

INADEQUATE YOUTH PREVENTION AS A RISK FOR SOCIETY AND THE POLICE

Markus HÖHNER

University of Police and Public Administration of North Rhine-Westphalia
Erna-Scheffler-Str. 4, DE-51103 Cologne, Germany
E-mail: markus.hoehner@hspv.nrw.de
ORCID ID: [0009-0004-6761-280X](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6761-280X)

Christian HORRES

University of Police and Public Administration of North Rhine-Westphalia
Erna-Scheffler-Str. 4, DE-51103 Cologne, Germany
E-mail: christian.horres@hspv.nrw.de
ORCID ID: [0009-0000-0425-0208](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0425-0208)

Lukas BAULIG

University of Police and Public Administration of North Rhine-Westphalia
Erna-Scheffler-Str. 4, DE-51103 Cologne, Germany
E-mail: lukas.baulig@studium.hspv.nrw.de
ORCID ID: [0009-0009-9191-1283](https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9191-1283)

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Abstract. *The responsibilities of police officers have expanded significantly over the years. New operational challenges resulting from crises —such as the war in Ukraine, refugee movements, or the COVID-19 pandemic— have presented new challenges. Despite these new challenges, traditional responsibilities must remain a priority. Instead, continuous development and evaluation of measures and procedures are required. A lack of foresight can create risks in police operations and investigations. **Youth crime prevention** is one of these crucial aspects that law enforcement must address. Recent developments have significantly diverted attention from youth crime prevention. However, effective youth crime prevention plays a key role in long-term crime prevention. What approach does law enforcement take in handling juvenile delinquency, and what types of prevention strategies are applied? How do police officers interact with young offenders? These are essential questions that an evolving field of police science must examine.*

Keywords: *youth crime prevention, police intervention, police strategies*

Introduction

Understanding a processual society and becoming aware of its dynamics and effects are among the core competencies conveyed by Norbert Elias throughout his life. His view of sociological processes called for a deeper engagement with both the individual and society. According to Elias, individuals and society do not exist independently, but rather form a kind of interdependent community, a network of interdependencies (Elias 1977). This perspective serves as the foundation for the following critical analysis of the interactions between juvenile offenders, often labeled and personified as criminals, and the police (in particular) and juvenile court assistance. The focus lies on how these young offenders perceive institutions of state control. The central guiding questions are: What does police prevention and social work mean, and what role does police science play? What is the responsibility of the police, and how should they position themselves within the broader network of actors? Policing today faces constant change and growing challenges. Simultaneously, professionalization is advancing, and the number of related academic disciplines concerned with police work continues to rise. Police officers are now expected to develop a wide range of competencies to handle complex

incidents, requiring legal knowledge, but also empathy, sociological and pedagogical skills. Officers must function as mediators, psychologists, paramedics, and digital experts (Kühne 2021). Not only the institution of the police but also its operational environment is subject to transformation. As society accelerates, individuals must acquire more complex competencies, creating a long-term interdependence (Bidlo and Mahnken 2021). It remains questionable whether increased specialization enables officers to meet these expectations. Juvenile delinquency is both widespread and episodic (Arbeitsstelle Kinder- und Jugendkriminalitätsprävention 2015). It often begins early in life and typically ends with entry into professional adulthood. Only a minority pursue a long-term criminal path (LKA Nordrhein-Westfalen 2020; Feltes and Schilling 2015; Haus des Jugendrechts 2018; Scherr & Bauer 2024). However, society's perception is frequently shaped by sensationalist headlines such as "Youth gangs becoming increasingly brutal" (Bild.de 2019). In contrast, reality shows a different picture. For instance, an article in *Polizei Dein Partner* states: "When minors become offenders – declining case numbers stand in contrast to spectacular individual cases" (Gewerkschaft der Polizei 2021). This gap between perception and reality is often referred to as the subjective sense of security. Dark figure studies have confirmed that public perception of crime often does not match actual statistics (Ministerium des Inneren des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 2023). Older studies, such as the 2016 Bochum Dark Figure Study, identified various causes for this misperception. A ten-year statistical comparison (LKA Nordrhein-Westfalen 2020) shows a steady decline in registered suspects under the age of 21, from 105,915 in 2014 to 85,948 in 2021, a decrease of ~18.88%. Since 2022, however, a counteracting trend has emerged, accompanied by a significant increase. This can finally be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, though it does not fully explain the massive surge. Youth crime declined between 2010 and 2021 (from 68,166 in 2010 to 54,156 in 2021)¹. However, in 2022, a significant increase was recorded, mirroring the rise in the number of suspects (from 54,156 in 2021 to 75,088 in 2023). The neglect of youth prevention measures and various societal issues may have contributed to the increase. Nevertheless, statistical values are often distorted. The Police Crime Statistics (PKS), for example, only account for crimes in the bright field and for identified suspects. The dark field remains statistically elusive. This paper first examines the relevant institutional actors before exploring the collaborative concept of the Haus des Jugendrechts (House of Juvenile Justice). Subsequently, the current status and potential for process-driven improvements are discussed.

