

Received: 21 June 2023, Accepted: 6 October 2023,

Published on-line as Recently Accepted Paper: October 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.1681>

Addressing Violence Against Parents and Peers and Violence in Schools Through the Perspective of Ecological Theory

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☞ This paper examines violence against parents and peers and violence in schools using Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory. We aim to establish connections between these forms of violence, perpetrator characteristics, and conclusions about the influences at different ecological layers. Through in-depth empirical research, we reviewed police, prosecutorial, and court files on child-parent violent crimes. Out of the total closed cases, 46 were included for further analysis, with nine cases addressing violence or misconduct in schools. Our findings highlight the link between violence against parents, early adolescent misbehaviour, and academic problems. Outward manifestations of these issues include discipline problems, truancy, association with problematic peers, substance abuse or addiction, and violent behaviour. Boys exhibit a progression from psychological to physical abuse against their parents and others. These results confirm other conclusions on the early onset and persistent nature of violent and delinquent behaviour. Notably, mental health issues and substance abuse play a significant role at the microsystem level. In conclusion, we recommend policy upgrades with a systematic approach to address youth violence, appropriate care of young people's mental health and the public delegitimation of various forms of violence.

Keywords: ecological theory, violence against parents, peer violence, school violence, violence prevention

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Obravnava nasilja nad starši in vrstniki ter nasilja v šolah z vidika ekološke teorije

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~ Prispevek obravnava nasilje nad starši in vrstniki ter nasilje v šolah z uporabo Bronfenbrennerjeve teorije ekoloških sistemov. Ugotoviti želimo povezave med omenjenimi oblikami nasilja in značilnostmi storilcev ter oblikovati zaključke o vplivih na različnih ekoloških ravneh. V poglobljeni empirični raziskavi smo pregledali policijske, tožilske in sodne spise o nasilnih kaznivih dejanjih otrok nad starši. Od vseh zaključenih primerov je bilo v nadaljnjo analizo vključenih 46 primerov, pri čemer je devet primerov obravnavalo nasilje ali neprimerno vedenje v šolah. Naše ugotovitve poudarjajo povezavo med nasiljem nad starši, neprimernim vedenjem mladostnikov in težavami pri akademskem uspehu. Problemi se manifestirajo navzven v obliki težav z disciplino, izostajanjem od pouka, druženjem s problematičnimi vrstniki, zlorabo ali odvisnostjo od drog in z nasilnim vedenjem. Pri dečkih je opaziti stopnjevanje od psihičnega do fizičnega nasilja nad starši in drugimi osebami. Naši rezultati potrjujejo ugotovitve drugih študij o zgodnjem pojavu ter vztrajni naravi nasilnega in prestopniškega vedenja. Pomembno vlogo na ravni mikrosistema imajo zlasti težave z duševnim zdravjem in zlorabe drog. V sklepu priporočamo nadgradnjo politik s sistematičnim pristopom pri obravnavi nasilja med mladimi, z ustrezno skrbjo za duševno zdravje mladih in javno delegitimacijo različnih oblik nasilja.

Ključne besede: ekološka teorija, nasilje nad starši, vrstniško nasilje, šolsko nasilje, preprečevanje nasilja

Introduction

Events related to youth violence in Slovenia since autumn 2022 and the aftermath of the tragic school mass shooting in Belgrade in May 2023 have prompted a broader public discussion on youth violence. It has become evident that there is a lack of a systematic approach to addressing and preventing youth and school violence. Additionally, there is a paucity of empirical data available, with reliance primarily placed on common sense approaches rather than rigorous scientific evidence (Bučar Ručman & Šulc, 2020). In public discourse, it has become increasingly prevalent to attribute blame to two institutions: the school and the family. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the causes of violence are multifaceted and encompass various levels of society.

