

# Background Information

New study examines evolution of violence among youths

## Youth violence on the decline

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**Researchers at ETH Zurich's Criminological Research Unit have examined the evolution of violence among youths in the Canton of Zurich. Their study shows that the propensity towards violence is clearly decreasing within this age group.**

Young people in the Canton of Zurich have committed acts of violence or been the victims of violent acts less often in recent years, according to a representative survey of ninth-grade students conducted by the Criminological Research Unit at ETH Zurich's Chair of Sociology. In this third iteration of the study, the researchers have confirmed trends already seen in police statistics: youth violence has not only fallen with respect to the offences registered by the police, but also in terms of violent experiences that young people themselves report.

### **All forms of violence declining**

Using repeated studies that are unique in Switzerland, researchers led by Denis Ribeaud from the Criminological Research Unit chronicled the evolution of youth violence as well as juvenile delinquency since 1999. In cooperation with schools throughout the Canton of Zurich, they surveyed some 2,500 students in the ninth grade (aged 15 to 16) last year using a standardised questionnaire administered in class. Prior surveys were conducted in 1999 and 2007.

Researchers detected a decline in all forms of violence examined in the study, with the most distinct decrease observed in theft and blackmail, followed by assault. Bullying in schools also appears to occur less frequently. In contrast, cases involving sexual violence against minors declined the least. The study showed the profile of sexual offenders has changed since the first survey in 1999, shifting from adult perpetrators within the family environment to offenders of a similar age who typically meet their victims when they go out. The victims of sexual violence are almost exclusively female.

## Background Information

### **Less violence in public spaces**

In recent years, things appear to be more orderly on the streets and in public transport, as well as in bars and clubs. Researchers observed that violent offences have declined the most sharply in public spaces; accordingly, violence between strangers has also become rarer. ETH researcher Denis Ribeaud attributes this to the increased police presence in volatile areas along with successful prevention work in the Canton of Zurich. "Another reason for this could be that young people are spending their free time differently than they did a few years ago, and now spend more time at home," Ribeaud says.

This could also explain why not only violent acts but all other forms of juvenile delinquency, including vandalism and theft, have decreased in recent years. A recent study by the World Health Organization (WHO) also confirmed that consumption of addictive substances by young people in Switzerland has also gone down. (HBS Study: [www.hbsc.ch](http://www.hbsc.ch)).

### **Perpetrators become victims**

Although Swiss youth are more rarely the victims of violence, particular victims suffer from more acts of violence over the long term – and, since 1999, violent offenders are increasingly at risk of becoming victims themselves. Violence is generally becoming more concentrated in violence-prone areas, with the roles of victim and perpetrator increasingly blending together. Young men with low levels of education and immigration backgrounds are overrepresented in these areas. It is here where ETH expert Ribeaud sees potential for more prevention efforts: "Measures focused on intervention and the prevention of violence could be more strongly focused on these high-risk groups."

### **Relationships and cyberbullying investigated**

The researchers studied relationship violence for the first time in 2014. Sexual violence was reported by 18% of girls in relationships and around a quarter of young people in relationships reported that they were subject to physical violence by their partner in the previous year. However, the most common form of dating violence consisted in restrictions on their autonomy. Girls are more frequently perpetrators of light forms of physical violence than boys. "There could be room for action in this area as well in terms of prevention work," Ribeaud explains. "Intriguingly, the study shows that both sexes are more inclined towards violence in a relationship when they adhere to traditional gender roles, namely when the man is in a dominant position in a relationship."

The researchers also studied the phenomenon of cyberbullying for the first time. As the study shows, bullying is still the most common form of violence experienced during adolescence, even if the trend is indeed declining. Today, cyberbullying is about as widespread as "traditional" bullying and is often carried out by the same perpetrators.

### **A comparison with older teens**

For the first time, some 900 11th grade students (aged 17 to 20) took part in the 2014 survey, which allowed researchers to compare the different age groups. In contrast to ninth grade students, those in the 11th grade were somewhat more likely to be victims of violence, especially within a public context. The main reason for this difference is probably that older teenagers go out more frequently.

## Background Information

The current study (as well as those in 1999 and 2007) was largely funded by the Canton of Zurich's Department of Education. Additional sponsors of the study were the canton's Department of Security and Department of Justice and Home Affairs, as well as the Swiss Federal Social Insurance Office. Inhalt.

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