

THE DYNAMICS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN TEENAGE CRIMINAL GROUPS

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Abstract: At the age of adolescence, the influence of friends radically overcomes that of the family. Norms and social values of adolescents migrate easily from one extreme to another, from positive to negative or vice versa, becoming contradictory and uncontrollable. For these reasons, juvenile delinquency frequently occurs in groups.

This study was performed on a number of 11 criminal groups composed of teenagers. The aim was to identify the dynamics of interpersonal relationships within such groups, in other words to capture the mechanisms of the emergence, the procedures for the consolidation and development of interpersonal relations.

Keywords: criminal group, adolescents/teenagers, interpersonal relations, group dynamics.

Introduction

Criminal groups composed of teenagers are in most cases redoubtable adversaries for their investigators. Being formed in short intervals of time, they become criminally effective, making it sometimes difficult to be discovered and annihilated. The crime spectrum of such groups consists of numerous types of offences, from the simplest ones with a low degree of social danger, to the most complicated, more aggressive, with a maximum degree of social danger.

The age-specific psychological and physiological features intensify juvenile delinquency, make it less manageable, and are often oscillatory, disordered, chaotic, and hard to anticipate.

Research methodology

The fundamental goal of this research is to identify the dynamics of interpersonal relationships established within the analyzed criminal groups. More specifically, we will focus on the following operational objectives:

- O1. Identification of premises/circumstances of the emergence of a criminal group.
- O2. Measuring the social/interpersonal relationships within the analyzed groups.
- O3. Identification of methods of consolidation and development of interpersonal relationships within the criminal group.

The following instruments have been used in order to achieve the objectives of the research: anamnesis; interview with various people (members of the group, police officers, lawyers, teachers, members of the families of those involved, etc.); analysis of documents available (depositions, testimonies, etc); sociometry; psychological tests.

Note: The research was conducted *post-facto*, i.e. after the criminal groups had been annihilated, and when they were in various stages of the criminal trial.

The criminal groups: an overview

Table 1. Descriptive parameters of the criminal groups

The Group	The Criminal Environment		The number of members	Ages	Family type (Number of adults present)			
	Urban	Rural			0 Without parents	1 Monoparental	2 Biparental	
							Natural	Remarried
G1	X		9	12-17	1	-	5	3
G2	X		9	12-16	1	1	4	3
G3	X		8	11-17	-	1	4	3
G4	X		6	11-17	-	-	4	2
G5	X		6	11-17	-	-	3	3
G6	X		5	9-15	-	-	3	2
G7	X		4	13-17			2	2
G8		X	5	10-14	1	1	2	1
G9		X	7	11-16	-	1	4	2
G10		X	7	12-17	-	2	4	1
G11		X	8	12-17	1	1	4	2
		Total	74		4	7	39	24

As regards the criminal environment, of all the 11 groups analyzed, only 4 operated in the rural environment, while the remaining 7 (namely, the majority of them) operated in the urban criminal environment, which is certainly richer, exposed to more temptations, more impersonal, offering a larger environment for criminal activities.

The number of members is slightly variable, but within specified limits. Thus, the lower limit is around 4-5 members, while the upper limit is 9 people. Therefore these are small, sometimes very small, groups based on direct communication, *interaction is face-to-face*, the members know one another very well, which ensures operational efficiency and, apparently unexpected, criminal success of these groups of teenagers.

The members' *age* oscillates around a lower value of 9-10 years, which indicates an early criminal onset. This fact is concerning, because if we take into account the age of the group (see Table 3), there is an extremely early start in criminal activities, somewhere around 8-9 years of age. Instead, the upper limit reaches 16-17 years of age, when group members who are still active tend to escape from the group, possibly to change the criminal profile or level, by joining new groups and moving on to other categories of crime.

A long-discussed aspect in relation to the criminal onset is *social environment and family of origin*. Quite often, the causes attributed to criminality are identified at this level. Extremely interesting is the number of adults present in the child's life, i.e. *the type of family of origin*. Only 4 members (representing 5,4 %) come from families in which parents are absent, being raised by various relatives, especially grandparents. 7 subjects (representing

9,45 %) belong to single-parent families, one of the parents being deceased or having permanently left the family residence. Most of the members of such criminal groups (i.e. 63 subjects, which means 85 % of the total number) come from biparental families, in which both parents are present in the child's life.

Therefore, the members of the families the minors belong to played a decisive role in their choice of the criminal group, of a way of life beyond the limits of the law.