Rearing children, their development, socialisation, and full inclusion in society depend on many elements, which are often complexly intertwined. This perception of human development through various interactions and relationships with factors on different levels was introduced in Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 1994) ecological systems theory, which integrated conclusions from the vast body of research from diverse disciplines. He argued that external factors influencing human development coexist through different layers of the social environment. In ecological theory, these layers, which are not strictly bordered and limited but blurred one into another, start with the *microsystem* (i.e., activities, roles and interrelations in an individual's immediate setting within a family, peers and teachers in schools, co-workers at workplace), the *mesosystem* (i.e., interrelations between at least two elements of microsystem; e.g., relations between family, schoolmates, teachers, and peers in the neighbourhood), the *exosystem* (i.e., linkages and processes between two or more settings, where at least one is not a child's immediate setting and in which a child does not have an active role and direct contact with, but it influences her/him indirectly, e.g., parents' place of work, mass media, neighbourhood, government's (local and state) decisions, informal social networks, etc.). The *macrosystem* refers to the cultural and ideological blueprint that determines formal and informal institutions and 'sets the pattern for the structures and activities occurring at the concrete level' (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). It includes formal rules, laws, policies, beliefs, bodies of knowledge, customs and everyday practices, and lifestyles supported by the predominant values of a given culture and subculture. The last layer, the *chronosystem*, includes changes or consistency over time, not only at the level of the individual but also at the level of the environment (e.g., changes in family structure, socioeconomic status, employment, place of living).

Ecological theory and explanations of youth violence and bullying

Social sciences offer explanations of violent behaviour, though this has long been marked by theories that mostly stayed within their disciplines and focused on the lower level of factors and elements considered as causes of violence. Heise (1998, p. 262) argues that the theory-building approach was hindered by 'the narrowness of traditional academic disciplines' and the popularity of single-factor explanations among academics and activists. Ecological theory surpassed this theoretical narrowness, joined conclusions from various disciplines, and put multiple factors under the spotlight at different levels. It has been used as an umbrella covering previously separated conclusions and theories of delinquent and violent behaviour. WHO's World Report on Violence and Health (2002) adopted the ecological model as a theoretical foundation for understanding violence. It eloquently states that 'no single factor explains why some individuals behave violently towards others or why violence dominates in some communities compared to others. Violence is a result of the complex interplay of individual, relationship, social, cultural and environmental factors' (WHO, 2002, p. 12). The ecological framework was applied to research and provided explanations of intimate partner violence (Di Napoli et al., 2019; Heise, 1998; Muster, 2021; Nelson & Lund, 2017), child maltreatment (Belsky, 1980; Little & Kaufman Kantor, 2002), sexual assault (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009) and it also strongly influenced research on bullying, school, and youth violence (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Espelage, 2014; European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN), 2021; Henry, 2000, 2009; Henry & Bracy, 2012; Hong et al., 2014; WHO, 2015).

The ecological model explains youth violence and bullying across multiple levels. Espelage (2014) demonstrates that bullying is influenced by interactions, processes, and issues at various ecological levels, including the family (attitudes towards violence, presence of family violence, lack of parental supervision, family impact on peer selection, significant family changes like divorce), peers (association with violent peers, the role of bystanders), communities and neighbourhoods (exposure to violence in unsafe areas), schools (supportive teachers, school administration's anti-bullying efforts), and broader cultural and institutional factors (inequality perpetuation, alienation, aggression based on race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation of students). Benbenishty and Astor proposed a heuristic model of school violence based on ecological theory (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Astor & Benbenishty, 2019). Unlike other approaches, their model places the school, rather than the

individual student, at the core. They argue that schools exist within a socioecological environment, and violence is shaped by the school's external and internal context. The internal context includes factors such as school social climate, organisational climate, and ideology.³ The external context encompasses students' characteristics and the broader social context of the community. The authors also acknowledge the influence of the global context, media, and technology, highlighting the impact of global influences and trends on youth violence.⁴

The link between victimisation and victimising others – or, as Meško (1997) concluded in his case study analysis of young offenders in Slovenia, 'victim victimises' – is evident in research examining the microsystem elements. Studies have confirmed that bullies often come from families in which parents are not actively engaged in their children's lives (Low & Espelage, 2013) or in which aggression and violence are used to achieve family goals. This can be connected to direct violence, conflicts between child and parent, and indirect violence resulting from exposure to domestic abuse. Conflicts in the parent-child relationship have been found to be correlated with and predictive of both bullying perpetration and victimisation (Lereya et al., 2013; Stelios & Panayiotis, 2013). Baldry (2003) concluded that exposure to direct forms of violence within the family, such as parents hitting or threatening each other, significantly increases the risk of children becoming bullies. Childhood maltreatment significantly heightens the likelihood of involvement in delinquency and is also a crucial predictor of the prevalence of adolescent violent delinquency (Smith & Thornberry, 1995). Furthermore, the presence of violence and delinquency within the family can contribute to engaging in more severe and extreme forms of violence (see Putkonen et al., 2002, 2007). Apart from violence against others, childhood abuse (physical, emotional, sexual) also increases the risk of self-injury (Harford et al., 2014; Meeker et al., 2021) and increases the risk of victimisation in bullying due to the absence of protective factors, such as a warm parent-child relationship and effective coping mechanisms (Baldry, 2003; Espelage et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2019).