Theoretical approach

Various actors involved in the issue of youth delinquency will be examined below, with a focus on their respective roles in relation to police action. This analysis follows perspectives from police science, which is understood as an interdisciplinary discipline (Kühne, 2021). Police science can be defined as "the science of the police in its being and its obligations. It deals with the police as a function, as an institution, and with its actions" (Neidhardt, 2007). The inclusion of institutions that are also directly involved in the maintenance of internal security is essential to establish a "comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and transnational approach to analyzing internal security" (Feltes, 2007). An increasing number of institutions are involved in addressing police-related issues, which means that the establishment of internal security and crime prevention does not necessarily originate solely from the police (Feltes & Schilling, 2015). The effective prevention of juvenile delinquency must also involve

¹ The total number of all opera of crimes in NRW has risen since 2011.

the judicial system (Kutschaty & Kubink, 2011). These actors form a network of institutions in which the police continue to be regarded as the primary guarantor and facilitator of internal security. Prevention can be conceptually divided into a three-level model: primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. While there are valid arguments for a critical review of this model (Holthausen & Hoops, 2015), it still provides a clearer understanding of the overall structure. The two primary actors examined in this study, the police and youth court assistance, are involved in both primary prevention (before a criminal act is committed) and secondary prevention (after an act has occurred, during its processing). In addition, the structures within the House of Juvenile Justice enable access to tertiary prevention (Feltes & Schilling, 2015). Youth welfare services in this context are understood as youth court assistance. Although terminology may vary, both the literature and practical application refer to youth welfare as a division of the youth department within the court system.

What is the police's objective when dealing with juvenile delinquency, and what type of prevention strategies are applied? How do police officers behave toward young offenders? These are pressing questions that an increasingly relevant field of police science must explore. A society in a constant state of progress cannot, and will not, respond to individual "failures" by treating them as isolated incidents; rather, these individuals are typically stigmatized as members of fringe groups. Those who reject or fail to internalize the dominant society's decision-making processes frequently enter into conflict with the system. In such cases, the first actor of this system is often the police, as an institution of social control. Stigmatization, as described above, is clearly reflected in the term "juvenile repeat offender" (Bliesener et al., 2010; Holthausen, 2013). As an instrument of criminal policy, the term lacks definitional and prognostic precision (Neubacher, 2010; Feltes & Schilling, 2015). Nonetheless, it has undeniably established itself in the minds of police officers (Bliesener et al., 2010), especially since the literature itself has largely ceased to use alternative terminology (Riekenbrauk, 2015). It is also increasingly evident that especially young officers exhibit strong punitiveness in their dealings with known juvenile offenders. "There is a growing tendency to solve problems quickly and decisively through repressive measures" (Feltes & Schilling, 2015). The persistent phenomenon of insubordination, though not new and still insufficiently addressed—continues to result in harsh responses toward young offenders (Behr, 2018; Bliesener et al., 2010). Such responses may directly contradict the idea of processing offenses constructively and fostering prevention. In a case from spring 2021, reported to the author by multiple colleagues, a juvenile fled from officers on a moped and was ultimately apprehended. When confronted, he allegedly told the officer that he "pays the police" and that the officer should focus on catching real criminals. The officer reportedly replied that he preferred catching "criminals like him" and would personally ensure that the youth would never obtain a driver's license. The frequency of such incidents remains unclear. The intent and objectivity of the account must also be questioned. However, the emotional manner in which the situation was recounted suggests that others present did not necessarily agree with the officer's statement. The precise context remains uncertain and unverified, highlighting its anecdotal nature. Nonetheless, the case shows parallels to issues raised by Behr regarding officers' reactions to perceived disrespect and the persistence of a "warrior mentality" in police culture. This mindset may reflect an underlying tendency toward verbally aggressive communication (Hermanutz & Weigle 2023). Officers' reactions to perceived disrespect are often personal responses to what they interpret as an attack, rooted in a misunderstanding of disrespect and violence (Bartsch & Kibbe 2023; Behr, 2018). While initial encounters between children (Petzoldt, 2017) and adolescents (Feltes & Schilling, 2015) and the police are crucial to their perception of state authority, there is often a discrepancy between theoretical understanding

