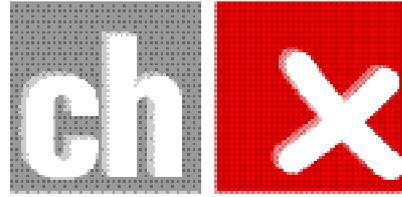




Swiss School of Forensic Science and  
Criminology (IPSC)



Swiss Federal Surveys of Adolescents  
and Recruits

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# VIOLENCE AND VICTIMIZATION

## A STUDY OF VIOLENT AND SEX OFFENDERS UNKNOWN TO THE POLICE

By Prof. Henriette Haas, PhD in Psychology  
*Institut de police scientifique et de criminologie, Université de Lausanne*

### **Abstract**

*The “Swiss Federal Surveys of Adolescents and Recruits” (ch-x), introduced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, belong to the most long-standing research traditions in the world. Due to the fact that all medically fit men are drafted, it covers a sample of about 70% all male Swiss around the age of 20. In 1997, the study was conducted in criminology, yielding some major findings on the origins of violence and the circumstances in which it takes place. The cross-sectional study, covering some 21,300 subjects, has been published in the book “Agressions et victimisation: une enquête sur les délinquants violents et sexuels non détectés.” written by HENRIETTE HAAS, a professor of criminology at the Swiss School of Forensic Science and Criminology (IPSC) at the University of Lausanne (English translation of the title: “Violence and Victimization: A Study of Violent and Sex Offenders Unknown to the Police”). The recruits filled out a 40-page questionnaire in classrooms of about 35 participants under the supervision of civilian experts, full anonymity was guaranteed, and made obvious by the ballot box, in which they were to drop the questionnaires. An additional sample of 1,160 non-recruits was also interviewed for comparison purposes. The main results were: (1) childhood victimisation does not automatically lead to later delinquency or mental disorders. Many children seem to be resilient. (2) Conduct disorder (in the sense of DSM-IV) in boys seems to be caused by an interaction of biological factors with insufficient child rearing. (3) A delinquent minority of all young men (i.e. 8%) were found to be responsible for over half of all offences and nearly 70% of all acts of violence as well as over 80% of all sexual harassments and offences. (4) Milder forms of violence are mainly caused by both personal attributes of the offenders, risk-seeking behaviours and situational factors. (5) Severe forms of violence stem from the unfortunate combination of weapons owned by chronic offenders suffering from severe personality disorders. (6) In general, undetected felons resemble in every respect the clinically known convicts (e.g., polyvalent criminal activities, personality disorders, preference for deviant groups and risk-seeking behaviours) and it is quite unlikely that they will remain without a record over long periods of time.*

## ***Study Plan***

Are there a substantial number of felons who remain undetected by law enforcement over long periods of time? Do offenders get involved in crime simply because of bad luck or because of mental disorders or other factors? These are just a few of the questions that criminologists often have to answer. A study of 21,347 male army recruits and 1,160 male non-recruits for comparison purposes was conducted on the topic of violence in 1997. This provided an ideal opportunity for criminologists to examine serious offending. Due to general conscription in this country (all medically fit men are drafted), the recruits' sample covers about 70% of the entire cohort<sup>1</sup> (i.e. 70% of all Swiss men around the age of 20). In order to encourage honest responses, participating recruits were guaranteed full anonymity and this was visibly enforced by a ballot box in which they were to put the questionnaires. Those questionnaires considered to lack credibility were later removed, leaving 21,314 valid questionnaires for analysis. The results of the Swiss recruits' study were found to be largely similar to those of other independent studies, thus suggesting a good overall validity of the data. Results were produced for three areas: (1) Childhood experiences and developmental disturbances; (2) Physical violence; (3) Sexual offences including sexual abuse, rape etc. To avoid any misunderstanding, we want to make it very clear that all acts reported by the recruits in the questionnaire were committed during the 12-months *before* they began their basic training. The results of this study have therefore no bearing at all on the military

service in the Swiss army. In general, the non-recruits were found to be no less delinquent than the recruits, on the contrary, we have reason to believe, that the non-recruits were even more delinquent. This is because individuals on the fringes of society are precisely the type of people who are less inclined to participate in scientific studies. Furthermore, questionnaire completion was mandatory for the recruits but not for the non-recruits. The following results are based on the recruits' sample of 21,314 valid questionnaires.