3 The lead/corresponding author of this paper had the unique opportunity to witness the divergent ideologies prevalent in schools within the Slovene public educational system. His active involvement in the 'Only (with) others are we' project (orig. *Le z drugimi smo*) (2016–2021) involved conducting extensive training for over 3000 teachers, counsellors, and principals across kindergarten, primary, secondary, and high schools. The responses to the same training sessions exhibited notable variations, ranging from affirmative applause and a principal's remark acknowledging the workshop as enlightening to another principal's concluding comment expressing concern about alleged one-sidedness, highlighting the importance of recognising that immigrants can also be implicated in criminal acts such as rape.

4 The most evident example of this is the impact of social media, particularly TikTok, on cyberbullying. TikTok's widespread popularity among young people creates situations in which violent incidents are recorded and shared, reaching a broad audience and resulting in further victimisation. Traditional media even pick up these videos, amplifying the victimisation through news coverage.

Longitudinal studies provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of various factors on delinquency. The Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development (Farrington, 1989, 1990; Farrington et al., 2006) followed 411 boys in London from ages 8 to 50. The study concluded that the most significant early predictors (at ages 8–11) of later criminal offending include socio-economic deprivation, poor parenting, family deviance, school problems, hyperactivity-impulsivity-attention deficit disorder, and antisocial behaviour in children. The development of a criminal career later in life was significantly influenced by factors experienced at a young age. Among the observed group of men, those who were convicted at the earliest ages had more convictions and the longest criminal careers throughout their lifespans (Farrington et al., 2006).

With most cross-sectional studies, we cannot make general inferences on a link between bullying and violence later in life. However, some broader studies proved this connection. From the research on the three community samples in Stockholm, Olweus (2011) confirmed the connection between bullying and committing general crimes over eight years. This link was even stronger in the case of violent crimes. A systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Ttofi et al. (2012) also showed that bullying offending and victimisation are significantly associated with violent behaviour later in life. Messerschmidt's (2017) life history analysis of adolescent boys clearly shows the connection between in-school bullying victimisation and compensation for the unsuccessful acclimatisation with the socially constructed ideas of masculinity with committing sexual violence in the home environment.

Violence against teachers and parents

Peers are not the only victims of adolescents' aggression and violence. At least two other groups of victims have attracted the attention of researchers: parents and teachers. Until recently, these phenomena were predominantly addressed separately; however, recently, we have seen attempts to address them together (Del Moral et al., 2019; Ibabe et al., 2013a; Jaureguizar et al., 2013).

Multiple studies reveal that student violence against teachers exists globally, with variations in prevalence and types. Longobardi et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of 24 studies, finding a prevalence range of 20% to 75%, with an overall prevalence of 53% for teacher-reported violence victimisation within the previous two years. McMahon et al. (2014) reported that harassment was the most common form of violence (73%) in a US sample, including obscene remarks, gestures, and threats. Canadian data (Wilson et al., 2010) showed 80% of teachers experienced violence, primarily personal insults and threats. South Korean research (Moon & McCluskey, 2016) indicated lower rates of teacher

victimisation but similar types of violence.

Lešnik Mugnaioni et al. (2009) revealed the prevalence of different types of violence against teachers in Slovenia. Verbal abuse is experienced by 56% of teachers, followed by psychological violence (44%) and economic violence (28%). Physical violence is reported by 5% of teachers. A 2018 survey as part of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) in Slovenia shows that 18.5% of primary school teachers and 14% of high school teachers experience verbal abuse from students several times a year. Physical violence is reported by 3.3% of primary school teachers and 1.2% of high school teachers. Disrespect and property damage occur for 16.2% of primary school teachers and 5.8% of high school teachers (Japelj Pavešić, 2020).

