

Summary

Violence narrated. Offender, victim and witness accounts of 'street violence'

Introduction

This report is part two of a research project on street violence between strangers. Here, the term 'street violence' literally refers to violence outside, i.e. in the street. In part 1 data were collected from the police regions Rotterdam-Rijnmond and IJsselland. Based on police reports on violent incidents in 1998, we analysed the frequency of street violence. In addition, offender and victim profiles were described. Part 1 showed that street violence is mainly found in three contexts: neighbourhoods (35%), traffic (24%) and entertainment areas, i.e. areas with a high concentration of bars, cafes, discos, restaurants, etc., where people go out (19%). In these contexts specific offender-victim combinations are more likely to occur than others.

The level of street violence was judged disproportionate in about one in four incidents involving no more than one perpetrator and one victim. In street violence between groups, half of the incidents was disproportionate. Roughly half of the neighbourhood incidents showed disproportionate violence levels; in traffic this was one third and in entertainment areas most street violence was disproportionate.

Part 2 is a continuation based on this material. This time a selection of 60 incidents of street violence are analysed extensively. These were selected from the three contexts in which street violence most often occurs. Thus, we studied 16 traffic incidents, and 22 incidents for both the neighbourhood and entertainment area contexts. Extra information was gathered from police files and interviews with offenders, victims and witnesses were conducted. The aim is to acquire insight into the process of street violence as well as into the backgrounds and motives of the persons who are involved in street violence.

Results

The results show that, in traffic, there are two main causes for street violence: asocial behaviour and unintentional traffic violations (i.e. the offender is unaware of committing a traffic violation). Offenders as well as victims commit either of these; each individual selects his own reason in a chain of reactions. However, violence in this context can almost always be traced back to a real cause. Incidents of traffic violence are short-lived and consist of one continuous process. As for the roles offenders and victims play, four varieties can be distinguished. In the first they involve a 'genuine' offender and victim; this type of violence is characteristic of 'senseless violence'. In the second there is no clear distinction between offender and victim: both contribute equally to the development of the conflict and are not afraid of using physical violence. The winner is later labelled perpetrator, the loser, victim. In version

three one side starts the incident, however, once it escalates to a physical confrontation both sides eagerly become involved. This happens rarely. In the last type, both parties are actively involved at the beginning of the conflict, but at the moment the actual fight starts, one side plays the aggressor and the other backs off. This is the most common process (8 incidents). We found type one and two in 3 and 4 traffic incidents, respectively. Only one incident concerned type 3. In just about all traffic incidents third parties play a significant part. Generally, they try to de-escalate the conflict; this is true for unknown as well familiar bystanders. The use of alcohol and/or drugs is reported in only two incidents. In six incidents weapons are mentioned; sometimes for threatening, at other occasions they are actually used. Frequently it concerns objects used as weapons rather than real weapons. Serious injuries are reported in five incidents.

Violence associated with going out can be attributed to two types of causes: mutual irritations and trivial (insignificant) causes. Two incidents concern offenders who suffer from psychiatric problems. These two are not covered by the aforementioned types.

In almost half of the incidents the process consists of two or more phases in which the violence increases and subsequently stops. The time between these phases ranges from one hour up to 6 weeks. These long lasting conflicts concern one and the same issue; for outsiders the individual explosions will appear as separate incidents. The triggers may vary, however. The explosions tend to become more serious over time. Nine incidents in the entertainment area context concern two groups that have an argument. In five instances one victim is confronted by a group.

Violence perpetrated in entertainment centres could be labelled intentional violence. The opponents make it clear to one another that the situation is worthy of violence. The most common form is violence perpetrated by both parties in both the initial and the escalation phases: offender and victim significantly contribute to the birth and growth of conflict. Most bystanders will try to intervene in one way or another. Their intervention may be positive, attempting to end the fight. However, negative actions are seen too, e.g. joining the fight. Bystanders who do not know the parties involved are much less likely to play an important role than those who do. But the role of this last group is often negative, as they contribute to the development of the incident. In 13 cases genuine or improvised weaponry is used, which suggests that violence in this setting is regularly accompanied by the threat or use of weapons. Injuries include stab wounds, concussion, unconsciousness and various head wounds.

Remarkably, although the use of alcohol is mentioned in just about all reports, the actual influence alcohol has on the process can be deduced in only five reports. The effects may not always be emphasised in the reports because alcohol use is so common in this situation. It seems logical, however, that the two-sidedness (offender and victim are both actively involved) in the initial phase is, to a large extent, due to a reduced capacity to adequately assess risks. Therefore, it is not unlikely that the (effects of the) use of alcohol is considerably underestimated in these files.

