

Living Conditions of Juvenile Prisoners

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Abstract

The article presents the key findings about the life situations and the conditions of socialisation of male juvenile prisoners in southern Germany. The analysis showed that socially disadvantaged population groups are significantly overrepresented among the juvenile prisoners. It was also found that social deprivation of juvenile prisoners has increased in the last 20 years. However, the social selection does not go so far, as that only people from the lowest social classes are found in youth imprisonment. Extreme marginality could only be observed with few prisoners. This also applies to serious fears of the future and resignation.

Further important parts of the analysis were the focus on migration background, the onset of criminal careers, family socialisation, academic and job performance and the critical comparison of methodology concerning various data sources and the different types of data collection.

Keywords

Juvenile delinquency, living conditions, juvenile prisoners, longitudinal comparison Germany

Aim of the Project

The aim of the project, funded by the German Research Foundation, was to analyse the life situation and the conditions of socialisation of male juvenile prisoners.

The theoretical basis of this project were different criminological and sociological theories which are connected to social inequality and crime respective criminalization. This includes for example the “Bielefeld disintegration approach” of Anhut and Heitmeyer (2000). This theory argues that the gap between high-income and low-income groups in modern societies is widening and the so-called losers of modernization show more problematic patterns in their behaviour, especially as violent behaviour increases.

Central aims of the project have been:

- (a) to analyse the current status and living conditions of juvenile prisoners. Besides the classical socio-economic factors, there was also a focus on factors of social bonding and integration as well as subjective experiences of exclusion such as those discussed in the new concepts about social inequality;

(b) to compare the population of youth prisoners with representative populations of young people which are not arrested. This should help to identify possible patterns of social marginalization and social selection;

(c) to examine the thesis that youth prisoners are more and more confronted with different problems and disadvantages. This part of the project also includes the question whether the changes in the population of the juvenile offenders only reflect changes of the society they live in or whether crime is handled in another way in terms of criminalization of poverty and social marginalization.

Methodology and Data

The methodological basis of the project is a combination of multiple methods of data collection (questionnaire survey, file analysis), different types of analysing (cross sectional and longitudinal analyses) and different data sources (self-reports of prisoners, data from prison files, etc.)

The survey of the juvenile prisoners took place in the second largest youth prison of Germany in the federal state Baden-Wuerttemberg. The interviews were conducted between June 2009 and July 2010 so that the survey includes all male juvenile prisoners of one federal state who were arrested within one year.

Four hundred twenty prisoners were interviewed with a standardised questionnaire. The participation was voluntary, 59 of the juvenile offenders did not agree to be questioned. The files of the participating prisoners were analysed, in particular the sentence(s), the initial report of prison staff and – where available - the report of the guardian ad litem and of the juvenile probation officer. The comparison of these data with the data from the standardised questionnaire allows one to critically analyse methodological aspects. This provides not only important results in terms of the quality of the data but also for the validity and reliability of data which is gathered by files from the justice system.

Besides this cross-sectional analyses, we compared, in a longitudinal analysis the population of juvenile prisoners from 2009-2010 with those from 1991-1992 (n=423). The files of the former juvenile prisoners were analysed the same way as the files of the current prisoners.

The last part of the project is a comparison of the juvenile prisoners with a representative sample of the German population: Therefore four German surveys were focused, which allowed the comparison with the youth prisoners in terms of age, gender, and federal

state („Deutscher Jugendsurvey“, „Sozioökonomisches Panel“, „ALLBUS“, „Shell Jugendstudie“).

Before presenting the results of the project table 1 shows an overview of some demographic data of both samples of 2009-2010 and 1991-1992 and the primary offences that caused the conviction of the young prisoners. The prisoners` ages are fairly similar in both samples while the migration background has risen within the population of youth prisoners. Looking at the prisoners` offences there is a significant increase in offences against the person while offences against sexual self-determination and robbery remains almost unchanged. Theft and drug offences have decreased within the last 20 years.

Table 1. Demographics and offences - an overview.