Violence against parents by adolescent children encompasses emotional, physical, financial, and sexual abuse (Cottrell, 2004). Factors contributing to abusive behaviour can be found within family dynamics, including cohesion, support, conflicts, and parenting style (Ibabe & Bentler, 2016; Ibabe et al., 2013b). A nurturing and supportive upbringing is considered a protective factor, while emotional rejection poses a risk for violence (Ibabe et al., 2013b). Permissive parenting, excessive control, and inconsistent parenting can also contribute to parent abuse (Cottrell, 2004; Cottrell & Monk, 2004). Witnessing violence or experiencing direct victimisation, such as physical violence, can influence violent behaviour (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Margolin & Baucom, 2014). Research indicates that violence against parents is linked to children's mental health problems (Band-Winterstein et al., 2016; Kageyama et al., 2018), as well as illicit drug and/or alcohol addiction (Benbow et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2018), which can lead to financial demands and subsequent conflicts and violence.

In recent years, researchers have started to address the problem of violence against teachers and parents jointly. This became known as 'violence against authority' (Ibabe et al., 2013a) and shows common elements in violence against both groups of victims. Parents and teachers should be recognised as 'a source of physical and psychological well-being, safety, and authority for adolescents' (Ibabe et al., 2013a, p. 1). A study on physical victimisation and verbal abuse of parents and teachers in Spain (Ibabe et al., 2013a; Jaureguizar et al., 2013) showed that school environment (classroom climate) influenced this type of violence, though the impact was even stronger for the family environment. In both cases, the mediating element between difficulties in the family and in schools and violence against parents and teachers was antisocial and criminal behaviour. In contrast, positive family and school environments acted as protective elements against antisocial and criminal behaviour (family again had a stronger impact).

Our research is guided by the following research questions: Is there a connection between violence against parents, violence in schools, and violence against peers? What are the characteristics of perpetrators of violence against parents, school violence, and/or violence against peers? Can we draw common conclusions about the influences of various elements at different layers of ecological theory on violence against parents, violence in schools, and against peers? The methods used to address these research questions are described in the following section of this paper.

Method

Participants

Our analysis included 46 case files, encompassing all instances of violent crimes committed by children against their parents. This was not a selected sample of such cases, but rather all finished cases with parent-child violent crimes that were kept in the archives of District State Prosecutor's Offices during the selected time period. We examined all available documents for evidence of violence or misconduct in schools or during schooling. Among the 46 cases, nine (19.6%) of them met the selection criteria and were included in further detailed analysis.

Instrument

We obtained permission from the Supreme State Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2021) to 'access, transcribe, copy or extract text' from the files of the State Prosecutor's Office. Between November 2021 and July 2022, the first author visited all District State Prosecutor's Offices in Slovenia and collected documents from the cases initiated between 2011 and 2013. The collected documents included police files with pertinent documents from pre-trial proceedings, including criminal charges, reports, and supporting materials such as minutes of the criminal report, official notes on collected information, suspect statements, crime scene investigation reports, medical expert reports, restraining orders, toxicological test reports, social work centre notifications, and criminal record extracts. The prosecution files consisted of investigation requests, witness and defendant interviews, prosecution waivers, indictments, and custody order documents. The court files contained minutes from pre-trial and sentencing hearings and transcripts of audio-recorded witness statements, expert reports, and final verdicts.

Research design

Data for the analyses were obtained from the State Prosecutor's Office records. In the nine cases that met the above-mentioned selection criteria, we examined the basic demographic characteristics of perpetrators (gender, age at the time of the beginning of violence, educational level) and then applied the coding system with the use of *a priori* codes (i.e., codes based on the theoretical review and defined prior to examination of data) (Gibson & Brown, 2009, pp. 130–137). All documents in the files were analysed for the following codes: family characteristics, long-term family relations, relations with peers, problems in school, the onset of violent behaviour, characteristics of violent behaviour, pre-conviction and police records, drug abuse, mental health problems, victims of violence, important life-changing events in the family. After the coding phase, an in-depth analysis of the coded data was undertaken, aimed at identifying patterns, potential exceptions, and deviations from existing conclusions. By employing a qualitative content analysis, we constructed coherent thematic groups, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the data.

Results

Characteristics of violent offenders and the beginning of violent behaviour

Detailed analysis of nine files revealed specific characteristics at different ecological levels. All offenders were male and lived with their parents. Many of them displayed aggressive and abusive behaviour during their teenage years, preceding their involvement in violent crimes against their parents. For most of them, problems occurred already at elementary school (four had discipline problems, and one had academic problems); the youngest showed behavioural difficulties at the age of 10 (Case 3). In three cases, problems appeared at the beginning of high school, when boys started to hang out in bars and abuse alcohol and, in one case, illicit drugs. The academic success of all perpetrators was low. Among them was one with unfinished elementary school, four with finished elementary school, three with vocational school and training, and one finished high school (entered university but never finished it). From the documents in the files, we can see that their behavioural problems at an early age included truancy, aggressive and violent behaviour, and alcohol and illicit drug abuse.

