

Police Under Observation

Time and again, young people in Europe's cities are taking to the streets to battle with the police, as happened this summer in Great Britain. Most of these riots have one trigger, but multiple causes. One of the factors can be the way in which the police treat young people. To delve a little deeper, **Dietrich Oberwittler** and **Daniela Hunold** at the **Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law** in Freiburg are comparing circumstances in Germany and France. Their results are surprising.



A hard road: Peaceful coexistence between the police and young people is hard to ensure, but more successful in Germany than in France. Yet, there are conflicts even in Germany – as happened on May Day 2009 in the Berlin suburb of Kreuzberg, when drunken hooligans, masked left-wing activists and young immigrants pelted police for hours with bottles and stones.

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It was as if the aggression needed a valve. The release came with the death of Mark Duggan, who was killed by a police bullet. Although the course of events remained unclear, violence swept the London suburb of Tottenham, spreading quickly to other British cities.

The fighting between mainly young people and the police acquired a momentum of its own in Great Britain, just as the riots did in suburban France in fall 2005. In France, too, the trigger was a police operation with a fatal outcome: In the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, two young men were electrocuted in an electricity substation as they fled from the police. Rumors soon began to circulate that the police had caused their deaths. The resulting unrest among the youth of Paris spread to the whole of France.

FRENCH GOVERNMENT DECLARATES AN EMERGENCY

After four weeks of street fighting, the Paris banlieues and 200 other French suburbs resembled battlefields. Over 9,000 cars were burned out and 3,000 arrests were made. The government was forced to declare a state of emergency, as the country seemed to be coming apart at the seams.

Many feared that the fire might spread to other countries, but that didn't happen. In Germany, too, things remained quiet despite widespread television and newspaper reporting of events. So why is it that riots of this kind haven't happened elsewhere, before or since? >

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For all the interest it has attracted, the question has yet to be answered conclusively. Street violence is, after all, an issue that surfaces almost on a daily basis, and surveys consistently show that, for a majority in society, it is a cause for concern. What makes the systematic study of violence among young people,

single cause. What does consistently emerge, however, is that there is often a yawning gap between subjective explanations and empirical results.

Drawing a comparison between Germany and France promises to shed new light on this issue: Both countries are destinations of choice for immi-



Victims on both sides: Hundreds of people in the Paris suburb of Villiers-le-Bel commemorate two young men killed in 2007 in a collision with a police car. The deaths sparked violent riots, here and in other suburbs, in which 80 police officers were injured.

primarily from immigrant families, so relevant is the fact that it is an issue about which public opinion and scientific findings contrast starkly. "Criminality among immigrants – it is, of course, a hot social topic that we are researching," says Dietrich Oberwittler, research group leader at the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law in Freiburg.

Dietrich Oberwittler has been studying the causes of youth violence for years. Simple, moncausal explanations are inadequate. In seeking to explain human actions and motives, it is virtually impossible to point to any

grants, but they differ sharply in the intensity with which conflicts are staged. The streets are a battleground in one country, but not in the other. Yet both have a substantial immigrant population. According to the OECD, 8 percent of those living in France were born abroad, while in Germany the figure is 13 percent.

But here is where the similarities end. Above all, living conditions in the two countries' suburbs differ widely. Whereas the French banlieues are a focus of poverty and structural problems, such segregation is not found to the same extreme in German cities.

There has long been a scientific consensus that this concentration exacerbates the tendency toward violence and criminality.

However, there is another, thus far much less well known key factor that some suspect may also play an important role: the personal contact between adolescents and the police. It is precisely this contact that forms the subject of a research project entitled "Police and young people in multiethnic societies" (POLIS) being conducted by the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law. Dietrich Oberwittler's hypothesis is that this contact in France follows a different pattern than that in Germany.

THE POLICE ARE NOT THE ONLY CAUSE OF TENSION

It was, after all, the encounter between the police and youths that ended with the death of two young men that triggered the street fighting in France in 2005. In London, too, this August, a police operation sparked off riots and looting. "The police are not the sole cause of tensions, but they are an important contributing factor," says Daniela Hunold, who works as a scientist at the Max Planck Institute in Freiburg. Much would be gained if it were to emerge that the intensity of conflict were attributable to the conduct of the police. But how does one set about proving such a thing?

Together with French colleagues at the University of Grenoble, the researchers in Freiburg embarked on a large-scale bi-national research project. The issues they are studying include how conflicts arise and how prejudices are formed and consolidated in personal encounters between young people and the police.