and practical experience. This also affects how the police perceive and execute social education roles attributed to them (Riekenbrauk, 2015; Feltes & Schilling, 2015). Even though many officers are unaware of this responsibility, or do not see it as their own, it is demonstrably a part of everyday police work, albeit under a different label (Behr, 2018). In practice, such tasks are often grouped under the broader category of crime prevention. Police-led initiatives such as “Gelbe Karte” (Yellow Card Project) or Crash Kurs NRW are examples of primary prevention projects initiated by the police or the Ministry of the Interior of North Rhine-Westphalia (IM NRW). These projects could be described as socio-criminal policy efforts, thereby framing social work as a more prominent aspect of the police’s responsibilities. Other projects, such as KURS NRW and Kurve kriegen, align more closely with secondary prevention. There is currently no standardized research on the impact of verbal conflict situations involving police officers and young offenders (Behr, 2018). The police seem to struggle with the social transformations they face. Officers today are expected to represent a new, “ambivalent” type of police professional, far removed from the traditional types described by Behr: the warrior and the patrolman. As previously noted by the author, police officers can increasingly be seen as legally trained social workers whose roles are no longer captured by such outdated labels. They are expected to demonstrate composure, a balanced attitude, and refined skills in dealing with young offenders. While not all competencies fall neatly into this category, it represents an aspirational model of policing. In this context, insubordination would no longer be understood as a question of respect but rather as a communicative challenge in daily police operations. To conclude this section theoretically: within the North Rhine-Westphalia police force (NRW), there is currently no specific continuing education program for officers on targeted communication or engagement with young offenders. Only during their training at the University of Police and Public Administration (HSPV NRW) are such topics covered, within the submodules 1.3.1, 1.3.2, 2.1.2, and 2.2.3, dealing with crime prevention and juvenile delinquency (HSPV NRW, 2024). However, the number of hours allocated to these subjects is relatively low compared to legal content. This suggests that social competencies in dealing with youth crime are mainly acquired during field practice. Yet the acquisition and sustainability of these competencies, and the experience with preventive approaches, remain largely unexamined. From the author’s perspective, this creates a clear research mandate for police science to investigate the development of such competencies and how they manifest in daily conflict situations and police encounters (Breyman, 2006).

Youth court assistance (Jugendgerichtshilfe, JGH), also referred to as youth welfare services in criminal proceedings, is a department within municipal youth welfare offices. The two terms are largely synonymous. “The particularity of youth court assistance within the range of responsibilities of the youth welfare office lies primarily in the fact that typical service-related aspects (§ 52, paragraphs 2 and 3 of SGB VIII) are combined with other sovereign functions” (Trenczek, 2009). Accordingly, it is the legal duty of the youth welfare office, specifically of youth court assistance, to cooperate with the police as an actor of social control and to maintain direct communication. A critical discussion of the role, development, and capacity of youth welfare services in this cooperation seems unavoidable. In the Fifth Youth Report from 1980, the federal government stated that youth services were overwhelmed and inadequately prepared for their responsibilities. It was so severe that youth services were “hardly in a position to effectively solve the problems of children and adolescents who are in poor social and educational conditions”. This assessment has evolved over the decades. The expansion of youth protection, the rights of children and adolescents in criminal proceedings, and the presence of youth welfare services during legal processes are positive developments.

