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School shootings - Considerations on prevention in a context of relative ignorance

of the phenomenon

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On March 11th 2009 at 9.30 a.m., former student of Winnenden Realschule Tim K. returns to,his school near Stuttgart, goes into three classrooms and opens the fire at students and,teachers. He kills that day 16 people including himself.

Again, Germany has become the scene of a school shooting. After the events in Bad-Reichenhall, Meißen, Erfurt and Emsdetten, yet another case within only a couple of years. Is Germany the country of school shootings? If yes, why? What is going wrong? And what can and has to be done from the perspective of crime prevention to prevent further deeds of this kind?

The demand for prevention of these most extreme forms of violence is stronger than ever. Though the discussion in politics and public opinion is still all too often lead by activism rather than factual, scientific based arguments. Of course, at first glance it is plausible to ask for stricter gun control and the prohibition of ego-shooter games. Yet, are these the real solutions to the problem? What could and should an effective prevention policy of school shootings aim at?

What do we know about school shootings?

To be able to formulate goals of prevention and to design effective measures, it is necessary to be able to properly describe a problem and to analyze its potential causes (Meyer/Linssen 2006). Though, the scientific knowledge base on school shootings is poor. Firstly, definitions diverge on what "running amok", a "killing spree" or a "school shooting"[1] actually is. Not everything that is called killing spree in the media would fall in this category from a scientific point of view (see Adler 2000). The understanding of the phenomenon is limited by the small number of incidences and the diversity of circumstances and motives (Lange/Grewe 2002). Moreover, the offender(s) often turn their arms against themselves at the end of a killing spree, which makes ex post investigations very difficult. It is often tried to make up for these deficiencies by referring to research results form other countries, such as the US. Yet, there are limits to these comparisons (Linssen/Bannenberg 2004). Access to firearms for example is regulated very differently in the US compared to Germany, though in both countries access to firearms is used as an explication for the phenomenon (see below). Now, first things first:

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[1] Annotation of the translator: In German the general term for these phenomena is „Amoklauf" (running amok). The original text therefore rather uses this term, despite its connotation that would distinguish running amok in English from killing spree or school shooting. As can be seen below, the article precisely wants to show that "school shooting" is a more adequate term, which is also used by the scientific community in Germany.

Following most sources the notion running amok is derived from Malay and means „to attack or kill in blind rage" (Kania, 2007). It was used for attacks in a context of war that were undertaking almost in a state of trance. The Malayan killing spree is part of a specific cultural context that does not have much in common with our today's common understanding of the term. Meticulous planning seems to characterise almost schematically the school shootings in Winnenden and Erfurt. This contradicts the idea of an emotion driven act undertaken "at the heat of the moment" (Vossekuil et al., 2002; Robertz 2004, see below). But what does characterise school shootings today? In the American literature you can find the definition as a killing of at least three persons. Though, defining school shooting by a number of homicides seems unsuitable. In Emsdetten the shooter injured several persons but finally only killed himself (Spiegel 2009). Suicide at the end of a shooting is recurrent but not a defining feature of a killing spree (Adler 2000, Kania 2007). If it happens, it is usually planned. Additionally, it is necessary to distinguish school shootings from other so called "family tragedies", familicides or murder-suicides. In these cases the offender usually kills close family members and then himself.

According to current understanding, a killing spree is undertaken in a state comparable to that of trance with an important loss of the sense of reality, which is coherent with the original Malay definition of the term running amok. It is comparable to a state of inebriation. According to Lempp (2006) and Robertz (2004) this is due to loss of the sense for reality and to having slipped into a parallel reality, in which destruction is the only rational and in which emotions are faded out.

As crime prevention - following public debate - is mainly concentrating on youth, it seems reasonable to follow in this paper Robertz (2004) and to use the term "school shooting". It describes homicides and attempted homicides, which are undertaken by young people at school and which are content-related to the site of crime.

School shootings, as other killing sprees, are almost exclusively undertaken by boys or young men, most of which are individuals acting on their own (single perpetrators) (Robertz 2004). Except for the deed, the perpetrators themselves do not have much in common. US-literature has identified some shared characteristics, though given the very limited number of cases on which they are based, it impossible to generalise these conclusions. Kania (2007) states the following common characteristics for school shooters in Germany: Perpetrators

- do not have uniform demographic characteristics,
- only rarely suffer from severe mental health problems,
- rarely come from broken homes,
- are not exclusively socially isolated lone perpetrators and
- commit school shootings premeditatedly and not impulsively.

