findings of specialist staff of these facilities, significantly lower intellectual performance than

their non-Roma peer group. There may be a number of complementary causes for this state, and the specific factors affecting the capabilities of Roma (and measurement of these capabilities) is dealt with in detail in the literature on the subject.

**Light mental dysfunction** (LMD) syndrome, thought of today as hyperactivity syndrome (ADHD), is linked inter alia with a number of behavioural disorders, such as displays of aggression, impulsiveness and so on. A quarter of the subjects in our research group suffered from LMD, and the same number had this disorder noted in their case histories. It appears that the increased number of individuals afflicted in this way compared with the standard population is not fortuitous and so LMD can be regarded as one of the criminogenesis factors.

A child's functioning in the **school environment** is another important variable in his/her overall personal profile. Criminological theory provides supporting evidence that a negative attitude to education, school or teachers is a significant criminogenous factor and can be regarded as one of the possible precursors of delinquent behaviour. A full two thirds of the children examined have a negative attitude to education in the opinion of OPD staff. It was confirmed by psychological tests that the attitude to school was definitely not positive, but school is not a place that is feared – it is regarded most frequently as a waste of time and boring, and attitudes to teachers are indifferent and at critical times verging on tense, even hostile.

Subjects' achievement at school was as expected below average right from the first year class; the achievement crisis deepens in later years and the number of children failing also increases. Half the subjects of younger school age and three quarters of the subjects of older school age have serious achievement problems.

An important question is also transfer of pupils from basic to special school. Children who only attended basic school formed 56% of our sample, and 12% of the children had attended special school from the first class. The remainder, ie 32%, had been transferred during their school attendance; they were transferred not only for reasons of achievement (which is the real task of a special school) but for educational reasons. It can also be seen from our findings that Roma pupils on the one hand are transferred directly to special school more often and on the other hand are transferred to this school during their school attendance much more often and earlier. The result of this procedure is that more than two thirds of non-Roma subjects (69%) but only a little more than a quarter of Roma (27.5%)! obtain basic education at basic school full time. It can also be stated that Roma have constant problems with achievement throughout the whole of their school attendance, whereas non-Roma start to fail seriously at older school age.

At older school age there were frequently a large number of discipline problems among the children in our sample. Dominant here in particular are widespread truancy, committed by four out of five subjects, and theft (60% of the children). A significant number of our subjects (40%) committed open physical aggression in school mainly against fellow-pupils but also sometimes against teachers. These, however, were rather attacked by subjects verbally or by displays of no interest at all in learning.

The main subject of interest of our research was to map **socially pathological manifestations** for which children sent by state authorities to institutional (preventive) education were examined. As has been mentioned already, the commonest offences were truancy and theft –

this was also what aroused the interest of social services in the subjects most often. In other places aggressiveness, running away from home, or general educational uncontrollability linked with lack of respect for the authorities appear.

Truancy is a problem which has a wider impact – it is generally accompanied by actions which have the result of handicapping a child, such as lower achievement and conflicts with teachers. When the problems are more serious, the child is transferred to a special school, so does not achieve a full basic education and level of education, and, as is known from criminological theory, there is a close correlation between the level of the population affected by negative phenomena and criminality. Part of the blame lies with the basic school system, which is not “designed” for the less gifted or problem children – it is significant that Roma children play truant much more often than non-Roma children.

Property offences, primarily petty theft, are the commonest criminal act committed by children. Overall, two thirds of the subjects committed acts of delinquency regarding property, most of them repeatedly. In comparison with this, a quarter of the children committed violent acts – this was generally affray with bodily harm, robbery or extortion (not infrequently committed on school premises). Subjects most often began their career as delinquents at the age of twelve or thirteen. They are driven not only by a longing for excitement and to dispel boredom but also rational economic calculation. For a person’s social status in a group of young people these days is very often defined inter alia by ownership of items of a status-conferring nature (such as designer clothes, electronic equipment etc) and enough money for entertainment (for example, visits to discotheques). Children from socially deprived families or simply “kept on a tighter rein” therefore fulfil their longing to assert themselves by means of criminal acts. The particular danger is that they will carry over this model of creating and satisfying needs into adult life and may become members of the criminal sub-culture.

We also attempted to clarify what these “institute” children are like in terms of dependencies. It was found that the probability of alcohol and drug abuse is significantly related statistically. Similarly, a close relationship was perceived between smoking and alcohol abuse.

Smoking is not in itself a criminogenous factor, but more regular smoking among children is a signal of non-standard socialisation. There were more than 60% of these subjects in the group; it can be stated that problem children start to experiment with smoking at a rather young age and become regular smokers at an early age.

More than half of the children studied have experience with consumption of alcohol that is worth noting, and nearly 40% with non-alcoholic drugs. Experiments related in particular to volatile substances, marijuana and pervitin. Approximately a third of the children had tried out a game on a fruit machine.