Laurent Mucchielli

I. Methods-related issues

Trends in juvenile delinquency are the focus of an intense public debate to which a wide range of parties contribute, each claiming a position of expertise. Any discussion of the topic is thus highly-charged and difficult to push beyond the rules of political discourse and the media. In order to guard against this, the sociologist must begin by taking a critical look at the sources of useable statistics, the very notion of “juvenile delinquency” and the meaning of the “youth” category, in particular.

The issue of statistical data

There are at least three types of statistical data, each very different from the others, and each of which reflects a different “reality”. The public debate consistently refers to a single source of information: statistics from the police and gendarmes, which are incorrectly qualified as “delinquency statistics”. In actual fact, police data are generated when police departments and gendarmes record their activities (Robert et al., 1994; Aubusson de Cavarlay, 1996). The production of these statistics is linked in part to the—highly variable—way in which police and gendarmes process the complaints of victims who come forward (Zauberman, 2001). The statistics also depend on what the police “look for and find themselves” (whether it is during criminal investigations or routine calls and patrols, namely those conducted in public places). In both cases, the statistics are constantly subject to sudden and major modifications in the way in which they are recorded. The process is also affected by pressure from superiors and various policies. Generally speaking, the data logically reflect any changes in law-enforcement personnel—and the assignment of personnel—, in their priorities for action and in the way in which they handle complaints filed or incidents observed.

It is these police statistics which have, for the past several years, served as the basis for the recurring debate on the fact that juvenile delinquents are getting younger and the “explosion” of delinquency among minors (Mucchielli, 2000a). Police statistics do indicate a sudden massive increase in the proportion of minors (mainly boys) in the overall population targeted by law-enforcement interventions since 1993. Figure 1 illustrates the overall trend.
How should these data be interpreted? For those who wish to examine the data rigorously, the issue is exceedingly complex. First of all, the data reflect people targeted by law-enforcement interventions. The concerned cases are thus ones for which said law enforcement have identified suspects. However, the rate of cases solved varies considerably depending on the type of offence. In fact, the variations are so great that under no circumstances may the population targeted by law-enforcement interventions be considered a representative sample of the apparent population of delinquents (all persons having committed offences known to police) and, a fortiori, of the actual population of delinquents. Thus, in the year 2000, the rates of various types of crimes solved were as follows: “drug-related crimes”, 104.2%; “violations of the conditions for the entry and residence of foreigners”, 99%; “contempt of public authorities”, 96%; “shoplifting”, 86.6%; “rape”, 75.5%; and “assault and battery”, 71.8%. Conversely, the same year, the rates of the following types of crimes solved were: “robbery”, 9.2%; “automobile and motorcycle theft”, 7.2%; and “pick-pocketing”, 3%. These distinctions are capital insofar as the sharpest increases in the proportion of minors among those implicated in crimes by police departments and gendarmes fall into the categories with the highest rates of crimes solved. Thus the number of minors implicated in cases of “assault and battery” by the police was multiplied by 5.2 between 1993 and 2001; the number was multiplied by 5.8 for “contempt of public authorities” for the same period (figure 5). The number of minors implicated in “drug-related” cases was multiplied by 6.8 between 1993 and 1999 (figure 6). In other words, the increase in the number of minors implicated in crimes is based very largely on the types of offences that are easily noticeable by police. Suddenly, from 1993-94 on, law enforcement were referring a considerable number of cases in which minors were implicated to public prosecutors in these categories of offences. For example, between 1993 and 1995, the number of minors prosecuted for simple drug use increased from 2,405 to 6,143 (an increase of 155%); the number of minors prosecuted for contempt of public authorities (i.e. police officers) increased from 1,255 to 2,214 (an increase of 76%). Is such a massive change in the behaviour of adolescents in the space of two years truly credible? In reality, it is clear that “there have been changes in the way in which data are recorded which undoubtedly have little to do with the situation of minors […]. One may be led to believe that police are now more systematically arresting minors or that the minors arrested are more systematically prosecuted, or both” (Aubusson de Cavarlay, 1997, 24). Furthermore, overwhelmed by the force of common sense, commentators generally fail to address the issue of changes in the legislation (from the State’s viewpoint, delinquency is what the penal code defines as such; if the law changes, delinquency also changes as a direct result), which is nevertheless obviously at work here.
It is important to touch upon the law-enforcement and penal context that surrounded the arrival of the new government in 1993. The period was marked by an increase in law-enforcement personnel and increased police authority in “sensitive areas” (in addition, the law dated 10 August 1993 extended the scope of so-called “preventative” ID checks; this meant that police officers could now check IDs even when no violation had been observed) and a strategy in which petty crime (and, notably, juvenile crime) would be prosecuted more systematically. The law dated 4 January 1993 marked the widespread implementation of “penal mediation” and introduced a new “penal compensation” measure, which could be handed down by juvenile court judges or directly by juvenile prosecutors (Vaillant, 1994). In more general terms, the years 1992-1994 saw significant changes in the relationship between police and prosecutors with the gradual widespread implementation of “immediate appearance in court” and “real-time” processing of cases as well as the gradual creation of new Law and Justice Centres (Maisons du Droit et de la Justice) where “assistant prosecutors” (non-professional prosecutors) issued warnings and other admonitions (Lévy, 1993). This trend became more pronounced throughout the 1990s and during the Jospin government. Given this situation, it is highly probable, as also pointed out by Robert (2002b, 50-51), that police officers and gendarmes have referred to prosecutors many petty crimes committed by minors that were previously dealt with internally (these cases were simply closed in a majority of instances). In terms of statistics, the change is considerable due to the fact that referring a case to the prosecutor means that a report must be filed; it is this report that is counted in the statistics.

Police statistics, which are virtually the only statistics that enter into the public debate, are, in reality, the shakiest. More useful for this analysis are statistics from the court system. Court statistics do, of course, mainly depend on information supplied by the police. However, court statistics are less sensitive to the “seasonal” variations of the political climate and, most importantly, have long provided information as to the age of individuals convicted and the nature of their offences. This paper will give several illustrations of the kind of information these statistics provide. There are also other sources (in addition to the three mentioned here) that provide viewpoints other than those of government agencies.

In the United States and in other European countries there is a long-standing practice of attempting to measure delinquency by directly questioning perpetrators and their victims. In France, victim surveys were not initiated until the 1980s by the CESDIP (The Centre for Sociological Research on Law and Penal Institutions) (Zauberman, Robert, 1995). Victim surveys, which address victims whether or not they actually press charges, provide much more accurate information as to the reality of certain crimes (crimes whose victims are direct, individual and aware that they are being victimized as opposed to crimes such as tax fraud, white-collar crime, violations of environmental laws, etc.). Again, in the United States, since the 1950s researchers have conducted self-reported crime surveys,
questioning populations directly as to any offences they may have committed (Junger-Tas, Marshall, 1999).

