



Zurich Youth Survey 2021: Selected Results and Background Information

The latest Zurich Youth Survey 2021 shows that overall rates of violence among young people are increasing again, after significantly decreasing trends were observed between the two previous surveys in 2007 and 2014. The increase relates in particular to sexual offenses and robbery as well as school bullying.

Since 1999, thousands of young people have been surveyed about their experiences as victims and perpetrators of violence in the Zurich Youth Surveys at intervals of 7 to 8 years (see info box at the end of the text). Such surveys on the “dark figure” of crime and violence allow to go beyond the police crime statistics (PCS) to examine long-term trends in violence, delinquency, substance use and other problem behaviour among young people and to determine possible causes for trend reversals. This is important because only reported offenses are recorded in the PCS, and because the reporting rate for violent offenses in particular is low and can change significantly.

In the following, we summarize the most important trend findings in various areas of investigation.

Trends in Violence

- Looking at five types of victimization experiences, in 2021, 23.9% of surveyed ninth graders (approximately 16-year-olds) reported having suffered at least one violent offense over the past 30 months. This represents a +46.8% increase from 2014, when only 16.3% of respondents reported at least one victimization experience. While there are no significant changes with regard to “assault without weapon” as the most common form of violent victimisation (2014: 8.6%; 2021; 8.7%), all other forms of violence are reported more frequently in 2021 than in 2014:
 - Assault with a weapon: from 2.9% to 4.4% (+54%)
 - Sexual assault/rape: from 3.3% to 8.0% (+143%)
 - Robbery: from 4.9% to 8.9% (+83 %)
 - Extortion: from 2.1% to 4.8% (+135%).

Comparable trends were found in the 11th grade sample (approximately 18-year-olds).

If we look at the average number of offenses suffered (*incidence rate*) instead of the proportion of victims (*prevalence rate*) mentioned above, the increase is even more pronounced, especially in the older group (11th grade). This means that there are not only more victims, but that they also suffer more offenses on average.

- From the perpetrator perspective, similar trends can be observed. Overall, the proportion of perpetrators – based on a 12-months reference period – has not changed significantly between 2014 and 2021, namely from 9.6% to 10.5% at grade 9, and from 7.0 % auf 8.5 % at grade 11. As to robbery and extortion, however, the corresponding proportions have increased significantly in both age groups. In terms of the number of offenses committed (*incidence rate*), the increase is again more pronounced, with a roughly doubled overall violence rate in both age groups.
- Regarding school bullying, from the victim perspective, we observe the highest proportions of victims found so far since the first survey in 1999 for all forms investigated (*destroying things, hitting/kicking, threatening/extorting, laughing at/insulting, exclusion, sexual harassment*). From the perpetrator perspective, the increase is limited to physical violence and destroying things.
- Cyberbullying – i.e. threats, insults and humiliation via digital communication channels – is widespread overall and reported in one form or another by over half of respondents. Overall, the proportions of victims and perpetrators increased only slightly between 2014 and 2021, by +2% to +13% depending on the perspective (victim/perpetrator) and age group. In contrast, sexual cyber harassment has increased very significantly, by +55% to +101% depending on perspective and age group. For example, the corresponding percentage of victims in 9th grade has grown from 14% to 30%.

- Overall, the PCS trends correspond well with the dark figure trends, especially with regard to robbery and sexual offenses, for which increasing trends have been observed in recent years. Our survey data on reporting behaviour show declining reporting rates for robbery and sexual assault in particular, suggesting that the PCS may even underestimate the upward trend.
- The detailed analyses on the circumstances of victimization experiences of violence show an overall shift of violence into public space. This shift is accompanied by – from the perspective of the victims – an increase in unmotivated, random experiences of violence. Motives related to group affiliations (e.g., racially motivated violence, interethnic conflicts, conflicts between cliques, gangs or fan groups) are also mentioned more frequently.
- The analysis of more than 30 risk factors for violence reveals a complex picture with diverging trends. In sum, it appears that youth are not more at risk in 2021 than in 2014; rather, the increase in violence can be attributed solely to the 10% most at-risk respondents, whose exposure to violence more than doubled compared to 2014.
- The increasing threat of violence is also reflected in the sense of insecurity, where an increase can be observed for the first time since 1999.
- The long time interval of 7 years between the last two youth surveys hardly allows any conclusions to be drawn about a specific influence of the Corona crisis on youth violence. However, based on the available police crime statistics (PCS) and dark figure data, we conclude that the observed increase in violence represents a longer-term trend that began before the Corona crisis.