The project follows the same pattern in France and in Germany: The qualitative element entails systematic observations of and interviews with young peo-



Escalating conflict: French police are seen here fighting street battles with students protesting against the abolition of employment protection for young workers in 2006 (top). With tensions rising as a result of the increase in the retirement age, there were violent clashes during a student demonstration in Lyon in 2010 (bottom).



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In order to develop closer community relations, the German police are recruiting more immigrants like Arzu Teke (left). Police officers in Cologne question three young suspects. Max Planck researcher Daniela Hunold notes that the decision on who to stop is generally based on clothing or locality.

ple and police officers of all ranks. Meanwhile, the quantitative element that began in summer 2011 supplements these findings with an extensive and representative questionnaire-based survey of over 5,000 school students. The investigations are spread across three suburbs of differing social composition in each of two German locations: one a major city and the other a mid-sized town. Colleagues in France are carrying out a parallel study on the same basis. This will provide researchers in both countries with representative insight into – and a national comparison between – contacts between police and young people.

For several months in 2009 and 2010, Daniela Hunold accompanied police officers in two German cities as they carried out routine patrols by car and on foot. The researchers would prefer not to disclose the names of the cities, at least until the study is complete, in order to protect the police officers who took part in the study against undue prejudice. It is possible

that those with connections to the police in the cities in the study might be able to identify the departments concerned and jump to the wrong conclusions based on provisional results.

FAIRNESS MEANS WITHOUT DISCRIMINATION

Daniela Hunold has a degree in geography and is a criminologist by trade. These experiences, however, were new to her. "The high degree of professionalism among the police is worth noting," she says. "As a rule, contacts with young people are very neutral and objective. It is my impression that the police in Germany are at pains to be as transparent as possible and avoid arbitrary decisions. And they generally succeed." Police rules define how they should approach people and, as Daniela Hunold has observed, such contacts are rarely colored by the officers' own emotions or character traits.

It may be that the police officers were particularly correct in the presence

of an observer, but the researchers have no concerns that their findings may suffer in this respect: it is unlikely that anyone would be able to play-act for the entire duration of the study. What's more, the researchers compared their observations of the police at work with the experiences of the young people they interviewed.

It is indispensable that a modern, professional police exercise fairness in its approach to citizens – fair in this context meaning without discrimination. But is that really possible? It is, after all, the job of the police to treat criminals somewhat differently than the respectable public. But how does a police officer distinguish between them – often at a distance?

Certain forms of discrimination are scarcely avoidable. "Sometimes there really is no discrimination-free way of doing things," says Daniela Hunold. "Even police officers need to reduce the complexity of the situation in order to act. That's quite natural." As she has observed, this leads to a general



Peaceful patrol. And yet, in France – in contrast to Germany – violent conflicts between police and young people are a regular occurrence. Studies have shown the relationship to be more emotional and more aggressive. The police in France are more arbitrary and confrontational in their approach – not least because they are under greater pressure.

tendency for the police to be more strongly guided by prejudice than the average citizen. However, this is a product, not of the character or personality of the police officer, but of the tasks that being a police officer entails: namely the need to distinguish the “good guys” from the “bad guys”, sometimes in a matter of seconds.

Nevertheless, in the German cities studied, the police were, on the whole, professional and fair in their dealings with young people. But do young people see it that way? This is the crucial point. It can happen that a young man perceives a police check to be unfair – because he believes he is being picked on for his foreign appearance. That may be true, but there may also be other reasons.

Comparing subjective and objective perceptions is one of the most important tasks of empirical sociological research. “The quality of contact between young people and the police is very much subjective by nature, and the two sides may be left with quite

contrasting impressions of the same encounter,” says Dietrich Oberwittler. It is thus all the more important to approach the issue with scientific distance and empirical methods.

ETHNIC ORIGINS PLAY VERY MINOR ROLE

Studying the day-to-day contacts between the police and citizens is worthwhile, given that the feeling of being unfairly treated can lead young people to develop destructive attitudes. The criteria under which, for example, police checks take place “on suspicion” are therefore important. “It can’t be done entirely without cause,” says Daniela Hunold. Otherwise checks would have to be made entirely at random, which would be neither practicable nor efficient. “Generally, it is the clothes or the location that are the trigger.”

But it is not always just those concerned whose perception is incorrect. Third parties, members of the public, can be mistaken too. “Immigration on

its own is often taken to be the cause of criminal behavior – which is an illusion,” Dietrich Oberwittler adds. Empirical studies prove that young people are more likely to display an above-average tendency toward criminality if they, as individuals, experience social deprivation in problem residential areas. Their ethnic origins play little if any role. Studies in the US and other countries have yielded similar results, indicating that this theory has broad validity.