In addition to these quantitative instruments, a number of qualitative elements may be gathered from scattered sources, the goal of which is not to provide an overall measurement of a phenomenon, but rather a thorough understanding of the underlying human and social production mechanisms in specific local conditions where eliminating individual variations in order to allow for comparison with other local areas is not necessary. It is by using all of these sources that sociologists may attempt to build the kind of introspective analysis that is put forward here.

**Youth and delinquency: Where does it begin? Where does it end?**

In the current public debate, we commonly hear concerned statements to the effect that we no longer know where “youth” begins and ends. “Ever-younger and increasingly violent” juvenile delinquents is another all-too-common refrain. One of the consequences of this debate has been harsher penal sanctions for the 13-16 age group as well as the introduction of new “educational sanctions” for the 10-13 age group as set forth in the September 2002 law. However, the associated sociological trend has not been established, due to the lack of quantitative data at the national level that can be compared over a period of several years. What is more, the trend is much more complex than it appears. In fact, there are four separate issues: 1/ The nature of the process of delinquency itself (which raises the question of the age at which delinquency begins to emerge); 2/ the intensity of delinquency at a given time for a given age group; 3/ the rationale behind the actions of these juvenile delinquents (and thus their specific targets); 4/ the rationale behind the responses of institutions of social control, which raises the issue of the building of “delinquency career patterns.”

While it is new in France, the first of these four issues is a classic one in the United States, and one to which criminology has long provided answers: (petty) delinquency begins massively in pre-adolescence (around the age of 10) and increases in early adolescence to peak at around the age of 15 or 16. It then remains steady before decreasing sharply in the twenties and thirties (Farrington, 1986; LeBlanc, 1995). The fact that this age curve has not changed for decades in Anglo-Saxon countries would appear to suggest that the psycho-social process is identical and equally stable in France.

The second issue is somewhat trickier. While the phenomenon is by nature stable, its intensity may vary depending on the situation. While the idea of a change in the nature of this age phenomenon is very likely inaccurate, it is still possible that greater or fewer
numbers of pre-adolescents and adolescents commit a given act of delinquency depending on the place, the situation, and the time period\(^1\).

This leads to the third issue, which is to abandon generalities in order to examine the specific rationales behind such actions, the situations in which individuals act out, their preferred targets and, thus, the relative visibility of a given phenomenon. From this perspective, acts of rebelliousness or vandalism against police officers—and, to a lesser extent, teachers—or even the setting of malicious car fires, are phenomena which are particularly visible to institutions (just as certain types of “uncivil” behaviour are extremely visible to residents in the working-class neighbourhoods concerned).

This leads to the fourth issue; that of the process of building and reinforcing “delinquency career patterns”. Contributions by the American interventionists (especially Lemert, Becker and Goffman) must be mobilized in order to analyze the way in which the institutions of social control participate in the construction of delinquency by stigmatizing certain types of deviant behaviour in certain types of neighbourhoods by focusing on the exclusion of certain individuals from social interaction and by gradually restricting them to delinquent roles and practices. This labelling process, which takes place during interactions between a youth or group of youths and institutions, has been demonstrated with regard to the building of criminal gangs (Robert, Lascoumes, 1974; Esterle-Hedibel, 1997) and the process of academic failure (Broccolicchi, 2000; Van Zanten, 2001, 269-314; Esterle-Hedibel, 2003). It is also at the core of what has perhaps become the central mechanism of academic failure in many so-called “sensitive urban areas”: the relationship between a large proportion of these young people (far beyond the number who actually engage in delinquent behaviour) and law enforcement. This issue will be addressed further on in order to provide a more thorough analysis of the underlying motives. However, here the issue is whether this relationship has a role in building and reinforcing so-called “delinquency career patterns”. If interaction with law enforcement in public places has become “a major dimension of the experiences of young people in poor neighbourhoods” (Kokoreff, 2003, 144) and if this interaction now constitutes a source of conflict and confrontation \textit{in and of itself}, it is logical to suppose that the labelling process is operating to an increasing extent. Furthermore, insofar as this interaction takes place to an increasing extent in public places where it can be seen by all, it does contribute to the system of

\(^1\) Generally speaking, the increasingly young age of juvenile delinquents appears to come up even more frequently given that, at the national level, the population of France is aging. The number of young people under the age of 25 decreased between 1980 and 2000 (from 20.6 million to 18.9 million), while the population over the age of 30 (and, to an even greater extent, the population over age 60) increased considerably. The proportion of the population under the age of 25 decreased from 38.4% to 31.9% in 20 years, a decrease of 17%. Nevertheless, these changes at the national level must be viewed in light of what is observed at the local level. Neighbourhoods categorized as “sensitive urban areas” by the INSEE (French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies), where certain types of juvenile delinquency are more prevalent than in other areas, are characterized—among other things—by the high proportion of young people in the total population (Le Toqueux, Moreau, 2002).
standards that governs “street culture” and that is learned by young people in these
neighbourhoods, either willingly or unwillingly, from pre-adolescence. The discourse as to
the increasingly young age of juvenile delinquents, one of the main sources of which are
police statistics (Mucchielli, 2000a), is very likely linked in part to this situation.

That said, the issue of the age at which a young person begins to perform delinquent
acts is not the only one that is important to a society. It is likely that the age at which a
young person stops performing delinquent acts is just as important, if not more so. Of
course, delinquency career patterns do have beginnings, but they also have endings.
Indeed, it is without a doubt here that the most remarkable changes of the past few decades
have occurred. If, as Galland (2002, 5) points out, “youth only takes on a certain social
consistency insofar as these times of passage, which denote an uncertain social position,
are prolonged”, then one must admit that we have never remained young for so long as in
the French society of the past 20 years. The issue of access to steady employment is critical
here, as it has consequences on the other two criteria that traditionally denote “entry into
adulthood”: the acquisition of one’s own independent housing and the formation of a stable
couple, a precursor to the formation of a family unit. In 2000, 36% of young people
between the ages of 15 and 25 were in situations qualified as unstable (engaged in
temporary work, subsidized internships, or unemployed). As always, this lack of security is
unequal across different social backgrounds (through the earlier filter of the school
system). What is more, today, the lack of security also varies according to skin colour. For
example, according to the 1992 INSEE “Employment” survey, the unemployment rate for
French nationals was 9.5%, while for foreigners it was 18.6%. However, the
unemployment rate among North African nationals was 29.6%, a figure that reached
50.6% for the 15-24 age group within this population. Ten years after the study, the
situation remained practically unchanged; it had even deteriorated in most of the places
classified as “sensitive urban areas” by the INSEE (Le Toqueux, Moreau, 2002). For
individuals facing all of these handicaps at once—young people of African descent who
leave school without a diploma or with only a vocational certificate—the situation is
certainly even more alarming, especially when local conditions are taken into account.
Consequently, if this analysis is accurate, one would expect to see the major problems arise
not among pre-adolescents or young adolescents, but rather among the 15-16 age group
and, above all, young adults. One would also expect to see the effects of the delinquency
career pattern ending later.