	1991-1992	2009-2010
Average age	19,2	18,7
Migration background	46,1 %	56,9 %
Primary offences		
Theft	31,7 %	24,5 %
Offences against the person	12,5 %	28,6 %
Robbery	18,0 %	19,5 %
Drug offences	10,6 %	7,2 %
Offences against sexual self-determination	3,1 %	3,1 %

Results

Overrepresentation of Socially Disadvantaged Young People

Compared with the general population youth prisoners often come from incomplete families; they often have a migration background; they are confronted more frequently with unemployment in the parental home; and they have rarely completed an education or vocational training.

The “hard” social indicators, such as the educational level, differ significantly in both samples as well as the subjective factors such as life satisfaction or the experiences with institutions.

Not only in terms of the available economic capital, but also the cultural capital (for example operationalised through the education and training of both the prisoners as well as their

parents) shows that among the juvenile prisoners the socially disadvantaged population groups are significantly overrepresented.

More disparate is the image of social capital: The youth offenders are significantly less involved in the school and work area as the youngsters from the representative samples. Regarding the familial relationships, the importance of the father as a supportive resource is significantly weaker. By contrast, however, there are no differences in the importance and quality of the relationship with the mother. The importance of siblings, the partner and the peer group is even more distinct in the population of the youth offenders than in the comparison group, which is particularly evident in leisure activities.

Remarkable in terms of the social capital is that about two-thirds of the youth offenders reported that their peer group includes young people who also were in prison. Youth prisoners were much less frequently actively involved in associations or have worked in an honorary capacity prior to their imprisonment than their comparison group. It is noteworthy that this is very different from the time of their childhood and early youth: during this period the overwhelming majority (86 %) was actively involved in associations, especially football clubs.

The social disadvantage of juvenile offenders is reflected in different dimensions of material facilities, the leisure and consumer behaviour, the social bonds, etc. However, the social selection does not imply that only people from the lowest social classes are incarcerated.

The social data demonstrates very clearly that the majority of youth offenders does not come from the most vulnerable groups of society. A minority derives even from the privileged sector of population: 10 % of youth offenders characterise their residential area as superior or affluent residential area, 8 % of youth prisoners lived in academic families and 11 % classified their family into the upper middle class or upper class.

Changes in the Longitudinal Comparison

A central aim of the project was to investigate if and how the composition of the population of juvenile offenders had changed over time. Prison staff complains more and more that the juvenile prisoners are more difficult today than in the past and that they have more problems. To find out if these statements are based on subjective experiences or if they can be

empirically confirmed, we compared the prisoners from 2009/2010 with our collected data of the youth prisoners from 1991/1992.

Previous studies (Umbel and Grübl, 1996, Mey and Wirth, 1999) found out that an increasing number of young prisoners are confronted with the breakup of their families as a result of separation and divorce of their parents ("Broken Home"), which is also confirmed by our data. But this does not necessarily mean that the power of control of families and commitment to families decreases. Direct factors for a lack of familial bonding or problematic family interactions (e.g. parents are overextended, lack of control, emotional neglect by the parents) did not change over time. In this context, an increase or decrease of the institutional care could also not be established. Thus, it could not be spoken of a paradigm change with regard to removing the children from their families earlier.

An aspect, which received our special attention, is the area of education, school (participation) and vocational training. While in Baden-Wuerttemberg, the proportion of school leavers without certificate has almost halved since 1991/1992, the percentage of school dropouts among the youth convicts remained the same (39 %). And another difference was obvious: a trend towards higher qualifications as it is observed among graduates in general does not exist in the population of youth convicts.

Also in the area of vocational training, the longitudinal comparison shows a negative development: The proportion of young offenders who have completed their vocational training sank from a very low level, even lower (6 % in 1991-1992, 3 % in 2009-2010). While in 1991-1992, two out of three young prisoners had at least once access to vocational training and started one or more vocational training (and usually aborted), this was almost 20 years later only the case for one out of three youth offenders.