From the case files, we can see the progression and escalation of violence among the offenders. It started at a young age with psychological violence, which included insults, threats, death threats, blackmail, financial exploitation and abuse, and then escalated to physical violence in the form of hitting, choking,

pushing, and pulling of victims, and damaging and destroying property. In addition, some perpetrators used tools or weapons and threatened victims with them (e.g., knives, a homemade gun). Further, in some cases, offenders threatened with destroying and burning down the home and committing suicide.

Development and progression of violence are exemplified in Case 2, where it is stated: 'This family experienced problems with their son for the past 10 years. He struggled with learning difficulties since elementary school, was hyperactive, always seeking attention, and was disruptive. In high school, he began skipping classes, his academic performance declined drastically, and he drank and associated with inappropriate individuals. He became violent and argumentative, resorting to physical abuse against his parents when confronted.'

A similar account is found in Case 4, where a mother reported: 'Issues with my sons [one of whom became an offender] emerged when they finished elementary school. In high school, they started staying out late, frequently skipped school, and began drinking alcohol, leading to fights.' The offender hangs out with a group of approximately ten friends, who all use marijuana and have similar lifestyles.

Case 7 involves an offender who displayed aggression towards parents, grandparents, and siblings. Documents indicate that problems began in the offender's second year of high school when parents suspected illicit drug use (marijuana). His sister described the situation: 'We used to get along until he dropped out of the second year of high school and changed his group of friends. He first hit me when I was in my fourth year of high school.' This pattern of violent behaviour was also confirmed by a social worker, who described its development over seven years (from ages 17 to 24).

In Case 8, the sister of a physically violent offender stated that her brother 'started hanging out with a bad crowd and drinking alcohol when he was 15 years old.' The police also reached a similar conclusion, gathering information on the suspect and noting his history of alcohol abuse since his teenage years. When intoxicated, he instigates fights with his siblings and humiliates his parents.

Other noticeable characteristics of violent perpetrators are their psychological well-being, mental health, and addiction issues. Except for Case 1, for which precise data is lacking, all offenders exhibited a mental health condition and/or illicit drug/alcohol addiction. Out of the nine offenders, evidence in their files indicates that six have been placed in psychiatric hospitals. Some were diagnosed with specific mental health conditions, such as symptoms of schizophrenia (Case 9) or personality disorders (Cases 3, 4, 6). Additionally, some individuals struggled with illicit drug and/or alcohol addiction or exhibited extreme alcohol abuse (Cases 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). In Case 7, reports only referred

to illicit drug use (marijuana), while in other Cases (2, 4), alcohol use was combined with substance abuse. Reports for Cases 5, 6, and 8 solely mentioned alcohol abuse or addiction.

Specific files contain information regarding the factors contributing to the deteriorated psychological condition of the individuals. For instance, in Case 2, it is mentioned that the offender's problems escalated after the death of his mother. However, it should be noted that this cannot be considered the sole reason for his violent behaviour. As evident from the file, this individual exhibited violent tendencies even before his mother's passing, and she was also a victim of his attacks. The evolution of personal problems and the inclination towards violence is apparent in the documents of Case 3. The boy was institutionalised in a residential treatment institution in the fourth grade of elementary school (age 9–10) due to his bad temper and disruptive behaviour at school. He remained in this facility until the age of 17. After his return home, his family constantly engaged in conflicts, prompting the Social Work Centre to place him in another treatment institution. Although he returned home after a few months, he physically fought and threatened others with a knife. Consequently, he was placed in a psychiatric hospital. After three months, his parents took him out, and he was diagnosed with a mixed personality disorder. His violent tendencies persisted and worsened with alcohol abuse. His diagnosis was later confirmed by a court expert (psychiatrist), who concluded that his disorder stemmed from a combination of innate and acquired personal characteristics. While this condition alone does not significantly affect the individual, combined with alcohol abuse, it leads to a lack of self-control and impaired judgment and capabilities.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from Case 9. During high school, the offender began spending time in a bar after classes, and upon returning home intoxicated, he displayed verbal aggression. Over time, his inclination towards violence developed, and he exhibited violent behaviour even when sober. He also became physically aggressive. Eventually, he was diagnosed with an acute mental disorder with signs of schizophrenia and was hospitalised five times.