These methodological considerations are essential to the following section, which aims
to provide an understanding of recent trends in juvenile delinquency, but in a targeted
manner. Providing an inventory of all of these trends would go beyond the scope of this
paper. The analysis put forward will focus on the three sets of behaviours that form the core of juvenile delinquency (theft, physical assaults and public disturbances), to which one could also add traffic violations, for the most recent period possible: 1980-2000. The various sources mentioned above will be mobilized. Using statistics from the court system, the possible ages at which these issues appear to be most prevalent will be put forward without, however, testing the hypothesis in any systematic way.

II. Are we forgetting what is important? The issue of theft in a consumer society

It is significant that, in the public debate, commentators systematically focus on “violence” even though physical assaults do not constitute the core of juvenile delinquency and the victimization it causes. During the 1990s, thefts and break-ins made up almost two-thirds of all delinquent acts recorded, according to convergent police data and victims’ statements (Robert et al., 1999). In 2001, a victim survey was conducted in the Ile-de-France region (the Greater Paris area). The survey targeted a representative sampling of 10,500 people over the age of 14 (Pottier, Robert, Zauberman, 2002). The study revealed that, while less than 3% of the region’s households had experienced a physical assault (more on this later), nearly 8% had been the victims of non-violent theft, 9.5% had experienced a break-in (or attempted break-in), nearly 15% had been the victims of auto theft (or attempted auto theft) and nearly 19% had had items stolen from inside their vehicles. In other words, in terms of delinquency, the primary danger in our society is not being assaulted physically, but rather having one’s belongings stolen. The self-reported delinquency survey carried out in 1999 in the Greater Grenoble and Saint-Étienne areas confirmed this. Physical violence is significantly less frequent than defrauding the public transport system, purchasing stolen goods, shoplifting or various types of vandalism. Only classic physical fights between young people were reported at the same levels as certain other offences.

Here, statistics from the court system will be examined (for the entire group of people convicted) in order to compare trends seen during the 1980-2000 period and to break

---

2. In decreasing order of frequency, the survey revealed that 76% of the young people interviewed had defrauded the public transport system over the course of the previous two years; 32% had purchased stolen goods; 24% had shoplifted from a department store; 18% had vandalized public property; 17% had been involved in a fight; 13% had painted graffiti on walls; 9% had vandalized the entryway of an apartment building; 6% had thrown rocks at a police van; and 4.5% had struck a person other than a member of their family (Roché et al., 2000, 13-14).

3. This includes all convictions regardless of their nature. These data naturally reflect the fact that they depend on the prior work of police and that, in the area of damage to property, the number of cases solved remains very low. Consequently, the fact that police pursue a case does not mean that it will actually be prosecuted (something for which police often criticize prosecutors). Most cases (and particularly cases of theft) are, in reality, closed because the police were unable to provide conclusive enough evidence to prosecute the suspect. This means that the data must be taken with caution. Furthermore, our analysis starts
down the different types of theft (from simple theft to violent thefts with or without a firearm) by age group (table 1 and figure 2).

At least three general observations can be made from the data, given the fact that, overall, the courts convicted fewer and fewer people for theft over this period (around 173,000 convictions in 1984 as opposed to around 116,000 in 2000), which resulted in a decrease in the rate of convictions for theft in all age groups (figure 2).

1- Young people under the age of 13 only accounted for a tiny proportion of those convicted of theft (0.5% in 2000), a fortiori for serious theft. In 1984, in 1990 and again in 2000, there was not a single person in this age group convicted of theft with the use of a firearm. The proportion of the under-13 age group among all those convicted of theft with violence (but without the use of a firearm) also decreased during this period. Overall, as a proportion of convictions, acquisitive delinquency—contrary to expectations—decreased much more sharply for this age group than for other age groups during the period studied.

2- The 13-15 age group was much more prevalent among convicted thieves (8.1% in 2000). What is more, this age group saw the smallest decrease in convictions for the period studied. In addition, a new phenomenon was observed in 2000, when, for the first time ever, these adolescents appeared in significant numbers for of cases of theft with a firearm. In reality, this only adds up to around 20 convictions for the entire year, but it is perhaps these cases that have prompted comments to the effect that juvenile delinquents are “ever-younger and increasingly violent.” Is this truly the beginning of a trend or simply a passing increase due notably to the ease with which firearms may be procured in certain regions? It is too early to tell. Moreover, in 2000 the phenomenon remained quite marginal statistically.

3- Overall, when looking at the raw data as well as the rates, it is clear that, for the three years examined, the majority of convictions concerned the 16-25 age group. It is also clear with the year 1984 because it is the first year for which court statistics distinguish different age groups among minors.

4. The line dedicated to simple theft is difficult to compare for the years 1990 and 2000 due to changes in the laws that were implemented in 1994, resulting in a decrease in the number of simple thefts and an increase in the number of aggravated thefts (not discussed here). In fact, article 311-4 of the new Penal Code includes six new aggravating conditions, including thefts committed “in groups” (distinguished from “organized gangs”), thefts committed “in a vehicle used for the collective transport of passengers or in locations designed to allow access to means of collective transport” (in other words, trains, buses, underground systems, platforms, and access corridors), or thefts “with acts of destruction, defacement, or damage” (which allows the courts to further sanction all types of vandalism as well as the fact that, during drive-by robberies, the door of the vehicle may be damaged).

5. This overall decrease in the number of convictions for theft may seem surprising given the overall increase in the same type of theft in the statistics provided by police departments and gendarmes. The main explanation for this lies in the fact that, as stated above, fewer and fewer cases of theft are solved by the police and gendarmes and, as a result, are more frequently closed without a conviction by the courts.

6. The line in table 1 that mentions the rates for each age group would appear to suggest a phenomenon that begins at the age of 13. However, 13 is an important legal age threshold in the penal system. Therefore, any hasty conclusions that would risk confusing cause and effect are to be avoided.