The thesis that the life situation of youth offenders has deteriorated in the last 20 years, can be substantiated empirically with different indicators. The youth offenders are more often attributed to substance abuse problems over time, they are perceived more frequently as aggressive and generally as people with behavioural problems.

The following table shows four problematic patterns which actually all have increased in the last 20 years. The youth offenders do have more drug problems and problems with alcohol abuse. While in 1991-92 about half of the young prisoners had drug problems, in 2009-2010 it

had been 58 %. More clearly the problem of alcohol abuse has increased, it has risen from 33 % to 62 %. Prisoners who show the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or similar symptoms as well as aggressive behaviour obviously differ from those prisoners of 1991-1992.

Table 2. Problematic patterns.

	Youth prisoners 1991-1992	Youth prisoners 2009-2010
Drug problem	48 %	58 %
Alcohol abuse	33 %	62 %
ADHD or similar symptoms	11 %	20 %
Aggressive behaviour	22 %	38 %

Concerning these four factors we have to take into account that the data arises from the file analysis, which is based on attributions from the prison staff; so it is more or less a personal decision what is included in the prisoner`s file. It may be that the prison staff is nowadays just more sensitised relating to those problems.

Clearly, the analyses show as well an increase in the factors that are mentioned in the Poverty Report of the Federal Republic Germany as the most important risk factors for poverty: a lack of education and training, unemployment, single mothers / fathers and an immigrant background (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2008).

Table 3. Risk factors for poverty.

	Youth prisoners 1991-1992	Youth prisoners 2009-2010
Unemployment of the parents	19 %	5 %
Did not begin a vocational training	34 %	60 %
Broken home	28 %	40 %
Migration background	47 %	61 %

The increase in juvenile convicts, who are affected by risk factors for poverty, is clearly (unemployment of the parents) or at least a bit (an immigrant background, a single parent) higher than the increase in the whole society.

Regarding the problems of addiction and the problems with school education and training the longitudinal comparison of the representative sample shows consistent values while those problems has risen in the sample of the juvenile delinquents. The increase in social problems among juvenile prisoners thus cannot be explained solely by the general increase of these problems in the society. The deteriorating life situation could at least partly be interpreted as a consequence of a changed selection in the practice of juvenile justice: nowadays we try to avoid prison and consequently those who end up in prison are more selected than in the past.

Analyses on the Migration Background

We were able to develop a detailed analytical framework for surveying the migration background, because we asked the young prisoners their nationality, how long they have been in Germany, the nationality of their parents and the country of birth of their parents. This differentiation of migration and their conditions also enabled analyses of subgroups which are closely connected with the topic of exclusion. Regarding the experiences with exclusion we considered the question whether the peer group of the juvenile offenders is separated in ethnic homogenous groups. The analysis of friendship relations shows, however, that friendship circles mainly consist of ethnically-mixed groups. Even within the group of the "Russian Germans", in which the proportion of ethnically closed peer groups was the highest, the majority was integrated into mixed friendship circles.

Both, in the family of origin as well as in their peer group young people speak mostly German. A slightly higher proportion was again observed within the "Russian German" youth and among young people with a Turkish migration background who speak their native language. But nevertheless the majority of these two groups speaks German in their families.

Research issues related to migration status also resulted from the debate about social networks as a possible amplifier or compensation of material poverty (Friedrichs and Blasius, 2000).

Regarding the economic capital of the families of origin our analysis did not show significant differences between prisoners with and without a migration background. Looking at the cultural capital of families of youth offenders, e.g. operationalised through the education or the training of parents, however, there are significant advantages seen for prisoners from families without a migration background. The lower cultural capital (measured on the basis of

educational qualifications) of the parents of youth offenders with a migration background is also reflected in the cultural capital of the youth prisoner itself.

However, certain possibilities of compensation of this deprivation might be the higher social capital of young people with a migration background: Although the contact with the family of origin in terms of material and emotional safety is central for most local Germans.

However, for prisoners with a migration background the contact with the family of origin is more intense, the family relationships are important in everyday life and the number of supportive persons from the family circle is significantly higher.