This is also reflected in the 14th Child and Youth Report from 2014: “Child and youth welfare services have changed significantly in their contours since German reunification and the introduction of the Child and Youth Welfare Act in 1990, and again since the turn of the millennium”. The range of services, cooperation models, and support mechanisms have improved considerably over 34 years and are now more future-oriented. In criminal proceedings, youth welfare services fulfill their legal mandate by offering support, accompanying juveniles during trials, and providing interventions under juvenile court orders. These interventions can range from anti-aggression training to social skills courses or community service placements. However, the commission responsible for the 14th report also notes that current offerings for delinquent youth, particularly those to which youth services have only limited access, must be reviewed and improved (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2014). This applies especially to repeat offenders and young people with a migration background. The commission therefore emphasizes the need for sufficient resources so that youth welfare services can fulfill their role. The 1980 appeal to better equip youth services with staff and funding is reiterated in the 2014 report. Although youth services have adapted to ongoing changes and have benefited from more qualified staff and increased funding, they often still lack the time, access to relevant contexts, and personnel needed to fulfill their mandate. The central dilemma of youth welfare in criminal proceedings lies in the duality of help and punishment (Lohrmann & Schaerff, 2021; Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2014). Punishment rarely has a sustainable educational effect, even though it does not completely preclude education. Especially the overloaded juvenile justice system fails to do justice to both the pedagogical aim and the punitive expectations of society, as these are inherently incompatible (Müller & Sünker). This makes it a particular challenge for youth welfare services to create spaces where work with young offenders can take place (Schweitzer & Weber, 2022) without the pressure of state control (secondary prevention). At the same time, youth welfare (especially family support services) is expected to act preventively at an early stage (Görge et al., 2010; Holthusen & Hoops, 2015), in cooperation with other institutions and through early detection mechanisms (primary prevention). Therefore, youth welfare depends on timely reports from its partner institutions, such as case workers in youth offices and the police, to initiate appropriate measures and interventions. This requires a well-developed culture of reporting and inter-agency communication. Such cooperation between police and youth services is a core element of the House of Juvenile Justice concept. However, even here, the preventive and pedagogical objectives of youth services appear to be under considerable pressure.

The first House of Juvenile Justice (Haus des Jugendrechts) was established in Stuttgart in 1999 and is considered a pioneering model that inspired similar initiatives across Germany. In North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the first House of Juvenile Justice opened in Cologne in 2009. Today, NRW operates four such institutions, which are increasingly regarded as effective tools in combating crime and reducing persistent criminal careers (Haus des Jugendrechts, 2018). The collaboration between police, public prosecution, and youth court assistance allows for a more efficient and holistic approach to criminal cases, with a focused view on the juvenile offender (Haus des Jugendrechts, 2018). The underlying idea of the House of Juvenile Justice is to process cases involving repeat juvenile offenders more swiftly and with fewer bureaucratic barriers. A central objective is to achieve “the highest possible effectiveness in addressing youth delinquency through a parallel and holistic approach by the participating institutions” (Linz, 2012). Following the foundation in Stuttgart, other federal states adopted the concept. In NRW, the four currently active Houses of Juvenile Justice are