Neighbourhood violence starts because of serious (actual) as well as trivial reasons. In addition, conflicts start for no apparent reason. Type one, covering over half of neighbourhood violence, results from reciprocal

irritations. The second variety concern incidents in which youth groups commit violent acts which emanate out of habit, from the fact that they are bored, or 'just for kicks'. The third type concerns one-on-one situations in which somebody is victimised for no reason. This is the typical example of 'senseless violence'. This usually concerns psychically disturbed offenders. Most incidents consist of one continuous process and take little time. The impression is that neighbourhood violence frequently starts because people feel that their privacy is violated, physically or in terms of respect. Violence in this context escalates relatively easily, due to the fact that bystanders are familiar with those involved and as such have a tendency to choose sides and to get involved themselves. Serious injury is uncommon in neighbourhood violence. Most incidents can be labelled one-sided: one party is clearly responsible for initiating and intensifying the conflict. Few incidents are two-sided at both stages, involving two parties who are both responsible for the initiation and the escalation stages of the conflict. Two offender-victim configurations are found. Violence occurring between two persons is often 'senseless violence'. In other instances violence occurs between (mostly small) groups. Bystander behaviour in this context is not clearly defined. In youth group fights, bystander behaviour resembles that in violence in entertainment centres. In conflicts between individuals bystander behaviour is comparable to that involving traffic incidents. In incidents of 'senseless violence' both bystanders who are familiar with the persons involved, as well as those who are randomly present, tend to intervene. In two thirds of these incidents, the use of real weapons or weapons of 'convenience' is reported. In most of these cases these weapons are not only used for threatening, but are actually used. Alcohol and drug use is mentioned in 6 incidents, in three or four substance use appears to have influenced the process.

Scenarios

An analysis of the various process elements of the 60 incidents of street violence yields 6 patterns. These patterns are called scenarios. Scenario 1 is most common in traffic situations and is characterised by '*correcting without consideration*'. Scenario 2 is mainly found in the context of going out. This scenario is labelled as '*restoring order*'. Scenario 3 is neighbourhood specific and described as 'taking the law into one's own hands'. Scenario 4 again is most common in the context of entertainment centres and could be called '*fighting*'. Scenario 5 is found in neighbourhood situations and is a variety of scenario 3. It is described as '*wilding*'. Scenario 6 is most often seen in the neighbourhood and sporadically in the entertainment area situations. We dubbed this scenario '*frenzy*'.

The analysis of the motives of persons who commit acts of violence shows that not just anyone will fall victim to 'senseless violence'. Street violence is generally the outcome of interactive processes to which both parties contribute. Both offenders and victims act impulsively and without further thought. It is only afterwards that they realise that there may have been possibilities to handle the situation in another manner. However, at that very moment they are unable to (re)act differently. They feel forced to intervene in a corrective manner or to meet the challenge. The main motive is that perpetrators feel they are not taken seriously because they are not paid the respect which they feel they deserve. Violent offenders often feel superior to victims. They consider themselves morally superior to those who they

reprimand. Because their self-image is vulnerable, they quickly feel wronged. Once they are angered, they are more occupied with themselves than with the facts and the situation. They lack empathy. In a certain sense they experience their actions as a necessity.

Finally we have checked which incidents of street violence meet the social criteria for 'senseless violence'. Considering the structural and process features of the interaction, about one third of these cases could be classified as 'senseless violence'. The analysis of offender motives, however, shows that even these extreme incidents do not actually constitute 'senseless violence' because from the perspective of these offenders, motives do exist. These need not be acceptable to outsiders, but they can be understood.

Conclusion

The findings lead to the conclusion that a variety of motives, background and situational factors should be taken into account in order to better understand street violence. It is also clear that street violence does not have a singular cause. However, a number of personal characteristics and personality traits can be indicated which may increase the chance of committing violence against strangers. Herein lies an point of action for prevention: a way to prevent violence lies in strengthening the intrinsic inhibitions of violent offenders in order to render their aggressive impulses more controllable. Moreover, the results indicate that implementing preventative measures based on a specific context is of little use when violent scenarios which are common in that situation do not arise from it. A package of measures should be tuned to the ratio of contextual causes versus personal motives. As street violence is more strongly linked to a context, policy measures should be oriented more towards this context. On the other hand, where street violence is more related to personal characteristics, measures should be aimed at reducing risk and increasing protective factors.