The strong family ties and the resulting strong social networks are also a consequence of the fact that the attachment figure of the juvenile prisoners with a migration background did not change very often. Associated with this the relationship with the father became more important. Remarkably, prisoners with or without migration background do not differ in terms of experiences of violence in their education, regardless of whether direct or indirect experience of violence (e.g., violent conflicts between the parents) are taken into account.

Given the overrepresentation of young people with a migration background, it is not surprising that young people who belong to Islam are clearly overrepresented among the young prisoners (27 %). The juvenile offenders are also significantly more often members of a religious community and also describe themselves more often as “very religious” than the representative sample (representative sample 7 % - juvenile offenders 17 %).

This overrepresentation is also reflected on the behavioural level: 22 % of the juvenile offenders reported visiting a mosque or a church at least once a month whereas just 9 % of the representative sample reported so.

About one half of the young prisoners who are very religious is Christian, one half is Muslim. The significant overrepresentation of young people who describe themselves as very religious even remains if we just take those into account who belong to a Christian church. Approximately 9 out of 10 of the religious young prisoners do have a migration background that indicates a close connection between cultural traditions and the everyday relevance of religion. However, this overrepresentation of religious young people in the prison sample - irrespective of whether they are Muslims or Christians – relativises the importance of religious values and norms as protective factors against crime and violence, which is often postulated in criminology (see for discussion Kerner, 2009 comprehensive Brettfeld, 2009).

Experiences of Exclusion

Another emphasis in our project was the involvement of young people in society and social life, respective their perception of their involvement.

Following the concept that subjective factors can cause significant differentiation in the social situation, we gathered data concerning the subjective dimension of social exclusion. For example, it is important whether an unemployed prisoner is optimistic or resigned because the impact of unemployment will vary depending on the nature of the subjective processing. So we asked the juvenile prisoners if they had ever experienced feeling worthless, useless and excluded from participating, which could result from tight financial conditions, a lack of perspectives or a lack of social contacts.

Our results show that a precarious economic situation is not necessarily linked with social isolation: only very few of the respondents reported loneliness. Normally, young people do have people close to them on which they can rely on.

The contact with central institutions of Social Administration and other public institutions are evaluated differently by the youth convicts. "Classical" social work such as street workers or youth centers are classified as predominantly positive by the young people. This means that different institutions of social work could reach out to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds so the young people are not excluded or criminalised by them. The social work, which is close to the judicial system, however, is judged very differently: while the social work in the prisons and the probationary services are seen rather helpful, the work of juvenile court assistance got predominantly negative feedback. The majority of the respondents connected the youth welfare office and the employment office with rather bad experiences.

All these negative perceptions still do not automatically lead to subjective experiences of exclusion. Rather, it appears that we can assume that the objective experiences of exclusion are detached from the subjective processing. Despite the precarious integration in the field of education and vocational training only a small minority of the respondents was resigned or expressed fears of the future. The majority was optimistic - despite their problems in education – and also was confident regarding their professional future and they do have very realistic ideas for their future. This could be remarkably seen in one item of the questionnaire: 80 % of the respondents agreed with the statement "When I think about the future, I am actually very confident".

Overall, it could not be determined that typical careers of exclusion exist, which result from the interaction of employment loss, a lack of a social network and mistrust against institutions, especially because such an exclusion does not take place in the subjective perception of the youth offenders.

Familial Socialisation

The familial socialisation of youth offenders, such as the structural integrity of the family of origin, the parenting style, education and employment status of the parents or the financial situation of the family has been analysed. In addition, information about social problems of the family of origin like delinquency or alcohol and drug abuse was collected.

Two out of three surveyed youth prisoners reported the separation or divorce of their parents or the death of a parent and a related change of the attachment figure. The juvenile prisoners differ significantly from the representative group concerning the proportion of single-parent families or the accommodation in welfare facilities.

Looking at the education style of these families, one positive note is that the majority of the youth prisoners is often or at least sometimes praised, hugged or consoled by their parents. But yet it also shows that more than one third of the surveyed youth prisoners has been beaten up by their parents or even been mistreated. 5 % respectively 7 % stated, that they have been burned on purpose or that their parents threatened them with a weapon. So, every tenth of the young people reported severe forms of maltreatment, which is clearly higher than the values that are commonly made in representative surveys.