Gender-specific violence trends

- Male youth are more affected by increases in robbery and extortion, but in 2021 female youth also report significantly higher rates regarding this type of victimization than in 2014.
- Female youth, on the other hand, are massively more affected by increases in sexual violence. For example, 15% of female ninth graders reported having suffered sexual assault or rape in 2021, while the percentage was consistently below 8% from 1999 to 2014. Similarly, between 2014 and 2021, among female adolescents, victimization rates for sexual harassment in the context of school nearly doubled, from 19% to 36%. Sexual cyber-harassment was reported by 48% of female students in 2021, up from 28% in 2014. Male adolescents are also consistently more likely to report sexual victimization experiences, though their rates are 4 to 20 times lower than those of female respondents, depending on the indicator and timing.
- With regard to violence against sexual minorities, our analyses show that non-exclusively heterosexual male respondents are more likely to be victims of all forms of sexual violence and also more likely to experience school bullying compared to heterosexual male youth. Non-exclusive heterosexual female respondents are more likely to be victims of sexual harassment in the context of school and digital communication compared to heterosexual female respondents. Adolescents who fall into the gender category “diverse” (1.8% of respondents) have the highest rates of instrumental violence (robbery, extortion), assault, and school- and cyber-bullying of all groups studied.

Trends in delinquency, substance use, and self-injurious behaviour

- After a continuous decline in the proportion of perpetrators was found for all forms of self-reported delinquency from 1999 to 2014, stagnation or even an increase in some cases was observed between 2014 and 2021. Significantly more respondents report shoplifting, theft at home or graffitiing. However, delinquency rates remain almost consistently below the levels of 1999 and 2007, whereas drug dealing is the only type of offense surveyed that has decreased significantly.
- Little noticed by the public so far is the steadily increasing proportion of child delinquents, i.e. delinquency perpetrated before the age of 13, since 1999. Significantly higher proportions of offenders than in 2014 are found in robbery, extortion, threatening with a weapon, and theft at school, the latter being the most common form of early delinquency.

- With regard to substance use, the long-term trends point downward overall. For example, the proportion of 15- to 16-year-olds who have consumed beer or wine in the last 12 months has fallen steadily from 78% in 1999 to 53% in 2021. There are also clear downward trends for spirits (from 57% in 1999 to 43% in 2021), tobacco (from 56% in 1999 to 29% in 2021) and cannabis (from 40% in 1999 to 22% in 2021). The consumption rates of “hard” drugs are much lower compared to these three substance groups and have hardly changed since 2007. Around 3% of ninth graders report experience with ecstasy, cocaine, LSD, amphetamine, or heroin. The only countervailing unfavourable trend in this age group is the significantly higher proportion of regular (at least weekly) alcohol users, which doubled to 6.5% in 2021 after a steady decline from 1999 (4.3%) to 2014 (3.2%).
- In 2021, “*non-prescribed use of prescription drugs*” was asked for the first time. The proportions of users (last 12 months) are 2.8% for benzodiazepines (tranquilizers) in 9th grade and 4.7% in 11th grade, 6.4% and 8.5% for medications containing codeine (e.g., cough syrups), and 10.3% and 8.0% for opioid pain relievers. Since psychoactive substances are usually used more frequently with increasing age and this is *not* the case for opioid pain relievers, it is conceivable that this unusual pattern expresses a “generation gap”, i.e., it could indicate the increasing prevalence of nonmedical use of opioids in the younger generation.
- Self-injurious behaviour (e.g., cutting the skin using a blade, hitting one’s own head) was also surveyed for the first time in 2021. There are hardly any differences between the three age groups, with around 20% of respondents reporting such behaviour. The proportion of 15- to 19-year-olds who have suicidal thoughts is at the same level.