7. In law enforcement, questions have been raised in recent years as to the consequences of the war in Yugoslavia on the illegal firearms market.
that, after the age of 25, the decrease was not as marked in 1990 as in 1984 and in 2000 as in 1990, which supports the hypothesis that delinquents are ending their “careers” later and later. The fact that rates remained steady for the 30-39 age group also stood out from the rest of the trends observed.

In addition to examining these figures, which come from various quantitative sources, it is also important to raise some questions concerning the nature of the processes at work. When we speak of theft, what exactly are we referring to? Clearly, top news stories such as robberies targeting businesses (and, a fortiori, banks or armoured cars) are marginal as a proportion of all thefts. In 2000, people convicted of theft with a firearm accounted for 1% of all thefts sanctioned by the courts. Of these convictions, 88% concerned simple thefts. As for the remaining 11%, they concerned “thefts with violence”, the exact circumstances of which vary widely. It is worth noting here that the Central Division of the National Police Force has stated for several years now that nearly half of the cases reported in this category are mobile-phone thefts. Generally speaking, this leads the sociologist to raise questions as to the importance to youth as a whole of the most popular consumer goods in a given society at a given moment in time. It is no coincidence that these thefts virtually always involve cars or two-wheeled vehicles (particularly scooters), but also stereo equipment (currently CDs and DVDs), designer athletic apparel and mobile phones. What is the mobile phone if not the latest cult item of a consumer society and one that all adolescents covet? This is one of the fundamental aspects of this type of delinquency, which, logically, is concentrated in places (shopping centres) and concerns populations (secondary-school students) that increase the opportunities to steal and constitute young thieves’ preferred targets. The “Rational Choice” analysis favoured by criminologists and put forward in a seminal article by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979), which focuses on the opportunity for predatory criminal acts and the ease with which such acts can be committed, is relevant here. Nevertheless, a more detailed discussion of the theory is beyond the scope of this paper. In sociological terms, the analysis must be taken further and questions must be raised concerning the overall social schema that underpins the majority of these thefts: young men stealing from other people or businesses in order to acquire the goods that they cannot acquire by legal means. This is very similar to the mechanism of frustration put forward by Robert Merton in general terms in the late 1930s and further examined by Albert Cohen (1955) and, later, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Olhin (1960). Decades may have passed, but, overall, these analyses appear to remain relevant, a fortiori when the consumer society continues to develop despite the massive unemployment that has taken root. A comparison of the increase in theft and the increase in the unemployment rate among young people under the age of 25 who have not earned a

---

8. And that, consequently, 26% of youth aged 11-14, 62% of youth aged 15-17 and 78% of youth aged 18-19 would appear to possess (quoted by M. Fournier, Sciences Humaines, 2002, 127, p. 33).
diploma also reveals a striking similarity (Lagrange, 2001b). Therefore, this type of juvenile delinquency may be viewed not as a recent phenomenon whose increasing severity must be contained, but rather as a phenomenon that is structurally related to the functioning of modern society and one that logically follows trends in society’s mode of consumption since the 1950s. It is, in a sense, a violent means of redistributing consumer goods.

### III. Interpersonal assaults: Contrasting trends

“Youth violence” is one of today’s major concerns. But how is this best understood? Once again, there is a need to briefly review the different types of data available. If the statistics provided by the police and gendarmes are to be believed, the number of non-fatal physical assaults committed by minors was multiplied by 5.2 between 1993 and 2001. Likewise, the statistics put forward by the courts show a sharp increase in the rate of minors convicted of assault over the past decade, in particular for minors under the age of 16 (table 2). However, as demonstrated earlier, a literal reading of the government data with their strange and sudden variations without raising questions as to the political situation, trends in the incriminations observed and changes in relations between police and the courts is to be avoided. Again, it is important to note the impact of the new Penal Code, which came into effect in 1994. As pointed out by Robert (2002b, 51), the new Penal Code “allowed law enforcement to qualify as crimes—and therefore to count statistically—even cases [of assault and battery] in which there was no notable physical injury if there was an aggravating circumstance.” 9. Since 1994, police have thus likely referred more benign cases of “assault and battery” to the courts that they previously would have closed. That said, the increase in the number of cases of “assault and battery” predates the new Penal Code, going back to the mid-1980s (Robert, Zauberman, Pottier, Lagrange, 1999). This paper will show that the increase is linked to certain local realities, a theory that is supported by the qualitative data.

The fact remains that the number of assaults is nowhere near the number of thefts and break-ins. Victim surveys highlight the significant gap between damage to property and assaults on persons: in 1994-1995, one person out of four was the victim of at least one predatory criminal act; one out of 20 was the victim of at least one assault. But what is considered an “assault” or “violence”? This is the main question and one that was also raised at the beginning of this paper as regards the prevalent representations of young people. It comes up again in the analysis of victims’ statements. In the above-mentioned survey targeting the Ile-de-France region, in 2001, 6.6% of the households surveyed stated that they had experienced an assault over the previous three years (Pottier, Robert, Zauberman, 2002). However, in more than half of these instances, the persons surveyed considered insults and

---

9. Article 309 of the new Penal Code allows for aggravating circumstances, including acts of violence against “particularly vulnerable persons”, “one’s spouse or partner”, committing acts as part of a group or using or threatening to use a weapon.
verbal threats, or even looks they felt were threatening, assaults. The victims of true physical violence thus account for around 3% of the victims surveyed. The surveys also provided an opportunity to attempt to measure the seriousness of the assault, which was often quite limited: “blows were mentioned one out of five times; injuries one out of six times. Only one out of 15 times did the blows result in absences from work of at least a week” (Robert, 2002a, 23). In fact, “even in Ile-de-France, where the scores are higher than for the rest of the country, the survey reveals that just 0.45% of inhabitants over the age of 14 experienced assaults serious enough to miss at least one week of work [or school] in 1998, 1999 or 2000” (ibid., 25). Therefore, in reality, true physical assaults remain very rare, even if certain types of assaults have increased over the past two decades.

However, in order to better understand the exact nature of these incidences of physical violence, there is a need to push the analysis further. A punch is not the same as a rape or murder. There is also a need to ascertain the ages of the perpetrators of these acts. Because these types of cases are solved much more often than thefts or break-ins (and, therefore, are more often referred to the courts and less frequently closed without going to trial), the data from the courts are even more relevant here. Table 2 shows the ages of those convicted of three types of assault in 1984, 1990 and 2000: voluntary homicide, rape, and voluntary assault and battery. This table suggests at the very least four sets of observations.

1- When the rates are calculated, the increase in these three types of assaults concerns all age groups and not only the youngest, even though the youngest age groups saw the sharpest increase. Between 1984 and 2000, while the rate was multiplied by 4.5 for the under-13 age group and by 6.5 for the 13-15 age group, it was also multiplied by 2.1 for the 40-59 age group and by 2.8 for the over-60 age group. If there is actually a trend, here, it does, in reality, affect all of French society.