located in Cologne (2009), Paderborn (2014), Dortmund (2016), and Essen (2018), all of which handle juvenile delinquency cases. According to the original concept, officers from the criminal police, representatives of the public prosecutor's office, and youth court assistance staff work together under one roof to establish closer contact with young offenders and ensure rapid coordination on procedural matters. In addition, these institutions maintain relationships with external cooperation partners to offer support beyond the formal justice system (Haus des Jugendrechts, 2018). By networking these three key actors of the criminal justice system, a new foundation of trust is intended—particularly between youth welfare services and the police/prosecutor's office, which has historically been marked by skepticism (Feltès & Schilling, 2015). While the police focus largely on repressive measures, the role of youth welfare services is to engage in “relationship and trust-building work” (Feltès & Schilling, 2015). This can lead to conflict, especially when the relationship between young offenders and the police has already been damaged. Newer ideas—such as the concept of a virtual House of Juvenile Justice—have met with skepticism, and some critics have labeled the idea a form of “label fraud” (Lohrmann & Schaerff, 2021). However, the effectiveness of such concepts remains to be seen. The Houses of Juvenile Justice admit only so-called intensive offenders. These juveniles are discussed in so-called evaluation conferences, in which their development and potential for reintegration are assessed. Based on certain criteria (Haus des Jugendrechts, 2018), candidates are proposed for the program and assigned a dedicated caseworker. For the program to succeed, the young participants and their guardians are expected to act responsibly and cooperatively. If issues arise during case management, case conferences may be held with cooperation partners to determine specific procedural strategies, which are then communicated to the juvenile and their legal guardians. Such conferences are typically necessary when the frequency or severity of criminal acts increases. The program can end positively, negatively, or without a defined outcome. In Cologne, a distinction is made between “optional discharge” and “mandatory discharge”. In both cases, discharge is only possible with unanimous consent from all cooperating institutions. Each partner has voting rights and can delay the decision with a dissenting vote (Haus des Jugendrechts, 2018).

These concepts and their outcomes should be continuously examined and evaluated through scientific monitoring in order to improve procedures and ensure transparent measurement of success. However, such evaluations are often carried out by the ministries themselves, commissioned by them, or presented in the institutions' own reports. In the 2018 annual report of the Cologne House of Juvenile Justice, it is acknowledged that the project's success is difficult to measure statistically, as it relies largely on the recidivism rates of young offenders, an indicator that is subject to significant fluctuation. Nevertheless, it is precisely this recidivism rate that must be considered a key metric for success (Dessecker & Schäfer 2023²). Accordingly, the effectiveness of these institutions is highly dependent on the participation and cooperation of the juvenile offenders. If the support measures cannot be implemented, the system defaults to traditional repressive methods (Haus des Jugendrechts, 2018). As such, the collaboration between the involved institutions can be categorized primarily as a form of tertiary prevention, a reactive strategy adapted to reduce the future impact of offending behavior. However, alongside the positive aspects of the model, its limitations must also be acknowledged. The Houses of Juvenile Justice have been sharply criticized for their operational methods and underlying philosophy. Critics have repeatedly described them as political instruments—tools of criminal policy that focus less on the

² In the experimental group from the House of Juvenile Justice, 70% of the young people and adolescents remained without subsequent entries.

juveniles themselves and more on the broader phenomenon of crime (Riekenbrauk, 2015). They are perceived as visible responses to criminal behavior and as a reaction to growing fear of crime. In his article “Houses of Juvenile Justice – Assessment of a Cooperation Model”, Riekenbrauk, supported by further sources, argues that the concept places undue pressure on one particular actor: the youth welfare services. “The foundation of all social pedagogical work is the effort to establish trust-based cooperation with young clients. Even the mere appearance of overlapping responsibilities between youth welfare and the prosecution/police endangers the possibility of successful trust-building! There is a significant risk that general mistrust of law enforcement, formed through repeated experiences of labeling and criminalization, will extend to the youth welfare services. Moreover, the structural dominance of the police and prosecution in the ‘Houses of Juvenile Justice’ is unlikely to go unnoticed by the juveniles” (Riekenbrauk, 2015). A similar perspective is expressed by Prof. Dr. Thomas Feltes and Rüdiger Schilling in their contribution, ‘Police and Young People, More Preventive Repression?’. “In the perception of municipal decision-makers in the welfare state, social work appears to be a tool for ensuring peace and order. When the police are unsuccessful in doing so, calls arise for social workers to step in and teach young people how to integrate properly into society” (Feltes & Schilling, 2015). Thus, social work holds a crucial position in the triangular relationship between the police, the prosecution, and youth welfare services. Ideally, its task should be to support, guide, and socialize young offenders within the framework of the program, but under a pedagogical-social approach, without repressive consequences.