These findings already underline that school shooter do not have much in common with the young people targeted by conventional violence and crime prevention programmes, which are usually programmes of secondary and tertiary prevention: These (potential) offenders are marginalised, mostly young men, often with problems of socialisation and even experiences of violence, who grow up in precarious conditions and who show the common signs of social disintegration (Heitmeyer/Imbusch 2005). This relatively large group which is in the focus of very different prevention strategies is not overlapping with the group of school shooters (Linssen/Bannenberg 2004). Therefore the different forms of prevention designed fort them do not work for killing sprees. They would hardly reach the target group, if at all.

The rare findings on school shooters underline above all the absence of reliable attachments and bonds, of proximity and familiarity (Eisenberg 2000; Weilbach 2007). They are also in contrast to the traditional target group of (youth) crime prevention (see above). For them social links are rather developed, their peer groups are important. For school shooters there are only few links to peers and family life can be characterised by "unrelatedness", by coexistence instead of sharing one's lifes (Eisenberg 2000, Kania 2007). Material deprivation is the exception; the social environment is petty bourgeois, middle class. The level of education and intelligence are accordingly between average and high (Linssen/Bannenberg 2004). However, achievements at school stay behind the own expectations or that of others. Prior to the shootings a decline in class performance can sometimes be observed as well as bad behaviour and difficulties with discipline. The media give much attention to the way of life of school shooters, their preference for dark clothing, excessive consumption of media, especially with violent content, and to their provocative and violence accepting role models (Vossekuil, 2002; Robertz 2004). However, all of this is not atypical for adolescents in general. Additionally, the affinity for firearms and the access to weapons are often cited.

All in all, the characteristics listed here are of limited significance and can not be generalised, due to the limited scientific knowledge base.

What are the causes? Attempts to explain

Media like to refer to the mental health and psychological troubles of school shooters. Asmentioned above, psychiatric troubles are rather the exception than the rule. In the same way, conspicuous behavioural traits, as violent behaviour, are exceptional (Vossekuil et al 2002). Füllgrabe (2000) und Robertz (2004) find on the other hand that many perpetrators have underdeveloped coping strategies, which makes solving social problems seem very difficult for them. In their families, problems are "solved" in a patriarchic, aggressive way (Lübbert 2002), which is of no help in the company of peers or teachers. The results are underdeveloped personal relationships with peers at school. School shooters have often experienced a lack of personal attachment since

early childhood, which has subsequentially lead to a personality with low self-esteem, which can easily be hurt, but which is at the same time self-focused and unable to cope with frustration (Füllgrabe 2000). This allows drifting into a parallel reality (Lempp 2006), makes imaginary hideaways attractive, as they are perceived as less scaring and more recognising than reality (Weilbach 2007). Hillbrand (2006) and Robertz (2004) mention signs of pronounced depression and suicidal ideation, which make suicide and homicide become options.

Excessive consumption of violent computer games, so called ego-shooter, are another shared characteristic of the school shootings in Germany, which are often used for explanations. However, current research on the effects of media disagrees with such simple causal connections.[2] Ego-shooter can actual help gain shooting experience and help practice accuracy (Bösche/Geserich, 2007), yet in connection with school shootings they rather seem to be symptom than cause. Millions play regularly ego-shooter games, which makes clear that they cannot be considered a sufficient condition for killing sprees. Nonetheless, it is undisputed that they can reinforce negative predispositions (Bockholt, 2008; BMFSFJ, 2005). It is more likely that these dangers are linked to a process of drifting into a parallel reality, which provides the opportunity to obtain recognition (Lempp 2006). Computer games are therefore only means that could be exchanged by others, such as drugs or others. It is the predisposition not the game that becomes decisive for the action. From a prevention point of view prohibition or stricter control of access to media with violent content as a direct prevention measure of killing sprees do not seem very promising. Additionally, prohibition often has an adverse effect: especially young people are particularly attracted by what is forbidden. Moreover, the possibility to spread and download content through the internet makes it particularly difficult to enforce such a prohibition.

Considering the accumulation of school shootings, it does not seem convincing to exclusively look for reasons at the individual, psychological level. This is particularly true with respect to possible prevention measures. The phenomenon of school shootings also has a societal dimension. The feeling to fail and to have failed, social isolation, retreat in parallel realities, which precede school shooting, all have social causes. Weilbach (2007) for example points to political, socio-cultural and economic causes of running amok. They are at the origin of abasements, psychological scars, experiences of loss at the individual level. Put differently, modern achievement-orientated societies and the social and economic policies weakening community and solidarity which go with them, form a basis for running amok, which should not be underestimated. Social relationships are lost, difficult to create or to be kept alive, though relationships and personal attachments are of crucial importance for deviant behaviour.

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[2] Phenomena of imitation and copy cats are important issues in the research on the effects of media (Werther-Effekt). However, as the question of imitation is a general, separate issue of crime prevention, it is left aside in this paper. An introduction to the issue can be fund in Kania 2007.