2- The idea that the number of criminals is increasing and that criminals are getting younger is contradicted by homicide trends. The number of minors convicted of homicide was lower in 2000 than in 1984 and 1990. One can also calculate that the rate of homicides committed by young people under the age of 16 is equal to that for the over-60 age group. Generally speaking, homicide is, in reality, a crime that is committed by mature men. Overall, the number of homicides increased during the 1980s and decreased during the 1990s to reach 1970-levels by the year 2000 (Mucchielli, 2002c).

3- In terms of rape, the trend appears to be very different. In the police and court data, the number of rapes has been on the increase for the past twenty years or so. However, interpreting this trend in the data is complex. First of all, the increase affected practically all age groups, with the notable exception of young adults (ages 18-25). Young people under the age of 13 are the exception to this trend, despite a recent increase. On the other hand, the number of rapes committed by the 13-20 age group is higher, with figures similar to those for the 20-30 age group. However, surprisingly, this type of behaviour does not
decrease with age. The 30-39 age group had the highest rate of convictions (as a comparison, the number of rapes committed by this age group is twice as high as that of the under-18 age group) and there were just as many rape convictions among men aged 40 to 59 as for the under-18 group. The fact thus remains that, for the period studied, the number of convictions increased sharply for almost all age groups, which creates a major problem in interpreting the data. Are sexual assaults on the increase in French society, with a sudden rise observed simultaneously for all age groups? Or is the increase seen in the police and court statistics the result of changes in the attitudes of victims who are increasingly likely to press charges? Indeed, the fact that rape is a type of assault that is traditionally under-reported by victims, who, most of the time, know their attacker very well, must be taken into account (fewer than one out of every five rapes were reported during the mid-1980s). Victim surveys have not been in use long enough to provide an answer to the question of behaviours and the likelihood of victims to press charges and the available research is far from sufficient. However, the situation in Canada suggests an increase in the number of reported sexual assaults committed by minors starting in the mid-1980s (Jacob, McKiggen, Proulx, 1993). There are also a number of trend indexes in France that would appear to support the main hypothesis (which is not necessarily exclusive) of an increase in the number of rapes reported. For the past 20 years, penal law has become much more restrictive (harsher rape legislation; the creation of new crimes such as “sexual harassment”), victims’ advocacy groups have been formed, free hotlines have been set up, awareness-raising campaigns have been launched in schools and in the media, the way victims are handled by the police and the courts has been improved and educators have become more aware of sexual assault, etc. (Tournier, 1998). In addition, there is a need to measure the scope of the social transformations that underpin these changes to institutional standards and practices. In reality, French society has undergone unprecedented change in terms of providing victims with symbolic recognition and in providing better legal services to women and children who are the victims of violence. Historian Georges Vigarello (1998, 236) demonstrated how “the image of rape today has changed in three major ways: rapes reported by adult women are investigated more thoroughly; the trauma suffered is acknowledged and taken into account; the power structure of violence has been modified.” Because of these changes, victims now dare to come forward and denounce types of violence that were once generally kept secret. Paedophilia is a striking example of this phenomenon. As a result, there is a need to remain cautious when considering the increase in reported rapes and all sexual assaults in the government data. It is likely that this increase is as much the result of changes in society’s representations of the phenomenon as the frequency of the behaviours in everyday life, if not more so.
Finally, the court data confirm another trend that is also very clear in the police data: an increase in the number of non-fatal assault and battery cases during the 1990s. Overall, the number of convictions doubled between 1984 and 2000. Again, the same observations emerge from the breakdown of persons convicted by age: the under-13 age group accounted for 0.4% of the total in 2000 (0.3% in 1984, or no increase). The phenomenon increased sharply for the over-13 age groups (again, partially for legal reasons), peaking for the 18-25 age group. The prevalence of the phenomenon then decreases very gradually for older age groups, which is not to say that it disappears: rates are still high for the over-30 and over-40 age groups. For example, one can calculate, this time as a proportion, that the 30-39 age group sees as many convictions as minors over the age of 13. Generally speaking, once again, the apparent increase in the government data thus concerns all age groups, even the oldest ones. Again, an examination of the available data contradicts the notion of an increase in violence attributable mainly to the youngest perpetrators.

Studies that would allow a more detailed examination of the phenomenon for the over-30 age group are desperately lacking. On the other hand, there are studies of the younger age groups. Indeed, it would appear that we have seen, since the second half of the 1980s and in certain urban areas, in particular, an increase in the number of fights between young men (of varying degrees of seriousness, from fistfights to occasional knife fights) involving varying numbers of people, most often in the streets or on public transport, sometimes just off school grounds, and all due to conflicts that most often arise from attempted thefts or the violations of honour or territory which have always characterized the structure of juvenile social interaction in working-class environments (Calogirou, 1989; Esterle-Hedibel, 1997; Lepoutrè, 1997; Mauger, 1998). It is thus among young people under the age of 30 that live in large subsidized housing estates that we see the highest victimization rates for assault (Aubusson de Cavarlay et al., 2002, p. 151). Fundamentally, victims and their attackers are frequently similar in these situations: they are mainly young men fighting with each other. Overall, the data confirm the relevance of the “lifestyle” concept put forward in the United States in the 1970s based on the same victim surveys (Hindelang, Gottfredson, Garofalo, 1978). Nevertheless, once again, this does not imply that young people are the only group concerned, neither as victims nor as perpetrators. If violence is truly on the increase, then the trend affects all age groups and all of French society and calls for analyses other than those that continue to point a finger at young people, who are constantly suspected of being dangerous, if not outright barbarians. Finally, it is important to point out that the issue of assault can not be viewed as completely separate from the issue of theft. As stated by Robert (2002a, 32), half of all assaults are actually cases of racketeering, theft or attempted theft, as referred to in the interpretive analysis put forward in the previous chapter.
IV. Motor vehicles, alcohol and accidents: Young people are no longer the major culprits

The idea of a specifically-juvenile danger to society can at last be put to the test of what the law considers “involuntary violence”; in other words, the prosecution of perpetrators of traffic accidents that result in death or serious injury. The phenomenon is significant: the courts convict five times more people for involuntary injuries and homicides than for voluntary injuries and homicides. Furthermore, court statistics specify the proportion of those convicted that were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the accident they caused. Two observations can be made from these data that paint a much more complex picture than our usual social representations of the phenomenon.

