

**UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING  
SERIOUS VIOLENCE IN YOUNG PEOPLE**

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An example of when things go wrong...

The 15-year-old

You're like a father I've never had, remember that. I've never said that to anyone. You've taken care of me, I swear—forget about money and all that—you've been there for me. More than anyone else in my whole life, brother.

The 15-year-old

I appreciate it, brother, more than I can express in words. Loyalty is the only thing I know. Loyalty and violence.

The 15-year-old

I'm going to show Sweden who I am. The news will become my best friend.

«Big brother»

Love. You are very special to me.

«Big brother»

My beloved brother, I will be a big brother to you, try to take care of you as best I can.

«Big brother»

The only thing I ask in return is loyalty, and now I know what you stand for. I will always be there for you.

## VULNERABILITY FACTORS

- Young boys – immaturity and the vulnerability of adolescence
- Strains within the family – often themselves exposed to violence
- Born to a young parent with low educational attainment
- Parents without employment or with low income (below the median income)
- Experienced the loss of one or both parents before the age of 15
- Multiple relationship disruptions (moving, divorce, migration, foster care, etc.)
- Physical and mental illness in the family – often also substance abuse
- More than 45% of youth in the risk group have mental health challenges themselves

*(Popovac, 2024; Sausdal & Hannerz, 2025)*

## 3 SOCIETAL RISK FACTORS

### 1. Neighborhood effects

- Concentration of families with similar challenges
- Lack of social and emotional support in local networks

### 2. Negative strain theory

- Limited opportunities for social mobility
- Being exposed to or witnessing discrimination against one's parents

### 3. Institutional anomie

- Weakening of welfare services and activities for children and young people
- Art, culture, and sports: arenas for transforming pain, mastery, experiences of community, belonging, and psychology of mattering
- Prevention funded through short-term “project funding” rather than as a natural part of our way of life

*(Gerell, 2017; Morris, 2013; Sausdal & Hannerz, 2025)*

## INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

- **Crime and violence:**

Is it about the antisocial individual, or about a dysfunctional society?

**“The punitive turn”** – the recent political shift toward more punishment.

## INTERACTION BETWEEN EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL FACTORS

- **Socioeconomic difficulties and language use in the family (Hart & Risley, 1995):**
  - 4 million more words heard by age four in families with higher socioeconomic status
  - 120,000 more negative comments in families with lower socioeconomic status
  - 560,000 more positive comments in families with higher socioeconomic status
- **Socioeconomic hardship and cognitive functioning (Holmes, 2013):**
  - 13-point lower scores on IQ tests when savings have run out
  - Weaker problem-solving and greater risk of making poor decisions
- **Disturbances in personality development (Klein, 1998):**
  - Pain is experienced as coming from outside – paranoid anxiety and mistrust of the world
  - Splitting, projective identification, and omnipotent control («transport of pain»)
  - Protecting oneself from “the external” by controlling relationships or by retaliating

## INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

- **Crime and violence:**

Is it about the antisocial individual, or about a dysfunctional society?

- **Focus on both:**
- Both support measures for the individual
- ...and measures at the societal level

## PSYCHOLOGICAL WORK WITH YOUTH WHO USE VIOLENCE

- “Treatment” **in and through relationships**, not only through talk therapy or «punishment».
- Change is not achieved primarily through insight and understanding, but through corrective relational experiences.
- Experiential therapy – focusing on both external behavior and what lies behind it:
  1. Normative measures (structure, boundaries, consequences / youth sanctions, etc.)
  2. Mentalization-promoting measures (affective awareness, self-regulation, prosocial roles, etc.)
- Holistic approach: Guidance and training for foster parents, teachers, residential care workers, etc.
- Professional frameworks: attachment psychology, mentalization theory, and trauma psychology.
- Adults must work with their own emotions (to prevent countertransferences):
  - Avoid becoming too harsh - «the punitive turn»
  - ... or withdrawing - abdicating one’s role as an adult.
  - And to maintain empathic concern for the young person - trying to understand them from «the inside».

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