A ccording to the 2007 report by Germany’s Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the number of right-wing extremists prepared to resort to violence has stabilized, albeit at a high level of around 10,000 individuals. “There is absolutely no cause to relax our vigilance,” says Martin Brandenstein, pointing to a circumstance that is often overlooked: “The fact that the development of right-wing extremism behind our prison doors has thus far been neglected by researchers means that particularly our juvenile detention centers are increasingly populated by a group of prisoners we know virtually nothing about.”

Martin Brandenstein has been working as a staff member in the Criminological Department of the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law in Freiburg im Breisgau since December 2004. While at the university – he first studied psychology, and later law, as well – he specialized in aspects of clinical and forensic psychology. Many of the results of this work have found their way into his dissertation, which he expects to complete soon.

To obtain information, he developed an interview technique through which to investigate changes in identity, self-perception, adherence to right-wing extremist beliefs and groups, and the propensity for violence among young offenders in the course of their imprisonment. The object was that the prisoners themselves should supply the answers – but for that to happen, Brandenstein first had to find them. Describing the problems he faced in starting his research, he explained: “The fact that there was a xenophobic background to an offense won’t necessarily appear in the case files.”

He finally located the offenders he was looking for by examining the characteristics of their victims. “I looked at who was most likely to be targeted – foreigners, homosexuals, the homeless, junkies, punks, members of the left.” Typically, this form of violence is inflicted on those who the perpetrators identify as belonging to a minority group. “Even though there were times when the motive for the attack was not unambiguously xenophobic, this victim-based approach proved to be an ideal way of exploring the complexity and gray areas of xenophobic violence,” Brandenstein explains.

The random nature of the violence, the haphazard chance that it should have been inflicted on a particular person in a particular place – for Brandenstein, these are important indicators: “Perpetrator and victim would have had little or no personal connection with one another prior to the event. The victim simply had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

For his study, Brandenstein singled out young offenders who were serving their first term behind bars and who had been in prison for no more than six weeks when the interviews began. “That was important because I wanted the developments I recorded to be, as far as possible, the product of the new imprisonment situation faced by the offenders, not of their past experiences behind bars.”

He managed to find 11 juvenile inmates who met his strict criteria and were willing to take part. Brandenstein met them twice in prison, once shortly after their arrival, and again seven to nine months later. For comparison purposes, he interviewed two other groups of juveniles: 10 serving time for crimes of violence without a right-wing background and 16 who had been arrested for acts of xenophobic violence but had merely been put on probation.

With the aid of the first group, he wanted to compare the extent to which a xenophobic propensity to violence develops differently from its non-xenophobic counterpart. His preparatory research had indicated that xenophobia and a disposition toward violence do not necessarily go hand in hand. “Not least because xenophobia comes in many guises,” he discovered.

With the second group, those guilty of xenophobic violence but not behind bars, he investigated whether the changes that took place in prison were necessarily attributable to the effects of imprisonment per se, or whether conviction for a crime of violence was, in itself, sufficient to prompt a change in attitude or disposition...
toward violence without the more drastic need for a jail sentence.

It was with mixed feelings that Brandenstein approached his first meeting with the young inmates. “At the time, I seriously wondered how it would go,” he remembers. It wasn’t exactly a group of choirboys waiting for him in the prison visiting room. “By the time one of these teens ends up in jail, he most likely has quite a career behind him.” He was prepared to draw the answers out of his interviewees bit by bit, if need be. In most cases, however, it was not resentment he encountered, but an astonishing openness. “I had the impression that most of them were glad that someone was interested in them and willing to listen to them,” he states.

In order to discover how a stretch of time in prison affects young people, Brandenstein first had to answer a more fundamental question. His opening strategy was thus to discover the extent to which offences committed right-wing extremists who used violence were based on a rejection of social minorities, or whether other symptoms could be identified, such as nationalism or ideologies of leadership and allegiance that point to more extreme radical tendencies.