Youth services must carve out a space of autonomy in this structure and avoid being relegated to a secondary role in the “discourse on ‘intensive offenders’ and the ‘correct way’ to deal with them” (Riekenbrauk, 2015; Feltes & Schilling, 2015; Holthusen & Hoops, 2015). As the renowned sociologist and criminologist Franz von Liszt (1851–1919) famously stated: “Good social policy is the best criminal policy.” It therefore remains questionable whether the Houses of Juvenile Justice are truly the most effective option for dealing with or supporting juvenile offenders, especially since the selection process, which focuses solely on so-called “intensive offenders,” inherently promotes stigmatization. This risk, along with the concern that short, informal coordination between institutions could create structural imbalances, is also highlighted by Cologne-based attorney Lukas Pieplow in the 2018 annual report of the Cologne House (Haus des Jugendrechts, 2018). However, he also notes a positive development: the police officers working within the House have developed closer connections to the young people involved, along with a deeper understanding of their circumstances.

The foregoing has shown that prevention is not the sole responsibility of the police, even though the police often see themselves as the main actors, especially in contexts such as kindergartens and schools (Feltes & Schilling, 2015). At the same time, it must be acknowledged that crime prevention is essentially another term for social work in criminal policy. It is therefore undeniable that police work is partly social work. Gaining knowledge and developing a more nuanced understanding of crime, delinquency and prevention ultimately leads to the realisation that these so-called ‘soft skills’ (not to be confused with the notion of ‘soft’ officers - cf. Feltes & Schilling, 2015) are an essential part of police work and can significantly enhance its effectiveness. As previously outlined, working with juvenile delinquency should never be reduced to repression alone. Rather, it becomes clear that if young offenders are initially confronted with repressive methods, a trusting and open relationship between them and the police is unlikely to develop. This, in turn, may hinder any further preventive or educational engagement. A pedagogical and socially informed approach to interaction with young offenders is therefore critical and must not be obstructed by one-

sided enforcement. The aim of preventive policing is to preempt the need for repressive intervention. For that reason, early-stage communication and transparent clarification of behavioral boundaries play a key role (Feldes & Schilling, 2015). While the juvenile justice system includes various punitive measures, its foundation, unlike the adult justice system, should be educational in nature. Nevertheless, several of these measures have faced criticism, such as the Warnschussarrest (warning shot detention) introduced in 2013. A study conducted by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony and the University of Kassel found no clear positive effect and concluded that the measure failed to achieve any sustainable educational or pedagogical outcomes (Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony & University of Kassel, 2016). Interventions addressing juvenile offenders should occur promptly and are thus a regular component of routine patrol duties. The reporting culture within the police should be further strengthened, allowing early identification and documentation of problematic situations and behavioral patterns. This is the only way youth welfare services can take action proactively. Such a shift requires a broader mindset, a readiness to embrace additional responsibilities, and an ongoing commitment to professional development. It demands a reconfiguration of police practice. The question of why young people become offenders is not explored in depth here. Nevertheless, it is necessary to briefly highlight key criminological findings. These help to explain why early intervention in unstable family environments is vital to preventing future delinquent behavior. The official website of the “Crime Prevention of the Federal and State Police Authorities” includes an article that discusses experiences of violence. It concludes that children and adolescents who have themselves been victims of violence are significantly more likely to engage in violent behavior later in life (Polizeiliche Kriminalprävention der Länder und des Bundes, 2021). This has been empirically supported by numerous studies and scholarly contributions (LKA Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2020; Temple et al., 2017; Möller, 2018; Wonneberger et al., 2017; Züchner, 2018; Palit & Chhabra 2023). The established correlation between early experiences of violence and later criminality is a crucial finding. This knowledge must inform the development of targeted prevention projects (Bliesener, 2013). It also leads to a pressing call for early interventions designed to protect children and young people (Baier 2022; Petzoldt, 2017; Niehaus, 2019; Dollinger, 2014; Dölling, 2012). This results in a clearly defined mandate, directed both at youth welfare institutions and at the police, to improve communication practices and information sharing structures in order to act more effectively in the interest of prevention. A future question that may arise is whether the mental development of our children also impacts crime rates. A 2024 study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Steinmayr et. al. 2024) indicates that many young people feel socially or emotionally lonely. Whether these findings can serve as a basis for youth crime prevention remains unclear. However, a connection between social and emotional loneliness and the formation of youth-specific groups could be a conceivable approach.