Of course, the 18-30 age group accounts for 40% of all people convicted in 2000 (table 3). Likewise, as a proportion, young people between the ages of 20 and 24 come in ahead of all other age groups for this specific type of delinquency. Nevertheless, this observation masks a significant change over time. Overall, traffic-related crime has continued to decrease. Of course, the issue of traffic-related crime is, to an increasing extent, of major concern to public authorities. The 1990s saw an increase in awareness-raising campaigns in the media, prevention campaigns and repressive measures, especially during periods when the number of traffic-related deaths is typically high (the beginning and end of holiday periods, for instance). This trend can be seen in the number of people convicted, which decreased from 19,078 in 1984 to 10,679 in 2000. What may come as a surprise is that young people are the main group responsible (in the positive sense of the term, here) for the decrease. In fact, upon further examination of the age breakdown of the data, it is the 18-25 age group that saw the most significant decrease for the entire period (the proportion of convictions attributed to this group fell from 34.2% to 24.3% between 1984 and 2000); the over-40 group saw the smallest decrease. When the rates are calculated, the phenomenon is even clearer. Of course, the 18-24 age group remains the most likely to commit this type of crime when looked at this way. Nevertheless, the decrease in rates between 1984 and 2000 was massive for young people, to such an extent that the 18-19 age group now has a lower rate than the 25-29 age group, with rates similar to those of the over-60 age group (figure 3).

Beyond the prevention campaigns and repressive measures, the increase in disciplinary action against alcohol consumption is without a doubt one explanation for this phenomenon. In fact, in 2000, the under-30 age group accounted for just 42% of people convicted for traffic-related violence committed under the influence of alcohol as opposed to 58% for the over-30 group. In 1984, the ratio was virtually the opposite. More generally, the statistics on convictions for simple drunk driving (table 4) tell the same story. At a time when the courts were becoming increasingly strict and convicting increasing numbers of
offenders, the number of convictions decreased for all age groups under 30; it increased for all age groups over 30 and the older the group, the larger the increase\textsuperscript{10}.

In the final analysis, there has been a remarkable, yet largely unnoticed, trend in traffic-related crime that has been overwhelmed by the force of common sense. Unlike the image of young people as perpetrators of “irresponsible” behaviour, the court data demonstrate that if traffic-related crime has continued to decrease steadily, it is above all because of young people\textsuperscript{11}.

V. Young people and disorderly conduct: A traditional conflict exacerbated locally

Today, as in the past, young people go through a rebellious, discontented, anti-authority phase. Also as in the past, an equally-traditional conflict with certain aspects of public order is being seen today as are, in certain urban and social situations, recurring tensions with law-enforcement officers. Again, these issues are very broad and a systematic examination of each one of them would go far beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is important to attempt to identify some of the rationales that underpin these phenomena and to examine the significance of a few statistical indicators in light of the relevant field surveys.

Because this type of offence does not create individual victims (vandalism or drug dealing and use, for instance) or because the level of victimization is too low to be observed in surveys of representative samples, it is not possible here to use victim surveys. The self-reported delinquency survey conducted in the Rhône-Alpes region mentioned above indicated that disorderly conduct formed the core of juvenile delinquency. The most widespread phenomenon here is public transport fraud, followed by various types of

\textsuperscript{10} Because this type of offence is increasingly prosecuted by law enforcement, the number of convictions went up during the 1990s. Nevertheless, the decrease seen among young people is even more remarkable given that routine roadside checks traditionally do not play in their favour and that law-enforcement officers (and, in particular, the gendarmes, who patrol rural areas where people are more likely to know each other) are generally less indulgent with young people than with adults over the age of 35 and the elderly (Pérez-Diaz, 1994, 411-415).  

\textsuperscript{11} This can also be confirmed by looking at road safety data. The idealized image consists of incriminating 18- to 25-year-olds who frequent nightclubs or bars on Friday and Saturday nights and who then drive drunk late at night. This image certainly reflects a certain social reality, but under no circumstances does it form the core of traffic-related crime. Upon a closer examination of the data published by the National Interministerial Traffic Safety Observatory (ONISR, 1999), we see, first of all, that Saturday is indeed the day of the week when the highest number of fatal accidents occur (around 14% of weekly traffic deaths). However, Saturday shares this tragic privilege with Sunday and is not far off the other days of the week (the days from Monday to Thursday each account for around 9% of the weekly total; Friday is in the middle of the ranking). The same observations hold true for non-fatal accidents resulting in bodily injury. Secondly, if 18% of fatal accidents do in fact occur between midnight and 6 a.m., then 82% occur at other times of the day. In reality, the highest number of accidents does not occur at night, but rather late in the afternoon when adults are on their way home from work and when other age groups tend to frequent bars. The same is true for non-fatal accidents resulting in bodily injury.
vandalism and, finally, cases of throwing rocks at police vehicles. This survey is, however, local in scope. Unfortunately, there are no national data other than the government statistics. Therefore, it is necessary to take another look at the available national data.

An examination of police data reveals a phenomenon previously mentioned: the highest increases in delinquency recorded among minors occurred suddenly starting in 1993-94 and concerned certain specific categories of offences (all types of vandalism, contempt of and violence against public authority and drug consumption) (figures 4, 5 and 6).

In all three cases, the discovery and repression of these offences directly concern day-to-day relations between young people and the police. Consequently, the hypothesis can be put forward that the increase is above all evidence of the deterioration of relations between young people and the police, which leads police to perform routine checks more systematically and harshly (more on this point below) and to file reports more frequently, resulting in an increase in the number of cases that reach the courts (cases that were previously often recorded as complaints in police log books or simply closed as mentioned earlier)\(^\text{12}\). Whatever the case may be, the increase in pressure from police does have a subsequent impact on the courts. Even if the courts close a number of cases without going to trial, the courts do reflect the changing police complaint trends. It is thus important to examine court sources, from which two major observations can be made:

1- Over the two decades studied, convictions for drug offences (drug dealing and use) saw the largest increase in terms of absolute value. For the 1990s alone, convictions for vandalism and “contempt, rebellion, and violence against public authorities” saw the largest increase. Drug cases had practically reached current levels by the end of the 1980s, which contradicts the discourse prevalent at the end of the 1990s concerning the “new mafia” that had recently taken root.

2- Among the people convicted of these crimes, the proportion accounted for by minors over the age of 13 (the figures are insignificant for the under-13 age group and almost exclusively concern vandalism) decreased between the first two dates studied (1984, 1990), followed by a sharp increase between the last two dates studied (1990, 2000), a trend seen across all three types of offences. For the entire period, conviction rates increased across all age groups, with the sharpest increase seen for the 13-15 age group, due to the recent increase in the two types of offences mentioned above. However, minors are not the main perpetrators of acts such as disturbing the peace, which increase until the age of 25, generally peaking between the ages of 18 and 25, and disappear only after age 40.