### ***Does an unhappy or difficult childhood cause delinquency?***

Although the majority of recruits reported growing up in a warm and loving family climate, some were not so fortunate, for example, 4.8% of recruits reported being physically maltreated by their parents, 1.9% were beaten by other adults and 4.1% reported being sexually exploited or seriously abused during childhood or adolescence. The children of immigrants were more likely to report being maltreated or abused, than the children of non-immigrants. We examined to what extent victimisation during childhood and adolescence acts as a risk factor for later delinquency and found that being victimised, in general, does not lead to delinquency or mental disorders, so long as children do not suffer from multiple forms of abuse. According to our figures, even many of those boys who had been exposed to multiple and severe risks could go on to lead normal adult lives. Another rejoicing result was that two-thirds of the recruits who had attended special classes in primary school (e.g. because of language problems, learning difficulties, behaviour problems) went on to complete apprenticeships or higher education. Only 12% of this sub-group of boys achieved no

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<sup>1</sup> Haltiner K. (1998/99): « Von den Rekrutenbefragungen zur Jugendrepräsentativen Erhebungen – Eine erste Bilanz ». *Bericht über die pädagogischen Rekrutenprüfungen.*

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formal professional training at all, compared to 5.3% for the recruit's sample as a whole.

### ***Developmental disturbances among boys***

In the study, a working definition of serious conduct disorder was based on the criteria of the DSM-IV (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition 1994)<sup>2</sup>. This syndrome includes a strong tendency towards delinquency and violent behaviour and it is not to be confused with minor disciplinary problems. For 10.1% of all recruits sufficient indicators for conduct disorder were found. By the time they had reached age 19, approximately one third (33.6%) of this group of disturbed boys reported that had been involved in serious and habitual delinquent behaviour and a further 37% reported committing less serious offences (compared with 8.1% and 21.4%, respectively, for the whole recruits' sample). Conduct disorder was found to originate often from inadequate socialisation in dysfunctional families (e.g., marital violence, alcoholism in the family, child maltreatment and sexual abuse), probably in combination with biological risk factors. However, this developmental disorder cannot be blamed entirely on ineffective child rearing. The contribution of frequent accidents to behavioural disorders of boys is dramatic; either because these children suffered from a mild form of brain damage since birth, or because they may have acquired one as a result of an accident. Social disadvantages like "poor education of the parents", "being of immigrant parents", and "parental dependence on social aid" are quite frequently cited as important social risks for delinquency. However these

factors were found to play only a subordinate part in the origin of conduct disorder when the effect of all psychological, biographical and social variables was considered. This result may be influenced by the excellent Swiss welfare system, and the fact the job opportunities in this country are available even for people with little education. Further it was found that, with all other factors accounted for, there was a five-fold reduction in the risk of developing seriously disturbed behaviour, for boys who had a good relationship with their teacher. It was also shown that 58.2% of juveniles, who came to the attention of the police, had subsequently given up their delinquent behaviour.

### ***Violent activity amongst young men prior to basic training***

A minority of men (24%) considered violence to be a legitimate means of promoting their own interests. The victims of physical aggression were mostly other men, although 8.6% of all recruits admitted hitting women or children during the 12-month period prior to entering basic military training. Excluding the 341 seriously violent felons, the origins of less severe forms of violence were considered. Various factors found to be relevant were attributable to situational influences and the personality of offenders. Although there was an over-representation of children of naturalised parents among the men who had been physically violent, the algorithm of logistic regression did not find the variable "immigration" as a being of any influence. Statistical analysis revealed other biographical risk factors to be more relevant to the emergence of violent behaviour, for example, being a victim of maltreatment or sexual abuse and being involved in accidents. It was therefore the fact that immigrant children

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<sup>2</sup> American Psychiatric Association (APA) (Eds.) (1994): *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV*. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., Washington DC.