Xenophobia has many faces. What’s true of society in general is equally true of the subcultures Brandenstein encountered in the juvenile penal system: “We are dealing here with a highly heterogeneous group.” He found the entire spectrum of social hardship cases sitting opposite him in the interview room.

One case in particular sticks in his memory: “There was one young guy, for example, who had a high school diploma and was convicted on multiple counts of arson. He wasn’t into physical violence as such – his motivation was entirely political; he just wanted to get rid of foreigners. He was totally imbued with this ideology.” For this offender, violence was a means to an end – an important factor for Brandenstein, who was able to use this individual as a kind of litmus test to discern distinguishing features among this heterogeneous group: “I needed to know whether these were committed right-wing extremists who used violence for specific purposes, or juveniles who committed violent acts in order to appear strong and masculine. Was this something they believed they had to do in order to be part of a specific group, or did they do it just for the fun of it?”

On closer examination, by no means everything that at first glance appears to be right-wing motivated actually is so. “We were frequently surprised,” says Brandenstein. “In many cases, we couldn’t be sure whether xenophobia was really a cause.” One adolescent, for instance, related that, on the outside, he had been on quite good terms with a foreigner. But then, one day, he and his buddies passed the guy in the street and went after him. It was just the foreign guy’s bad luck.

For a psychologist, such contradictions between words and deeds are very revealing. They give an indication of the state of development of the individual concerned, since humans in specific development phases, such as puberty and adolescence, exhibit a greater propensity for aggressive behavior. According to Brandenstein, acts of xenophobic violence are often committed by teens in order to let off steam. “In those cases, right-wing extremism serves as more of a smoke-screen for violence for its own sake, because they enjoy getting into a fight – much like we see with hooligans.”

The processes involved in psychological development play into the hands of the extreme right in other respects, as well. Another typical feature of the time between childhood and adulthood is the search for an identity. The pluralism of our postmodern society does not make this search any easier, says Brandenstein: “Our present age is characterized by a steadily diversifying range of accepted takes on life.” In the process, individual values and ideas of accepted standards are becoming increasingly relative, leading in turn to a loss of security. This makes it substantially more difficult for young people to develop an identity of their own – a dilemma that can exert huge psychological pressure.

As a result, some adolescents attempt to establish and maintain an identity of strength and power by committing acts of violence. The emotional turmoil they experience in this phase of their development makes them susceptible to bombastic propaganda with pithy slogans, “The hard right offers a strong attraction because its profile is so clearly defined: from the music and the symbolism to the disposition toward violence, there is hardly any aspect in which the hard right is not specifically identifiable and highly charged. And juveniles who want to know who they are and where they belong are often glad to receive a helping hand.”

“Glad that someone takes an interest in them.”

“Some just like getting into a fight.”

Violence and right-wing ideology simplify the search for an identity. Juvenile attackers in Greifswald in 1992 (left) and at a racist demonstration (right).
Ideology, too, is important in offering juveniles a means of orientation within the group environment. "Given that we are talking here of an extreme – specifically a hard-right – set of views, there is no need for young people to bother about niceties and complex shades of opinion. On the contrary, the more they simply do what is asked of them, the better," Of no less importance are the sense of community that comes with participation in frequent group activities, and the resulting feeling of strength and recognition.

Even the clothes they wear, the quasi-uniform, gives a sense of identity. "Just their boots, their clothes or their haircuts are enough to say: I'm one of them." The practice of talking up their own group status by designating other groups is another factor that distinguishes xenophobic youths from other violent offenders.

In his interviews, Brandenstein mainly employed open-ended questions that could not be answered with a simple yes or no. "That is the only way the subject can personally come to a decision about his self-image and about what is important to him, and how he sees his attitudes, his actions and not least, of course, his offenses," explains the researcher.

This strategy allowed him to explore the behavior of these young people in all of its complexity. Their sense of identity affords both a sociological and a developmental and socio-psychological interpretation of the xenophobic violence committed by juveniles. "The image we have of ourselves can be created only by seeing ourselves through the eyes of others," says the psychologist. "And that, in turn, can happen only through interaction with others."