Numerous academic contributions have examined the historical development of police activities and the increasing scope of police and criminal law interventions, such as the shift toward earlier stages of criminalization. However, the development of communicative-police interaction, particularly in the context of juvenile delinquency, has received considerably less attention, despite its equal significance. To date, there is very little empirically accessible research in this area. Nonetheless, trends in prevention and intervention can be outlined and used to make cautious projections about future developments in police practice. The JuKrim 2020 study conducted by the German Police University (Deutsche Hochschule der Polizei) offers a helpful comparative basis. The study ultimately calls for improved networking and cooperation across institutional boundaries: “If we summarize the individual statements on

potential prevention approaches, the key to promising, future-oriented prevention lies in a particularly target group-specific, early-starting, and more interconnected approach”. But what approach should be pursued in practical terms? The institutional cooperation between the police, the public prosecutor’s office, and youth court assistance, such as within the Houses of Juvenile Justice, supports a form of tertiary prevention, aimed at slowing the progression of delinquent behavior and offering juveniles an alternative path (Görge et al., 2010). In contrast, primary prevention efforts are often carried out independently by each institution. From this arises a range of potential fields of action that still require development in order to implement more effective and coordinated prevention strategies (Holthusen & Hoops, 2015). While youth welfare services sometimes face barriers to access, the police often lack the specialized personnel or sociological perspectives required for comprehensive preventive work. This observation should not be misunderstood as a severe criticism: police work is by nature bound by legal constraints and traditionally focused on repressive functions. Nevertheless, it remains part of the police’s mandate to engage with the interdependent structures of society, to adjust and train its personnel accordingly, and to continue evolving. Compared with the police typologies described by Behr, police practice is already undergoing a clear transformation. Empathy, communicative competence, and flexible operational confidence are increasingly emphasized as core competencies necessary for forward-looking, socially responsive policing (Behr, 2018).

Methodology

This paper is based on a comprehensive literature review. The methodology consists of a systematic collection, selection, and critical analysis of existing scholarly literature, empirical studies, official reports, and policy documents relevant to juvenile delinquency prevention and police action in Germany. No primary empirical data were collected. Instead, the focus lies on evaluating secondary sources to develop a nuanced understanding of the interrelations between youth crime, police engagement, and institutional cooperation—particularly in the context of preventive approaches and structural innovations such as the “Haus des Jugendrechts” (House of Juvenile Justice). The sources consulted include academic contributions from criminology, sociology, social work, and police science, with particular attention to theoretical frameworks such as Norbert Elias’ concept of interdependence. The inclusion of government reports and official statistics serves to contextualize scholarly findings within current institutional practices. Literature was selected based on thematic relevance, scientific rigor, and its contribution to understanding the practical and structural challenges in preventing youth crime. Key authors referenced include Feltes, Behr, Holthusen, Riekenbrauk, and Görge, among others. Through this qualitative approach, the paper aims to explore structural weaknesses, institutional interdependencies, and normative implications without engaging in hypothesis testing or quantitative data analysis. The methodology allows for a critical examination of policy implications and identifies gaps between theory and practice, especially regarding communication, early intervention, and the social role of the police in youth-related contexts.