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had been more frequently victimised as children that accounted for their overrepresentation among violent men, and not cultural differences or migration. The data suggests that the children of parents from the Balkans and conflict-ridden Islamic regions were on average twice as likely to be sexually abused, than non-immigrant recruits (7.9% and 3.8% respectively). Again, having a good relationship with teachers was an important protective factor against future violence. For those boys who had been exposed to cumulated risks, being placed in an institution (e.g., home for children with difficulties) during adolescence was found to have a therapeutic influence, insofar as it diminished later violence.

### *Total of all self-reported offences prior to basic training*

In the following analysis, we considered all illegal acts, i.e., from misdemeanours to major crimes. The total number of offences reported by recruits was 156,076, which gave an average of 7.3 offences per person per year (which seems very high). Approximately one third of these offences were motoring related offences: the average for speeding and drink-driving offences was 2.4 offences per person per year. The distribution of offences was found to vary considerably. More than half of all offences were committed by 8.1% of recruits (e.g., drug dealers, habitual traffic offenders, burglars, thieves, arsonists, vandals, violent and sex offenders). Furthermore, this group of serious (habitual and potentially dangerous) delinquents were responsible for nearly 70% of all violent crimes and over 80% of all sex offences. However, only a third of this group reported ever standing trial for their delinquent behaviour.

### *Violent felons*

A subgroup of the serious delinquents consisted of the violent felons (n=341). They reported involvement in serious violent offending, including one or more incidents involving actual bodily harm, assault, robbery, blackmail with the use of weapons or many repeat incidences of brawling and endangering the life of others. These serious violent felons were also heavily engaged in other illegal activities such as sexual harassment, burglary, arson, vandalism and drug dealing. It is therefore not very likely they will go unnoticed by law enforcement over long periods of time. Their political inclinations seemed to be equally distributed between the left (e.g., hip-hopsters, and squatters) and the right (e.g., skinheads and supporters of right-wing nationalist groups). A high proportion (80%) of the hard-core violent group showed symptoms of a personality disorder, mostly after an early onset type of conduct disorder in childhood. It seems that they particularly like to spend their free time with those similar to themselves, for example, frequently getting “tooled up” with pistols, knives, baseball bats and other weapons. Multivariate logistical regression analysis of the data suggests that the unfortunate combination of a personality disorder in criminal recidivists with the possession of weapons is the most important predictor of serious violent offending. When the adult lives of violent criminals were examined, many of them were found to have overcome the difficulties experienced in their childhood on a superficial level. Although the information reported suggested that they were well adjusted and socially integrated (e.g., they had completed their education, had a circle of friends, and had a partner), this did not seem to subdue their aggressive propensity, acquired early in

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life. This kind of personality dissociation (also described in the famous novel of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*<sup>3</sup>) is not rare among violent criminals and sex offenders. There are reasons to assume that there is a link between the superficial normalisation and the partial success of the therapeutic measures undertaken during adolescence.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, a number of measures are required to control delinquency and violent offending. A criminal policy based on five pillars could be well used to tackle the problem of violence. The five pillars are:

- I. Prevention (e.g. treating children at risk at a very early age).
- II. Repression and deterrence (i.e. a strong law enforcement and correctional system).
- III. Therapy for those delinquents who are willing and able to participate.
- IV. Harm reduction, which means sufficiently long sentences for very serious crimes and unlimited custodial sentences for the most dangerous offenders.
- V. Offender-victim mediation in cases of minor harm, on the wish of both parties.

In the light of the present study, showing that crime is multiply determined and that it is mainly caused by a small group of recidivists who have shown many abnormalities since their childhood, it seems that one can hope to reduce crime only by combining the different pillars of criminal policy.

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<sup>3</sup> Stevenson R.L. (1886): *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

## The book

Haas Henriette S. (2001):

*Agressions et victimisation: une enquête sur les délinquants violents et sexuels non détectés.*

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