---

\(^{12}\) Concerning the various types of vandalism, it is again important to mention the legal context, which surely encouraged law-enforcement officers to arrest increasing numbers of offenders. The new Penal Code, which took effect in 1994, did in fact impose significantly harsher penalties for “destruction, defacement, and damage to property not presenting a danger to individuals”, by setting forth a series of aggravating circumstances, by overhauling sentencing rules, and by specifically-addressing graffiti, as stated in the new article 322 of the Penal Code.
Given the statistics concerning these offences, it is important to examine the underlying social mechanisms behind them.

In terms of the increase in drug trafficking and sales, first of all, the existence of small-scale drug dealing in working-class neighbourhoods is not new. In areas where poverty is most prevalent, people have always been “resourceful”. What is new is that drugs have staked out an increasingly important position in the black-market economy since the 1980s (Duprez, Kokoreff, 2000). While this issue will not be examined thoroughly here, significant research has been carried out over the past several years (cf. Faugeron and Kokoreff’s introductory review, 2002). The increase in marijuana trafficking (the main drug sold) is patent. It may be cause for worry because it brings much more money into circulation than traditional local trafficking activities (such as car parts, for instance). Consequently, it is much more attractive to young people. The amount of cash in circulation creates additional risks for dealers, who then need weapons to protect themselves, which in turn results in conflict and score-settling that is potentially more serious. Next, as drug trafficking is established over longer periods of time, some dealers become more “professional” by organizing their supply channels, ensuring the stability of their organizations, adapting their practices to suit the inherent risks and police patrols and setting up money-laundering systems (Duprez, Kokoreff, Weinberger, 2001). This creates a danger for young adults of being caught up in a spiral of delinquency from which there is no escape. It also creates a risk of early delinquency for adolescents (cf. for example, a quantitative illustration from Belgium: Gavray, 1997; and a monograph of a French neighbourhood: Bordet, 1998). That said, it is surprising to hear certain police union officials, so-called “experts” and numerous political leaders state that all so-called “sensitive” neighbourhoods have been overrun by organized crime similar to what is described above and, even worse, that this type of crime involves all generations of the families concerned. This is an abusive stretch of the imagination that also serves to criminalize a population for whom we do not appear to know the numerical and social scope or understand the complexity of its internal relations. The number of drug users in France, mainly marijuana users, is in the millions, and cuts across all social backgrounds (with increased use among certain age groups even among the well-off) and, in total, nearly one young man out of three is concerned (Beck, Legleye, Peretti-Watel, 2000). Furthermore, research indicates that, in most working-class neighbourhoods, the drug-trafficking networks observed are very modest in size and made up of young men who do not necessarily commit delinquent acts other than selling marijuana to acquaintances, who use the drug themselves and who set up small-time dealing operations to finance their personal use. This is an altogether different picture than the image portrayed in the media of delinquents who “drive Mercedes”. What is observed is a form of resourcefulness that
supports what some researchers have called “the minimum-wage earners of the bizness” (Duprez, Kokoreff, 2000).

And what about cases of vandalism and violence against police officers? These acts form the core of what police officers call “urban violence”, referring to provocative behaviour (such as setting malicious car fires and throwing rocks at police vehicles) for which they often directly pay the price. As compared to the previous decade, it appears undisputable that we are seeing a sharp increase in what might be better labelled “violence against institutions”, referring to all types of vandalism of public property and various forms of disrespectful behaviour, provocation and, sometimes, assaults on people who symbolize public institutions (mainly police officers, also frequently public transport drivers and officers and sometimes even fire-fighters). How can this trend be explained?

The scope of this paper only allows for an overview of a few of the general underlying mechanisms with a focus on several examples of specific local conditions.

In the public debate, such acts of violence against institutions are often linked to a “crisis of authority”, a phenomenon that would appear to begin with the family and that is extended to include teachers and, ultimately, society in general. The idea is without a doubt an interesting one, but it does not help us to gain a more thorough understanding of what is at work here. That society’s relationship with authority has changed over the past half-century is unquestionable. It is well-known that family relationships have changed in this respect. Parents’ relationships with the schools have also changed in part with widespread access to education. But does this offer an explanation as to why youth set malicious car fires or enter into confrontations with the police? One observation is that the increase seen does not offer a sufficient explanation. The results of empirical research carried out at the local level calls for an alternative analysis. In the poor neighbourhoods of the Mantes area, Lagrange and Bidart (2000, 72) thus estimate that “a non-negligible proportion of delinquency and rebellious behaviour is due not to deficiencies within the families, to negative examples, or even to the lack of other alternatives, but rather to dialectics that are formed very early on, starting at the end of primary school, between young people and institutions and, exceedingly, the police.” If it is thus the very dynamics of their relationship to institutions that has deteriorated for some youth, there is a need to restore balance to that relationship and to examine how people experience their relationships to institutions and the way in which those institutions operate. The “crisis of authority” is thus in reality a crisis of legitimacy, which is linked to the overall socio-political situation and to the interactions between people and institutions in day-to-day life. Generally speaking, since the second half of the 1980s we have seen a three-prong phenomenon in which the belief in social change has disappeared (with a sort of fatalism taking its place), the political elite has been discredited and a segment of the population is not represented
politically. This situation has without a doubt created a background characterized by feelings of abandonment and injustice among the residents of neighbourhoods that have been “forgotten”. This individual and collective discrimination on the part of institutions is something that is confirmed regularly by the concerned parties. The relationship to police, which is experienced as being particularly discriminatory, plays a key role in the experience of a segment of the youth population (Kokoreff, 2003, 144sqq; Bordet, 1998, 62sqq). One can even speak of feelings of “collective victimization” based on the rap music of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Mucchielli, 1999, 2003b). Such feelings strongly encourage not only the distrust and avoidance of institutions but even the development—especially among a segment of the youth population—of what one could call, as do Hérault et Lapeyronnie (1998, 202), an “anti-institution” culture that leads to the systematic denigration of institutions that are “perceived as instruments of social marginalization”\(^{13}\). In day-to-day relations, the issue of how routine ID checks in public places and, to a lesser extent, interrogations and police custody are handled has been the subject of a conflict of legitimacy and interpretation that has become increasingly prevalent over the past 15 years. This conflict has resulted in an increase in incidences of provocative acts and assaults on police officers (with, namely, the act of throwing rocks at police vehicles) and in the increasing use of penal categories such as contempt for and violence against “public authorities” on the part of police officers, who, in doing so, are often attempting to establish their domination on a symbolic level and to ensure that the courts convict people with whom they have clashed (Jobard, 2002b).