The lack of money for illicit drugs and alcohol was identified as a trigger for fights, leading to violence against parents and subsequent criminal charges in some cases (Cases 2, 4). However, this reason was not the sole factor contributing to such behaviour. The documents in case files demonstrate a pattern of long-lasting and evolving violence against parents, extending beyond isolated incidents prompted by financial issues. Pre-conviction records and a history of police scrutiny are available for eight offenders, encompassing crimes such as fraud, threats, and family violence. One of the offenders (Case 4) had previously been convicted of 13 crimes, including six thefts, two frauds, a grand theft,

endangering safety, two acts of family violence, and vehicle theft. In one case, there is no available data on previous criminal offences.

Victims of violence and types of violence

Because our research focused on violent crimes against parents, parents were expected to be the primary victims. However, a comprehensive examination of the files revealed that violence was also directed towards other individuals, including siblings, grandparents, relatives, and even police officers who responded to emergency calls. In one instance, the violence extended to an 11-year-younger sibling, leading the parents to be unable to leave the sibling alone with the offender (Case 3). These situations also had a detrimental impact on the academic achievements of the affected siblings (Cases 3, 7). While not explicitly stated, it can be inferred from the files that violence was also perpetrated against peers. This inference is supported by statements such as 'the perpetrator has a history of fighting since high school' (Case 4) and information on prior convictions. Additionally, in one case, a former university professor of the perpetrator became a victim, receiving threatening emails containing death threats.

Family relations

The data in the files provides limited insight into long-term family relationships and conditions. However, based on statements from social workers, witnesses, and police reports, we can categorise families into three groups. The first group includes families where parents have lost authority over their children, although they still attempt to provide support (Cases 1, 2, 3, 7, 9). This is evident through the involvement of children in various forms of professional assistance, such as psychologists and psychiatrists. These parents also continue to help their children even after experiencing physical violence at home. For example, in Case 2, the father accompanies his son to job interviews and assists him in writing job applications despite withholding financial support. In Case 3, the parents decided to remove their son from a psychiatric hospital where he had been placed for several months following a violent outburst. They also choose not to pursue criminal charges against their son and maintain regular contact, providing him with financial support. A similar domestic situation is observed in Case 9. In Case 7, the parents seek help from the Centre for Social Work and other institutions due to concerns about their son's drug abuse, dropping out of school, and aggressive behaviour. After moving in with them, this boy also exhibited violent behaviour towards his grandparents.

The second category comprises families in which the children did not receive parental support and were exposed to unfavourable conditions. However,

in our sample, this situation was only evident in one case. Case 5 involves a family in which the father, who was an alcoholic, passed away, and the son was placed in a foster home by the Centre for Social Work. The mother relocated and remarried. Violence ensued when the offender later joined them. Witness statements indicate that alcohol abuse is prevalent in this family, serving as the primary factor contributing to conflicts and violence.

Data from Case 4 indicates an overly permissive parenting approach within the family. Issues with the son emerged during elementary school and persisted for several years. The parents provided him with money, which he used for drugs. Despite the son's use of violence during high school, the mother never involved the police or sought assistance from other institutions, believing he would improve. The son remained unemployed, relying solely on social support, and despite the violence, the parents continued to cover his rent and food expenses.

Within the files, we also observed changes in the family that align with the ecological theory's chronosystem. These long-term changes included the death of a mother (Case 2) and the death of a father, followed by placement in a foster home (Case 5) and the death of a brother (Case 9). Although these events marked turning points and intensified the violent behaviour, they were not the sole cause. Violent and disruptive behaviour existed prior to these events, except for Case 5.

Discussion

The results of our empirical research have revealed a link between violence against parents, delinquency in early youth, and school-related problems. These problems manifest as disciplinary issues, truancy, association with troublesome peers, substance abuse, and violent behaviour. Boys tend to develop persistent behaviour patterns, progressing from psychological to physical violence and severe abuse toward parents and others.

Our findings support previous studies and conclusions regarding the early onset and long-lasting nature of delinquent and violent behaviour. In all analysed cases, problems emerged as early as elementary or high school and persisted for years, with some cases spanning almost two decades. The development of a violent career was clearly influenced by factors experienced at a young age. Another notable characteristic of the offenders is their involvement in a broader range of criminal activities. With the exception of one individual, they were all convicted or processed for other offences and misdemeanours. This also confirms the conclusions of other studies that antisocial behaviour in

youth serves as a significant predictor of future criminal behaviour.