But it is also already evident that the way in which police officers behave differs depending on the district in which they are working. That could have to do with the varying workload or work organization, but it could also reflect prejudice against the district and its residents. “The influence of the socio-spatial context is one of the deciding issues in understanding police work, conflict and the development of prejudices,” says Dietrich Oberwittler.

It is still too soon to draw any final conclusions from the POLIS project. Nevertheless, Dietrich Oberwittler and

Daniela Hunold have some initial suspicions that are the subject of discussion with their French colleagues. Whereas conflicts between young people from difficult neighborhoods and the police are rare in Germany and can be categorized, at best, as the result of some “perceived injustice,” violent clashes are a regular occurrence in France.

The interaction between police and young people in France can be more emotional and more aggressive. Even if it is primarily the significantly more difficult living conditions and poorer prospects for immigrants in France that are responsible, the behavior of the French police is markedly different from that of their German counterparts.

The French researchers report that their police officers are more arbitrary and more confrontational in their dealings with young people. On the one hand, this can be explained by the higher risk to which the police are ex-

posed. French police officers thus feel under greater pressure to exercise authority and power in order to assert themselves.

GUARDIANS – AND TROUBLESHOOTERS

It is not part of Dietrich Oberwittler’s approach to speculate about the causes of these differences. However, the fact that the French police are organized along significantly more centralized and to some extent more military lines than in Germany offers some explanation. The shorter training afforded to French police officers must also play a role. “Whereas officers in Germany will have several years of theoretical training behind them at the police college, junior officers in France often learn their duties in practice by training on the job.” This does not encourage objective, by-the-book working methods.

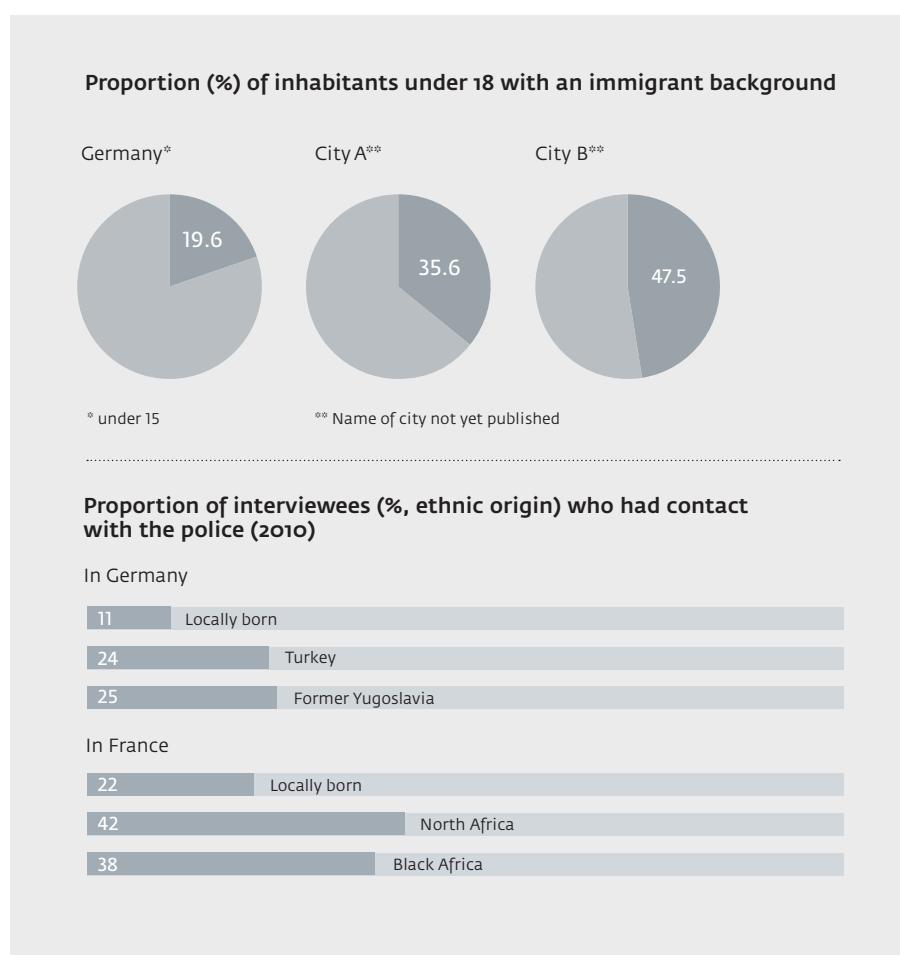
“In discussions with our French colleagues, it has become apparent that this strong desire, as the old German police motto goes, to be citizens’ “friend and helper” does not exist as such in France,” adds Daniela Hunold.