Trends on partnership, sexuality, pornography use, and teen dating violence

- With regard to gender-related attitudes, overall trends are favorable. For example, egalitarian attitudes toward couple relationships have increased significantly in both genders over the past 7 years, while violence-legitimizing norms of masculinity (e.g., “*A man who is unwilling to defend himself against insults with violence is a weakling*”) are again less endorsed.
- In 2021, acceptance of homosexuality was surveyed for the first time. Pronounced differences emerge between genders and school types. While in the “Gymnasium” (i.e., the school preparing for university) 92% of female respondents and 72% of male respondents find homosexual relationships just as okay as heterosexual ones, this proportion drops to 55% among female respondents and 25% among male respondents in the “B/C secondary” school (i.e., the least exigent school type).
- Between 2007 and 2021, among 15- to 16-year-old males, the rate of regular, at least weekly pornography users increased from 28% to 50%. Among female respondents, there is also an increase from 0.8% to 7.5% at a much lower level. Among 18-year-old young men, 64% reported regular pornography use in 2021.
- Among female respondents (9th grade) in particular, the proportion of those who classify themselves as not exclusively heterosexual increased very significantly from 2014 to 2021, from 7.4% to 26.0% (11th grade: from 14.0% to 26.0%). Similar trends are also found among male respondents, from 2.6% to 7.5% in 9th grade and from 4.2% to 8.9% in 11th grade, respectively.
- Overall, the proportion of adolescents who are in a partnership declined significantly between 2014 and 2021, as did the proportion of adolescents with sexual experiences. It is conceivable that this declining trend is related to contact restrictions in the wake of the Corona measures. However, it might also reflect a longer-term trend.
- As part of the Zurich Youth Survey 2021, the long-term development of teen dating violence (TDV) could also be examined for the first time in Switzerland. Here, opposing trends emerge. While monitoring (surveillance of the partner) has tended to decrease, we observe largely stable trends in physical TDV. Female respondents are slightly, but significantly more likely to report having suffered sexual TDV in 2021, at 23% compared to 18% in 2014. Also on the rise are forms of “cyber TDV”, such as threatening or defaming one’s partner via digital communication channels.

Study Background & Method

The Zurich Youth Survey (ZYS) is a unique series of surveys on the “dark figure” of crime, specifically on the extent and development of various forms of youth violence and delinquency as well as their contexts and risk factors. The first ZYS survey was conducted in 1999 with a representative sample of about 2,500 9th graders (15-16-year-olds) in the canton of Zurich and was repeated in the same format for the first time in 2007. For the third ZYS survey in 2014, an additional 1,000 11th graders (17-19-year-olds) were surveyed. In the latest 4th ZYS survey, from May to July 2021, in addition to around 2,500 9th and 1,000 11th graders, 1,000 7th graders (13-14-year-olds) were also surveyed for the first time, allowing to examine age-specific trends over the entire adolescent period.

The ZYS surveys are characterized not only by the large number of respondents, but equally by a survey methodology that is of high quality at all levels and consistent across years. This includes:

- Sample stratified by grade level, school type, and school district for the best possible representativeness
- Minimal dropout rate at the school/school district level (of 277 invited classes, 254 participated; 12 dropouts could be replaced)
- High participation rate of around 90% at the student level; the large majority of absences were excused absences
- Period of survey always between May and July
- Survey conducted in class by specially trained research collaborators
- The anonymous written survey in class in an “exam setting” allows for open answers even to sensitive questions. From 1999 to 2014, the survey was conducted using paper questionnaires. In 2021, tablet computers were used for the first time; duration approx. 85 min
- Unchanged core questionnaire. All comparisons are based on questions formulated in the same wording

The questionnaire asks about different forms of experiences of violence from the perspective of the victim and of the perpetrator. In addition, participants were also asked about juvenile delinquency and substance use:

- Serious victimization experiences in the canton of Zurich (robbery, extortion, sexual assault/rape, assault with a weapon, assault without a weapon)
- Juvenile delinquency from the perpetrator perspective (e.g., assault, robbery, shoplifting, vandalism)
- School- and cyber-bullying from the victim and perpetrator perspective
- Violence in adolescent couple relationships from the victim and perpetrator perspective
- Consumption of legal (alcohol, tobacco) and illegal psychoactive substances (e.g., cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine); 2021 for the first time also “*non-prescribed use of prescription drugs*” (opioids, benzodiazepines)

In addition to violent behaviour, delinquency, and substance use, the ZYS surveys also include a wealth of information on the contexts (e.g., *location, time, number of participants*) of violent experiences and the risk factors (e.g., *psychological factors such as self-control, media use with a focus on violence/pornography, parenting behaviour, school context, socioeconomic background*) of violent and problematic behaviour, as well as adolescents' attitudes toward violence and sexuality (e.g., *acceptance of intimate partner violence, conceptions of masculinity, acceptance of homosexuality, sexual orientation*).

The Zurich Youth Survey 2021 was designed and directed by Dr. Denis Ribeaud at the Jacobs Center for Productive Youth Development at the University of Zurich. Since 1999, the study has been realized in close cooperation with the Department of Education of the Canton of Zurich.

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Link to the study report www.jacobscenter.uzh.ch/zys2021

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