Although our study was not limited to the specific gender of offenders, we must not neglect the microsystemic (individual) characteristic that appeared in all cases: all offenders were men. This is not a coincidence. Our findings confirm the conclusions on the connection between (physical) violence and masculinity, which is already apparent at a young age.

Unlike other studies, our data do not indicate a direct association between behavioural problems in boys and family dynamics, family violence, or inappropriate parenting. From the analysis of extensive documentation, it was impossible to identify instances of maltreatment, neglect, or abuse. On the contrary, some cases exhibited descriptions of parental engagement and support for their children. Parents often made efforts to address problems through institutional means, albeit with limited success. Additionally, in families with more children, the other children, aside from the perpetrators, were not violent and were even exposed to victimisation by their violent siblings. Only in one case were we able to identify exposure to unfavourable conditions, such as growing up in a home with an alcoholic father and subsequent placement in a foster home after the perpetrator's father passed away.

Our findings are aligned with theoretical conclusions that highlight the connection between violence and mental health issues, such as offender's mental health disorders and substance abuse, as prominent factors at the microsystem level. Additionally, factors from the mesosystem level, such as association with delinquent peers and in-group substance abuse, significantly influenced the behaviour of offenders. This appeared mainly during the transition from elementary to high school when boys started hanging out in bars and abusing alcohol. The combination of mental health problems and substance abuse yielded the most concerning outcomes.

Conclusions

Conclusions drawn from our research provide the following recommendations for practical implementation. Firstly, considering that all boys exhibited signs of problematic behaviour at an early age, which subsequently led to long-lasting delinquency, there is a clear need for a systematic approach to address youth violence in elementary schools. This necessitates intervention in the exosystem by developing and implementing a violence prevention policy based on evidence-based approaches, encompassing effective primary and secondary prevention programmes. It is crucial to educate school staff and provide them with systematic and ongoing training to identify early indicators of violence.

As emphasised by Astor and Benbenishty (2019, p. 23), 'Schools make a difference'. External influences on youth violence can be mitigated and moderated by implementing effective violence prevention policies within school contexts. Similarly, Berčnik and Tašner (2018) conclude that appropriate school policies can contribute to reducing violence. Addressing youth violence requires a comprehensive, top-down, systematic approach, and schools should not be left to tackle this challenge alone.

Secondly, the results of our study show the importance of appropriate care for young people's mental health. The health system must provide appropriate support and help available in due time to everybody and not only those who can afford it. This support must also be provided for violent offenders, families, and victims. Additionally, recent studies on the mental health of young people during the coronavirus pandemic in Slovenia have revealed concerning findings. Among 9th-grade elementary school students, the prevalence of depression was 17.4%, and suicidal thoughts were reported by 12.4% (Jeriček Klanšček, 2021). Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that peer violence is addressed in two important national documents: the Resolution on the National Mental Health Programme 2018–2028 (2018) and the Resolution on the National Programme for the Prevention and Suppression of Crime 2019–2023 (2019).

Finally, while our research did not specifically delve into the broader social influences on youth violence, it is important not to overlook the legitimisation of various forms of violence, intolerance, xenophobia, misogyny, and chauvinism in public discourse. As the ecological theory has demonstrated, these influences at the macrosystem permeate and impact society as a whole. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise and condemn them as harmful, unproductive, undesirable, and unwarranted. Further, our findings showed a clear connection between violence and gender; therefore, we can repeat the call of Podreka (2017, p. 30) that 'research on violence cannot avoid the question of gender and construction of men and masculinity'. This issue clearly needs to be addressed at the macrosystem level and address cultural norms connected to violence, as well as the socially expected roles and behaviour of men in our society.

Our research primarily relied on official case documents, which provided numerous verified details but also imposed limitations on our study. For future research, we recommend incorporating information from social care centres, schools, and other relevant institutions. The focus should be not only on parent-child violence but also on bullying incidents and analysis of relationships with parents, peers, and the community. Such an approach would significantly contribute to the existing knowledge of young people's violence.

Disclosure statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

Acknowledgements

Aleš Bučar Ručman's work is based on the work in the research programme 'Security and safety in local communities – comparison of rural and urban environments' (P5-0397 (A), 2019–2024), financed by the Slovenian Research Agency. The research programme is carried out by the Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security, University of Maribor.

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