Table 4. Education style.

	often	sometimes	never
Praised me	53 %	42 %	5 %
Hugged me	52 %	38 %	10 %
Consoled me	52 %	33 %	15 %
Shouted at me	53 %	37 %	10 %
Refused to talk to me	9 %	31 %	60 %
Hit me	23 %	38 %	39 %
Locked me in a	9 %	21 %	70 %

room			
Being beaten up	14 %	22 %	64 %
Being burned on	3 %	2 %	95 %
purpose			
Threatened me with	3 %	4 %	93 %
a weapon			

The information about the relationship between the parents has a similar direction: More than one third of the youth prisoners stated that there had been serious conflicts between their parents.

However, the problematic conditions of the familial socialisation did not lead to a rejection or to a complete loss of contact with their parents. Even the young people who were exposed to corporal punishment, said that their parents are the most important people in their lives, who support them economically and emotionally.

Given the inconsistent and partly exaggerated tough education style, or rather, punishing style, and the social problems of many parents, this close relationship to the family of origin was not necessarily to be expected.

A correlation between domestic violence within the family and violent crime of the youth offenders could not be determined whether or not all forms of domestic violence or serious forms of ill-treatment were used. Thus, for the population of the youth prisoners the close connection between experienced and practiced violence, as determined in representative surveys (see, for example, Pfeiffer and Wetzels, 1999) cannot be reproduced.

Likewise only a slight correlation exists between alcohol or drug abuse by a parent and the alcohol or drug abuse of the juvenile prisoners. If the parents have alcohol problems, one out of three respondents has stated himself to have a drinking problem; if the parents do not have a drinking problem, only one out of five youth prisoners reported to abuse alcohol.

The intergenerational correlations need to be interpreted at best in terms of risk factors, which illustrates the distribution of the drug users: for those youth prisoners (one third of the sample) who reported to have a drug problem, in 40 % could be found a report of drug or alcohol abuse of the parents. A "social inheritance" of the noticeable problems can at best only be an explanation for a smaller part of the drug addiction of young people.

Heterogeneity of Life Situations

Regardless of the selection of the young prisoners in terms of social disadvantage, the majority has no status consistency, which means that extreme situations also form in our sample, the exception. For example, only for about one in ten prisoners can be found extreme accumulations of noticeable problems in the family of origin as "unemployment", "receiver of unemployment benefit", "addiction problem", "delinquency" or "detention" of a member of the family. The same applies to the surveyed young people themselves: An accumulation of problematic behaviour and life situation could be found only for a few. Just 16 % do have problems with addiction, education and debts at the same time.

A very heterogeneous picture emerges with regard to the different types of capital (economic capital, social capital, cultural capital): most of the youth offenders who have deficits in one type of capital often do have resources in another type of capital. If the financial situation of the family and of the young offender himself is difficult and additionally he and his parents received no or just a poor school education there are often resources in the social capital in form of good family relationships and a peer group with friends they can rely on.

Analysis of Subgroups

Furthermore subgroups of youth offenders were analysed which are of central importance in the criminological research, especially in terms of their prognostic content: Early starters, who started their criminal career in their childhood, were compared to so called late starters, whose social problems began in late adolescence.

To examine the hypothesis that early starters have worse starting conditions as late starters in terms of their socio-economic conditions and family interactions we used indicators of poverty of the parents, the familial integration and social peculiarities.

Our analyses show that the two groups differ significantly in almost all of these areas: Early starters come twice as likely than the late starters from families with members who are unemployed or receive social welfare. They grew up more often in problematic social areas and their parents showed social anomalies more frequently. The biggest difference was found in delinquency and incarceration. More than one-third of the group of the early starters has at least one parent who has been detained, in contrast to every tenth of young prisoners from the group of late starters.