Discussion

The police operate in a reciprocal relationship with society, shaped by the ongoing transformation of societal norms, values, and the individuals subject to them. As demonstrated earlier, these norms have changed significantly in recent decades. This transformation necessitated corresponding adaptations in the orientation, training, and development of police

institutions. It has become increasingly evident that prevention cannot be equated with the successful implementation of repressive measures (Unkrig & Wendelmann 2023). Especially in the field of preventive responsibilities, the police can contribute to meaningful change, but also must relinquish certain roles that do not fall within their core mandate. Intervention in socially marginalized areas and precarious family circumstances is primarily the responsibility of youth welfare services and juvenile court assistance. Family conflict management and the resolution of domestic problems lie within their jurisdiction (Wonneberger et al. 2017). However, in order to act effectively, these institutions must first be adequately informed. This necessity has also been confirmed by the JuKrim2020 research findings. Strengthening cooperation and communication between the institutions involved in addressing juvenile delinquency is essential to improve support for young offenders and enable timely intervention. In fact, successful prevention and intervention often start within the families of these individuals. Investigating these root causes and identifying structural connections remains a complex challenge for youth welfare professionals. From a critical perspective, it is therefore essential to improve the exchange of information between relevant authorities to interrupt possible cycles of neglect, lack of parental care, and unlawful violence (Landtag NRW 2019; Möller 2018). These insights should become a core element of police practice, especially police reporting culture, so that youth services can gain access to relevant cases and fulfill their role effectively. This would also help delineate the preventive responsibilities of the police more clearly. The police should primarily serve as information providers and supporters of preventive strategies, not as the central guarantor of prevention. For police science, key research questions emerge: To what extent does police behavior influence preventive strategies, particularly those in the areas of secondary and tertiary prevention? And to what degree are preventive concepts and social competencies acquired and transmitted within the police? A necessary precursor would be to define which preventive tasks fall to the police, and which to youth welfare, and to identify areas of overlap or complementarity. Only then can we determine whether meaningful competence development can be expected from either institution. The issues previously reflected upon could thereby be substantiated or refuted through empirical investigation, allowing for a clearer understanding of roles and responsibilities.

Conclusion & recommendations

From the critical approach of the present scientific work, a variety of possibilities and problems become visible to improve state action, but also to reflect on state executive action. Police work cannot be primarily limited to repressive action, but must above all also take preventive aspects into account. However, police work is not the only one affected by this. The psychological aspects of prevention work also have an impact on the other actors in the state authorities. These are also responsible "players" for successful crime prevention. Nevertheless, the police are therefore not the primary grant for preventive action. This would overload the fields of action of police activities. On the part of the police, concepts and projects that have been successfully implemented for years have been launched and cooperations have been founded. A promising and yet critical cooperation is the House of Juvenile Justice. The proximity of the cooperation partners can lead to an efficient exchange and accelerated procedures, but also carries the risk that youth welfare services will come under great pressure in the performance of their tasks and will not be able to meet the aspect of help and support in the procedure. The tertiary idea of prevention thus serves two sides of the same coin. However, the criticism of the repressive orientation must be countered by the fact that the police see

themselves more as a mediator of prevention in their legal performance of their duties and cannot be the institution for preventive intervention. This already follows from the conflict between the constitutional mandate to prosecute. In contrast, the youth welfare offices are an institution that was founded to help and implement goal-oriented support for children and young people. In the author's opinion, inadequate further training and further education in the areas of prevention work should be improved in the future. Only through a comprehensive acceptance of certain concepts and ideas can the idea of prevention also find favour with the individual employee. Although there is no empirical data on the actual teaching of these skills and thus a shortage is only predicted. However, it can be positively emphasized that both youth welfare and the police have produced a lot of improvements in preventive approaches over the past decades. However, some research has made it clear that better networking and mandatory exchange of information between different actors is needed to achieve further improvements. In the opinion of the author, the police should take on a more reporting function and involve other authorities more. This requires sufficient competence in social thinking and understanding of criminological concepts. This appears to be the essential assignment of tasks to the police in the structure, the other actors, preventive social work. It has been proven that Norbert Elia's views of social interactions can also be related to the treatment of juvenile offenders. The chains of interdependence are a natural result of a society's "action" on the individual and the "reaction" it provides. It will therefore continue to be important in the future to analyse the network of relationships and to intervene at an early stage. Research on these topics could provide further insights and conclusions. This could improve social action and make it more efficient.

More efforts to prevent social media misuse could be key. However, that is a different subject area. A study on police language culture in interactions with juvenile offenders could provide new perspectives

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