This may be connected with the shock to society prompted by the Nazi experience. But even before 1933, there were efforts made in Germany to reform the police. Even then, there was an understanding that the police should not only react to conflict: they could and should prevent it. As long ago as the 1920s, Prussian politicians and senior police officers, such as Carl Severing and Bill Drews, began to demilitarize the police, advocating instead a modern, republican police ethos that set the tone for the whole of Germany. In 1931, a modern Police Act took effect in the Free State of Prussia that required police officers to play a preventative role and to act in the interests of citizens. After 1945, the police in the Federal Republic of Germany carried on these traditions.

More recent reforms have followed a similar path, with a higher proportion of women involved in front-line policing, an increasing emphasis on recruiting from the immigrant communities, and most recently in Berlin, for example, a duty to wear name or number badges.

A form of division of labor has developed to fulfill the dual strategy of the police to act as both guardians and troubleshooters. The police are now increasingly specialized – from SWAT teams to patrol officers to community support officers. The latter enjoy relative independence in deciding their duties and their beats, and actively seek contact with citizens, especially the young. “They often develop a very friendly attitude,” Daniela Hunold has observed. The trust thus engendered has distinct advantages. Yet there is also the risk of a loss of authority, something that can cause critical situations to escalate more quickly.

At the end of the day, conflicts between police and young people do occur in Germany, albeit far less often than in France. And when it comes to confrontation, both sides can be at fault, because there can be provocations.





International comparison: Daniela Hunold and Dietrich Oberwittler of the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law are studying the relationship between the police and young people in France and Germany.

on the part of sheriffs in the 1960s; it was obvious that something had to be done. In Germany, the pressure to act was never so great – due, no doubt, to the ongoing internal attempts by the police to reform themselves, accompanied by internal police research. “On the other hand, it is an unfortunate fact that police organizational systems tend to be more sluggish when it comes to change than other administrative systems,” says Daniela Hunold.

The problem in France is far greater. There’s a lot of pressure to act, but minimal willingness to apply the results of research. In fact, the French public tends to support politicians who see a heavy-handed approach as an expression of political strength and capability. The recent rearmament of the police force and the abolition of the local neighborhood police under the then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy are a good example of this. Why this should be the case is another question altogether. ▲

tion and a lack of respect on both sides. Mistakes and cases of excessively harsh treatment do happen in Germany on a regular basis and attract close media attention. The huge police presence at the annual May Day demonstrations in Berlin and the protests against the planned new railway station in Stuttgart in fall 2010 are typical scenarios.

GREATER INTERCULTURAL SKILLS WOULD BE WELCOME

Nevertheless, Daniela Hunold has also seen how patrol officers and community officers attempt to avoid escalation on a daily basis. Taking a young person into custody is a demanding task that requires energy, time and strong nerves. “If it isn’t really necessary, officers avoid doing so.” Beyond this, however, Daniela Hunold has noted a general humanitarian interest in fair treatment.

Still, there is room for improvement. For example, it would help if the police were to develop even greater intercultural skills, to give them a better understanding of youth culture or characteristics specific to individual migrant groups. This, too, is all part of the pattern: a better understanding helps avoid conflict.

How the work of the police should change in order to avoid future confrontations is likely to be a topical question in Great Britain, too. However, in order to answer the question, it is first necessary to identify the causes of this summer’s riotous behavior. The conflicts were all the more surprising insofar as the British police do not have a reputation for being excessively harsh. “As for the background to the riots, at present, one can only speculate, and a systematic study will likely take years,” says Dietrich Oberwittler. Marked social inequality and the lack of prospects for the socially deprived probably played a role. But the behavior of the police also may have contributed: “It is known from previous studies that the police stop and search immigrants with far greater frequency.” This could partially explain ethnically tinged conflicts.

What differences research into police actions in Great Britain, Germany and France may make in practice remains to be seen. “There’s a deep gap between knowledge and reality,” Dietrich Oberwittler believes. In Germany there is some – albeit limited – interest on the part of the police. Research in the US is much further developed. Work began there as a result of the violent conflicts and systematic failures

GLOSSARY

POLIS

Abbreviation for “Police and young people in multiethnic societies.” This Franco-German research project is studying the interaction between police and young people (with an immigrant background) and their mutual perception of one another in France and Germany.

Empirical social research

A discipline distinct from theoretical social research that describes social structures and developments on the basis of qualitative and quantitative data surveys.

Socio-spatial context

A term that describes the structure of the environment in which people live, relating, for example, to individual city districts.