Some of the members of the group come from socially, educationally, relationally, financially etc. dysfunctional families. The number of adults in the family is not important (whether it is a monoparental, biparental family or both parents are deceased), but how the family perform their specific functions/roles: educational, relational, social, moral and control in relation to the children (Milcu, 2013, pp. 172-173).

Table 2. The level of income in the families of origin and the level of education of criminal group members

The Group	FAMILY INCOME LEVEL			EDUCATIONAL LEVEL			
	Low	Average	High	School dropout	Grade retention	Class failure	No issues
G1	-	4	5	1	2	3	3
G2	2	4	3	1	-	3	5
G3	2	4	2	-	-	2	6
G4	1	3	2	-	-	2	4
G5	2	3	1	-	-	2	4
G6	1	3	1	-	-	2	3
G7	2	2	-	-	2	1	1
G8	2	3	-	1	1	3	-
G9	5	2	-	-	-	3	4
G10	4	3	-	-	-	4	3
G11	3	4	1	1	-	5	2
Tot al	24	35	15	4	5	30	35

The level of family income is often brought into question when considering the causes of crime. However, at least in the criminal groups we have analyzed, only one third of the subjects came from families with a poor financial situation, i.e. living on the edge of subsistence. The other two thirds of the subjects belong to families whose financial level is at least average, if not high, the subjects thus enjoying material comfort specific to their age. On the other hand, however, it is true that most of the interviewed subjects blame financial problems for their involvement in criminal activities.

With respect to *the level of education of the members* of these groups, the school dropout rate (only 4 subjects, i.e., 5,4 % of total) and grade retention (i.e. 5 subjects, representing 6,75 % of the total) are minimum. Nevertheless, there are multiple class failures in the case of 30 of subjects (40,5 % of the analyzed group), who are always on the verge of

failing some of their classes and displaying lack of interest in school. Most of the members of the criminal groups (35 subjects, i.e. 47,3 % of total) fall into the category of common children, without school performance issues. Thus, the statistics contradict the preconceived ideas frequently brought about in the media, according to which juvenile/teenage offenders have serious school problems, such as school dropout and grade retention. However, let us remember that these statistics mentioned above relate to school performance proper, not to moral, attitudinal, or religious education.

Research results

Table 3. Criminal parameters of the analyzed groups

The Group	NUMBER OF CRIMES COMMITTED/PROVEN	CRIMINAL EXPERIENCE LEVEL (subjects)			GROUP'S AGE (months)
		Low	Average	High	
G1	18	2	3	4	34
G2	11	2	5	2	27
G3	21	2	3	3	21
G4	12	2	3	1	24
G5	16	2	2	2	25
G6	13	1	2	2	16
G7	25	1	2	1	34
G8	18	1	2	2	36
G9	21	2	3	2	25
G10	16	2	3	2	18
G11	19	2	4	2	31
Total	Total = 190 (Average = 17.2)	19	32	23	Total = 291 (Average = 26.4)

One of the parameters with simply impressive values (in a negative manner, of course) is the *number of crimes committed* by the analyzed groups. It is necessary to point out that we took into account only the offences identified/ proven by judicial investigations, although we suspect that this number is much higher, some offenses not being in police records, for various reasons. The average number of offences for the whole lot was 17.2, which is a significant number for teenage criminal groups.

With reference to the *level of criminal experience* of the members of criminal groups, we found that 25% of subjects had a low criminal experience, 43.25% had an average level of experience in criminal activities, and the remaining 31.1 % had a high level of criminal experience. Statistical data indicate that each offending group recruits and involves inexperienced people in specific activities, even though they are – at least in the early stages – genuine vulnerabilities for the groups concerned. These groups invest a lot of time and resources in these people, socializing them and earning their trust, helping them to integrate and become loyal to the group.

With respect to *the age* of the group (since inception), the average for the groups analyzed is 26.4 months. Of the groups surveyed, only two acted for a period of less than two years. The great majority of the groups acted for more than 2 years, but not more than 3 years. This seems to be a significant difference in relation to adult criminal groups, which often exceed the 3-year threshold. Criminal groups take shape easily at the age of adolescence, quickly, without long attempts from members, based on affinities and common interests, and according to the statistical data above remain active for more than 2 years.

Table 4. *The stability and cohesion of criminal groups*

The Group	THE STABILITY LEVEL			THE COHESION LEVEL		
	Low	Average	High	Low	Average	High
G1			X			X
G2		X				X
G3		X			X	
G4			X			X
G5		X			X	
G6	X				X	
G7			X			X
G8		X			X	
G9		X			X	
G10	X			X		
G11		X			X	

The high level of stability in criminal groups is well-known. Although they are composed of teenagers, once established, these groups develop and stabilize quickly becoming support groups for their members. After joining the group, teenagers immediately find socio-affective, social, material support, easily assume the social and attitudinal norms of the group and its values. In return, the group helps them raise their own feeling of personal, social safety and gain a sense of belonging. As a result of these mechanisms, the stability of the criminal group grows quickly, reaching average/upper levels in short intervals of time. Of all the groups analyzed, only two have a low level of stability (G6, G10), because of their incipient stage of development (they were younger than the other groups).