The poorer economical and structural conditions of the families of the early starters also have an impact on the quality of family involvement and the educational climate: Ill-treatment by their guardians were reported by almost one half of the early starters, in contrast to a quarter of the late starters. Little difference was found however, in the analysis of criminal careers. Despite the differences in the duration of their criminal career there was neither a difference in how often they were in prison nor in the severity of the offenses. Nevertheless, the difficult living conditions in the early starters` infancy are still detectable in the late adolescence. Especially in the power range (school education, training), the late starters have better starting conditions. But also, a process of approximation of the two groups can be seen here: almost every second juvenile of the two groups was unemployed before prison.

Although the differences are often very striking between early and late starters in childhood, they turn out to be unsuitable for prognoses of criminal careers. Firstly, it was found that in almost all the examined dimensions of social deprivation more than one half of the youth convicts of the early starters have no deficits. Though it is more decisive that the living conditions of the late starters worsen in adolescence and the living conditions of both groups approach more and more.

The analysis of further subgroups yield interesting results about non-relationships: Those 10 % of the youth prisoners who derive from a middle-class or even rich family more often have a school-leaving qualification or, in general, higher schooling. Less often they have problems with debts and they have stronger material and moral support. But there are no differences in terms of addiction problems, the noticeable problems in the peer group and the form, frequency and severity of crime.

Analyses regarding the form of crime, show that only a few young prisoners are "specialised" on certain types of offenses. About 10 % to 20 % of youth offenders - depending on how broadly or narrowly one applies the criteria – can be classified in categories such as "only acts of violence" or "only crimes against property". For the remaining juveniles the typical "mix" of juvenile offenses such as assaults, shoplifting, car break-ins and "rip-offs" (robbery) can be found.

Critical Comparison of Methodology

The form of data collection, on the one hand, the information of the prisoner`s personal file and on the other hand the self-reports of the young prisoners, allowed various critical analyses of the used methods.

It could be measured if the results were distorted by those juvenile offenders, who refused to be interviewed or those who were taken out of the youth prison and removed in a prison for adults. The latter differ – as expected – in terms of their age and some indicators of the criminal career, such as the number and type of their previous sanctions. For those prisoners who refused to be interviewed, only a slight underrepresentation of prisoners with a migration background could be found.

By comparing the different data sources validity checks could be made which permit conclusions about the suitability of the various survey instruments for the study of social situations and biographies in the prison research. In almost all areas, the personal interview turned out to be the much more fruitful source of information. In the interviews no tendency to embellish facts in comparison to the information of the prisoner`s personal file could be found.

In addition, no specific groups of offenders (e.g. "fraudster") could be identified in which the discrepancies between the various data sources were particularly strong. As suspected, for data which permits more subjective interpretations a greater difference than for the data of "hard" social facts was determined. Two trends appeared:

- (a) The more relevant the information about the prisoners for their further planning in prison, is the better they are documented in the file; for example, information about the formal level of education (relevant measures of training) or drug problems (relevant for external or internal drug therapies).
- (b) The older the information is the less matches the gained information between the files and the personal interviews.

Another result was that the interviewer has only little influence on the responses of the youth offenders: the sex of the interviewer has no effect on most answers to the questions. But a slight effect can be ascertained when the questions address the representation of masculinity (e.g. "partner exists" or "composition of the peer-group").

Conclusion

The presented research project is a contribution to the fundamental criminological research.

A yield for the criminological theory discussion is noticing that serious or repeated juvenile delinquency and social inequality are still closely linked, whereby this connection was even more reinforced in the last 20 years.

Moreover, the results of the project empirically underpin the perception of the prison staff that the juvenile prisoners are more difficult nowadays than in the past: The juvenile prisoners are more often attributed to drug problems, are perceived as more aggressive and problematic in their behaviour and they have more difficulties in education.

Regardless of the selection of the young prisoners in terms of social disadvantage only a minority of the juvenile prisoners show an accumulation of problematic patterns. A social exclusion, which is reflected in a resigned attitude or a lack of future perspective, could not be observed for the majority of the juvenile offenders.

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