A sense of justice and respect of norms and rules is developed through (emotional) attachment (Hirschi 1969). Furthermore, immediate and personal attachments make it less attractive to construct one's own parallel reality and make social isolation more difficult. Modern societies with their discontinuities provide less and less opportunities for attachments, and at the same time more and more possibilities for creating one's own reality. (Meulemann 2006). Additionally, coping with insecurity and problems is more and more individualised (Heitmeyer/Imbusch 2005).

Moreover, the requirements of modern achievement-orientated societies put the individual with its needs and interest into the background. Individuals have to unconditionally subordinate to the requirements of the labour market. This does not only apply to children and young adults, but also to their parents who have to face the exigencies of the modern working world, which implies flexibility, mobility, unconditional readiness, and at the same time insecurity with respect to employment and professional future. It is not astonishing, if parents in this context - possibly themselves unable to cope with the situation - start looking the other way and do not want to realise their children's problems. As long as there are no abnormalities that can no longer be denied, they concentrate on the daily existence and "getting along". For a young person this often means too few possibilities for being appreciated and recognised as a human being. He does not find the recognition he needs, neither in the family nor at school nor in the working world do. These experiences add up to existing disorientation and create frustration and a feeling of being distained, with important effects for a troubled personality (Weilbach 2007). The need to (violently) obtain particular attention can almost be understood as re-establishing the recognition that is subjectively perceived as necessary and fair.

Again, it becomes clear: school shootings are not monocausal and cannot be understood only from an individual's psychological perspective. "The phenomenon of running amok is characterised by the interaction between the insecurities and tensions of today's society and individual personalities with difficulties to deal with conflict and at risk for extreme reactions" (Weilbach 2007: 120). It is a mixture of societal and individual factors prevention has to tackle in an interdisciplinary way.

What should be done?

Analysing the causes has shown that it is impossible to prevent school shootings as a specific phenomenon. The answer to the problem of school shootings has to be a combination of different, interdisciplinary and inter-institutional measures. For the measures to be effective strategic coordinated concepts are necessary. Single, independent projects which try to do a little here and a little there don't seem very helpful just like blind activism without any scientific foundation.

Such a scientifically validated concept should tackle the causes not the symptoms. In this sense prohibition of computer games or stricter weapon laws are of seconda-

ry importance. Crucial on the other hand is strengthening self-confidence and self-assurance from a young age on, strengthening social competencies, teaching coping strategies, creating opportunities to experience achievements and success, and last but not least to transmit a view on the imperatives of today's living- and working world, which leaves space for criticism and relativism. Prevention of school shooting is therefore a matter of general prevention programmes, that have a broad approach, and of a new setting for specific and general prevention programmes.

In the context of a school shooting the school appears as the place of mortification and becomes in this way a site of crime, a place to "re-establish" justice and recognition. From a prevention point of view, the school is a very good starting point, as compulsory schooling makes it a place with large scale impact. If possible, kindergartens and day care centres should already be included in prevention programmes. Installing and designing effective prevention measures is contingent on adequate framework conditions (vgl. Linssen 2006). Up to now, teachers are too often limited to their role of transferring knowledge. With respect to school shootings, a particular student often only gets their attention when the above described drop in school performance and disciplinary problems become obvious. It seems that at this stage the decision for such a deed is already taken and preparations under way. The chain of events that leads to school shootings needs to be interrupted at an earlier stage. Though a reliable identification of students that are in danger of running amok (in order to intervene) is quite difficult. Too many who would never even consider such a deed would be accused (see on this point Kania 2007). Therefore first priority comes to primary prevention.

In prevention programmes the school should become a place of bonds and attachments, which applies for teachers as well as peers. School should not only be conceptualised as a place for the transfer of knowledge, but (still more) as a social place. Teachers are important references persons for children and give them orientation. More attention should thereby be drawn to inconspicuous students. They, too, need to experience success and recognition. Strengthening strengths and giving at the same time orientation should be the guiding principal. At the same time the framework conditions of modern societies should be critically reviewed with students and action should not be unilaterally individualised.

Integrated multi-level concepts, which are not only aiming at the cognitive level but also including learning processes based on experiences, are successful (Lösel, 2006). Another important point is to intervene early with prevention measures and assure their continuity (Scheithauer et al., 2008). Examples are multilevel concepts by Olweus (Olweus 1993), or by Papilio (Scheithauer/Mayer 2008) or the „PAC" („prevention as a chance") programme of the state criminal police in Lower Saxony (www.pac-programm.de)). These concepts also include parents and can help this way to foster the attention given to children and to improve the bonds between parents and children. It is a precondition for the success of these concepts that parents are familiar

with them and that they can support them in everyday life. Moreover, by including parents it is possible to identify problems at an earlier stage, many seeming inconspicuous from outside.