Directly proportional to stability is *the cohesion of* groups, which is equally average/high. Members of the groups support one another, so that the groups are very cohesive, reacting as a group to their tasks, to achieve their goals, or to any threats from the outside world. The high level of cohesion is the main reason for their resistance to any annihilation attempts from law enforcement institutions; the members of such groups refuse to testify against one another even if this would be beneficial to their personal situation.

Table 5. Social parameters of criminal groups

The Group	LEADERSHIP		OPERATION			THE LEADERS' AGE (years)	
	Leaders	Lieutenants	Thief	Watchman	Seller	Leaders	Lieutenants
G1	1	2	2	2	2	17	14, 15*
G2	1	2	2	2	2	16	14*, 14
G3	1	1	2	2	2	17	14*
G4	1	1	1	2	1	16*	15
G5	1	1	1	2	1	17*	15
G6	1	1	1	2	-	15*	13
G7	1	-	1	2	-	17*	-
G8	1	1	1	1	1	14*	14
G9	1	2	2	1	1	16*	14, 15
G10	1	2	1	2	1	17*	14, 15
G11	1	2	1	2	2	17	14, 16*

* People with the highest preference index (most popular in the group)

As regards the social parameters of the analyzed criminal groups, we shall focus primarily on aspects related to the established hierarchy within these structures. As expected, absolutely all groups have one leader only. This ensures the coherence of their criminal actions and continuity in the structure and existence of groups. Most of the groups surveyed have an authoritarian leader, whose leadership is based on power and influence, sometimes even on physical force. There is one exception, namely the group G8, in which the leadership seems to be participatory, more relaxed, in fact explained by the age of the leader who is younger.

The surveyed groups have 1-2 sub-leaders (lieutenants) who ensure the operational (tactical) leadership of criminal activities. The only exception is group G7, which is a very small (i.e. only 4 members) and does not require additional operational leadership positions. According to the sociometric method, the relationships between leaders and lieutenants are very tight, not only functionally, but especially socially and affectively. They are not only co-workers in achieving their criminal objectives, but especially close friends.

If we look at *the operational structure of the groups*, we find an amazing uniformity of operational functions/tasks. The operational structure of these groups consists of *the thieves* (those who actually steal, also called the hand of the group), *the watchmen* (who secure the perimeter of the operation, so that the group may not be caught in the act) and *the sellers* (who re-sell the stolen goods). Thus, all members of the group are specialized in a specific task.

In its turn, *the age of the leaders* deserves to be taken into consideration. In the vast majority of cases, the group's leader is the oldest member of the group and this is one of the aspects that ensure him a dominant position. The only exception is group G4, whose leader is not the oldest but the most popular member of the group. Moreover, the leader is always older than his lieutenants, assuring them the dominant position within the groups and preventing them from being overturned by one of the people who are second in command.

Worthy of note is *the index of the preferential* status, obtained through the sociometric method. In all cases, these individuals are either the leader or one of the sub-leaders (lieutenants). In groups of up to 7 members, this position is occupied by the leader. In groups of at least eight members, the most popular is one of the sub-leaders (lieutenants). The explanation may be related to the fact that the smaller the groups are, the higher the mutual knowledge is, the more intense the direct exchange of information, as interpersonal relationships are built on social-affective, preferential rather than functional criteria. These issues tend to dissipate in larger groups, good mutual knowledge being less likely in such groups, communication being indirect, impersonal, and purely functional, focused on the assignment and fulfillment of tasks, which are typical of the work of the leader.

Conclusions

The unpredictability of the actions, the strong motivation of the members, the consumption of active substances (tobacco, alcohol, drugs, etc.), the strong influence of the Internet and uncensored information makes the probability of teenagers' involvement in various criminal activities to grow continuously. As a result of the analysis performed on the 11 groups, we argue that teenage criminal groups are highly dynamic, taking shape and developing quickly towards highly effective structures of activity. The structuring of these groups (through strict separation of leading and operational structures), the rigorous distribution of criminal tasks, the specialization of members in certain types of very precise operations, the well-defined functional and interpersonal relations, the high level of stability and cohesion of criminal groups are important indicators in the analysis and prediction of the behavior of such groups and their members.

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