Such interaction with others takes place at various levels: there is interaction between individuals and there is interaction between groups, and both individual and group identities are constantly being renegotiated, confirmed or modified. This is particularly important. In attempting to discover the effects of prison experiences on xenophobic offenders, one specific circumstance must be clearly borne in mind: behind bars, opportunities for interaction are limited to an extremely small number of individuals. "They always have the same people around them, the same fellow-criminals," says Brandenstein.

Explaining the social climate on the inside, he continues: "It's also very macho, lots of boasting and bragging, and they often have to physically defend themselves. The conditions are just about as unfavorable as it gets." However, while being interviewed, some of the juveniles showed themselves to be quite capable of taking a detached view of their interactions with other inmates. "They would say things like: 'It's a real kindergarten in here.' But still they considered it all well and good to stand for themselves physically. If they let people take too many liberties, they got no peace."

However, Brandenstein is unwilling to accept such statements as an indication of the remedial effect of the prison experience. Given the heterogeneous nature of this group of offenders, it is impossible to say definitively what effect imprisonment has on those guilty of xenophobic violence. It depends, among other things, on the inmates' general attitude toward the state. "Normal" prisoners generally accept their punishment as a normal reaction to their crime. With xenophobic offenders, in contrast, the possibility cannot be excluded that they will see their punishment as unjustified and as confirmation of their criticism of the state’s 'failure to act'. "The act of xenophbic violence can also be understood as a message of rejection directed at the state," Brandenstein explains.

Punishment can typically provoke defiance and a hardening of attitudes. Brandenstein therefore raises the issue that juvenile right-wing extremists are being convicted by a court against whose fundamental constitutional authority they have, by their very act, rebelled. It is not uncommon for these youths to say something like: "Now we're being punished for standing up and doing something." Brandenstein did, in fact, come across one young man who described the development in his attitudes in these very words: "I have become more hostile toward the state."

Similarly, the function of their violence – whether committed as a means to an ideological end, as an expression of identity, or just for the thrill of it – is a decisive factor in determining whether a young offender will continue to attract attention as a hard-right fighter or not. In principle, observations indicate that, in the case of all juveniles, the propensity to violence de-
Brandenstein. Even juveniles inequitably become accused to the privations. The punishment is most strongly perceived as such at the start of their term in prison. “That,” says Brandenstein, “is something that neither politicians nor the public pay much heed to — evidently because a psychological fact like that is not compatible with the power of suggestion inherent in expressing the severity of a sentence by stressing the number of years inside.”

The conclusion that he draws from his interviews and observations is at the same time a plea for a change of course: “It is not possible to properly address the complex and occasionally even contradictory manifestations of xenophobia with a one-size-fits-all program.”

However, the opportunities afforded within the juvenile penal system should be expanded, if, in fact, the entire system can’t be made more open-ended. Young offenders facing an extended jail sentence who seriously try to mend their ways should be offered the prospect of coming into contact with the outside world at an earlier stage than has previously been the case. “That is the only way to create conditions that encourage resocialization in a manner that more clearly reflects the essentially educationally oriented aims of the juvenile penal system,” says Brandenstein. Ultimately, however, there will always be a problem: “Even a term in prison that combines an element of therapy is still, first and foremost, imprisonment.”

At present, however, Brandenstein sees little chance of such suggestions falling on willing ears. Politicians and lawmakers are keen enough to emphasize the education principles of the law. “But that is highly idealistic,” he says. “In reality, the security aspect has been very much in the foreground in recent years, and that is now also reflected in the juvenile penal codes enacted by the federal states.” Following a decision handed down by Germany’s Federal Constitutional Court on May 31, 2006, these codes did not fully take effect until this year. In the past, the juvenile penal system did not even have a separate foundation in law.

The results of Brandenstein’s study do at least offer some consolation. Since the majority of these young people naturally outgrow their aggressions, they are not usually expected to re-offend on any large scale following their release. The stigmatizing effect of imprisonment may be counterproductive, but in most cases it is true to say: Where the law fails, nature succeeds.