Concerning the question which political conclusions should be drawn from dramatic event as in Erfurt or Winnenden, we would like to refer to passages of the speeches the German presidents Johannes Rau and Horst Köhler held at the commemorations in 2002 and 2009. They underline to which degrees these events are (still) incomprehensive to us and how carefully and thoroughly we should strive for a better understanding. In the future attention should be paid that prevention does not only mean specifically avoiding undesired states or situations, but that it always also leads to new social dialogue, how we wish to live together in the future and which conjectural and preventive measures we should take to come as close as possible to these goals and wishes.

„We are perplexed. We have not thought that it was possible that something like this could happen (in our country). We should not try to cover up our helplessness with apparently obvious explanations. We should admit: We do not understand this deed. And that in the end, we will never be able to fully explain it. Certainly, we wish to understand, what has driven the shooter, what has seduced him, what has made him loose any sense of humanity. We are looking for causes and responsibilities. We would like to know quickly, which consequences should be drawn, in order to prevent that something like this will ever happen again."[3]

„Every child is borne innocent. When a child dies, then hope and future die with it. This is why the news of violence against children horrifies us that much. Though, what if a child itself becomes a murderer? The same questions bother us over and over: How could this happen? How can a human being do such a thing? Weren't there any signals of alarm, no signs, on which one could have reacted? Some will also ask, how God could allow such a thing. And many family members ask. How should life go on now?"[4]

There is not THE answer to these questions. This is precisely why school shooting cannot be prevented. There are no reliable and quick solutions, no nostrum. Nonetheless, school shootings are not (only) the expression of individual problems of particular students. They are rather an extreme alarm signal for a general imbalance in our society. These alarm signs are unfortunately only occasionally noticed. The impact of such an eruption of violence is shocking. Yet, this is precisely why the reactions to these alarm signs need to be well considered and thought for the long-run. Hasty

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[3] Speech of president Johannes Rau in front of Erfurt Cathedral Mai 3rd 2002 in commemoration of the victims of the assassinations in a High School in Erfurt

[4] Speech of president Horst Köhler on March 21st 2009 at the commemoration ceremony for the victims of the spree killing in Winnenden und Wendlingen.

reactions and political activism are rather harmful then useful. Once one can show that there was a reaction, it is possible to go back to business as usual. This however would be fatal and would mean ignoring the societal factors that lead to young school shooters. At the end of the day, we are all responsible for what has happened and for what will still happen. This requires political debate and discussion about how to shape the future.

What does all this mean for crime prevention?

The above considerations and explanations take the authors to the following conclusions:

1. It is impossible to prevent school shooting as a specific phenomenon.

2. Stricter gun control/weapon laws or a prohibition of relevant computer games as a prevention strategy do not tackle the causes of shootings, are difficult to implement and will probably lead to unintended secondary effects (illegality).

3. Measures in the area of youth (media) protection, measures to foster media competency as well as those for the prevention of violence need to be further developed, proposed and evaluated. Yet, it should be omitted to pocket these measure in the name of a rash, simplifying prevention strategy for school shootings.

4. School shooters cannot be compared with violent children and young adults or those with behavioural disorders. Consequentially, specific prevention programmes for this target group are hardly promising for school shooters.

5. Prevention programmes that start in school or kindergarten seem reasonable, if not for anything but their coverage. Giving orientation, strengthening self-confidence, allowing children to experience a sense of achievement are important components of such a strategy.

6. It is necessary to develop new approaches and new links between approaches for general and specific prevention programmes.

7. Prevention must not end at school: Integrating parents is crucial.

8. Teachers and educators have to see themselves (even more) an attachment figure, as psychological parents rather than providers of knowledge.

9. It is important to create the framework conditions for teachers to be able to care and to look after their students instead of providing simply school services.

10. It should be standard procedure to take evaluated prevention experiences and knowledge from different disciplines of prevention research into account at all levels of planning and action.

11. Police and schools should develop in close cooperation emergency plans and update and further develop them.

12. The development and the use of possible leaking-concepts and of risk analysis of potential dangers of school shootings should be undertaken without precipitation

and closely following the general idea of close cooperation and interdisciplinarity.

13. The press and the media should use opportunities to reflect with the help prevention experts, media scholars and other experts on their role in school shooting, their coverage of these events and possibilities to improve their work.

14. Academic studies, research and practical experiences of crime prevention are only at the beginning of a necessary long-term analysis of the complex phenomenon which is school shooting. To gain insights into this rather recent phenomenon interdisciplinary cooperation and professionalism seem even more important than they are generally for crime prevention.

15. Specialised organisations in the field of crime prevention at all levels (local to international) should participate actively in the above describe discourses and processes. They can in this way contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon as well as to a better presentation, communication and a more rational way to deal with this issue.

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