Likewise, sociologists who have studied the “urban riot” phenomenon have demonstrated that sudden outbursts of anger often express these very feelings of abandonment, injustice and collective victimization (Bachmann, Leguennec, 1996, 355; Beaud, Pialoux, 2002). Therefore, behind many acts of rebelliousness and acts generally qualified as “vandalism”, one must acknowledge a form of political violence—which, while relatively un-evolved is no less meaningful—that French society is having difficulty hearing (as pointed out by Lagrange, 2001a, 11). This issue is an essential one for today’s youth and, in particular, for youth living in poor neighbourhoods; in other words, the descendents of African immigrants. While young “blacks” and “Arabs” are irrefutably overrepresented among perpetrators of public disturbances, is this not the result of underlying political causes?

Finally, it is important not to forget the local dimension of increasing hostility towards institutions and their representatives. This type of violence targeting institutions varies in seriousness from one neighbourhood or city to another. First of all, such acts are generally concentrated in “forgotten” neighbourhoods. However, this is not the only aspect of the

\(^{13}\). This allows for an additional hypothesis whereby feelings of collective victimization may be a factor in minimizing feelings of guilt vis-à-vis acts of delinquency, according to the classic theory put forward by Sykes and Matza (1957).
explanation. For equivalent populations, this type of violence is more prevalent in cities and neighbourhoods where representatives of institutions fuel tensions by the very way in which they respond to them. This is true for police officers as well as for teachers. Surveys on “school violence” have demonstrated that, for equivalent urban environments and populations served, individual establishments do not all report the same levels of tensions in their relationships with adolescents (Debarbieux, 1996-1999). This serves as a reminder that a relationship, even when violent, is an interaction between several actors whose behaviour must be examined. To come back to the issue of conflicts with police, in certain neighbourhoods of certain cities, relations between police and residents (and not just youth) are atrocious, with recurring cycles of violence (one focus of the research in Esterle-Hedibel, 2001). On one side, young people verbally provoke police officers and throw rocks at police vehicles. However, on the other side, police use methods that are not only discriminatory (racial profiling often accompanied by racial slurs and, sometimes, physical violence, particularly during body searches) but also much more violent than elsewhere, both during normal day-to-day operations and, a fortiori, during crisis periods when considerable additional manpower is deployed—often truly out of proportion to the actual situation. For this reason, the observers who, when studying these relations, have compared—proportionately, of course—the policing methods used in these neighbourhoods to those of a colonial army make a valid point. That said, it would appear more realistic to speak of a spiral of violence to which both parties contribute through cycles of counterattacks and reprisals as part of a conflict and power struggle between two equally-violent combatants.

Conclusion

Youth has always been characterized by certain behaviours, without a doubt because youth is the period that precedes the establishment of general standard models. Juvenile sociability, the construction of the self, the developing body, the discovery of sex, a taste for alcohol and high-risk behaviours, a nocturnal lifestyle, provocative acts towards adults and institutions and the temptation to steal all characterize this period of life, especially among boys. For various reasons (unstable family structure, academic failure, peer influence, individual life events), some young people enter into more structured “careers” of delinquent practices (such as organized theft or, more recently, the sale of marijuana). These “careers” may vary in duration. Furthermore—and also not new—certain children who are exposed to emotional or physical violence within their families or other

14. Contrary to stereotypes portrayed by politicians and in the media whereby these “forgotten” neighbourhoods are “lawless zones” into which “the police no longer venture”, observation reveals that police in fact use excessive force when policing these areas, a phenomenon that illustrates the degree of fear elicited by youth in these neighbourhoods and a lack of knowledge of these neighbourhoods on the part of institutions (Jobard, 2002a, 155; Kokoreff, 2003, 147-148).
environments at an early age are more inclined to use physical and verbal violence to express themselves (Mucchielli, 2000b). Today, (over the past 25 years) these traditional patterns have merely been perpetuated. However, today there are two relatively new aspects, one of which is virtually unknown to the public; the other exceedingly well-known.

The first is the central role that competition for the possession of consumer goods has taken on, with the resulting predatory criminal acts and assaults, a point that has already been developed sufficiently in this paper. The second new aspect lies in the fact that this crisis is, to a large extent, “territorial” in nature, in the sense that it mainly concerns areas that city policy and security policy have identified, each in its own way, for two decades. Even if the excessive media coverage of violence in these areas (“the suburbs”, “the projects”) combined with the discriminatory targeting of policing actions results in juvenile delinquency being incorrectly reduced to these areas alone, the fact remains that poor neighbourhoods are more seriously affected by the phenomenon. These areas have high poverty and unemployment levels and large proportions of young people (and thus higher rates of juvenile delinquency than in other neighbourhoods due simply to demographics) who very early on experience discrimination in their ordinary social relations and in their relations with institutions, a minority of whom respond to the situation with an increase in deviant behaviour. For all of these reasons—and also due to the settlement policies of public agencies and local elected officials (Oberti, 1996; Tanter, Toubon, 1999)—, these neighbourhoods have populations that are often mainly foreign or of foreign descent. This has resulted in a debate on the “excessive delinquency” of youth from immigrant backgrounds (Mucchielli, 2003a).

These two characteristics would appear to reveal a dual crisis in the structures that serve to integrate young people into the adult world. The first is economic: access to social status is made particularly difficult for hundreds of thousands of young men who find themselves disqualified with regard to professional life, symbolically at least as much as in reality, if not more so (insofar as some may find employment, but not the kind that comes with social status). The importance of social status in the coming-of-age process and its impact on all of an individual’s family and social relations has already been pointed out. The second crisis is symbolic and political: access to citizenship has been made particularly difficult for young men who feel that they have been generally disqualified with regard to the dominant political model. These men are no longer asked to participate nor are they represented by the traditional political powers-that-be. In addition, they also do not have the resources to launch autonomous, collective, sustainable, non-violent actions (unlike riots, which, because they almost always occur following a death, are passing emotional outbursts).
That said, the systematic examination of the available data reveals that violent behaviour is so far from being exclusive to youth that the theory of a specifically-juvenile danger to society can be debunked. In terms of “ordinary” or sexual assaults, the current trend affects all age groups and, in reality, French society as a whole. Overall, the observation of trends in the number of convictions broken down by age group does not confirm the theory of increasingly younger juvenile delinquents. In fact, it highlights a peak in criminal behaviour between the ages of 18 and 25 and, in certain cases, even later.

Finally, with regard to traffic-related violence, the trend identified was the opposite of what was expected, with a gradual decrease in this type of delinquent behaviour among young people. In the final analysis, four relatively independent—although concurrent—trends were observed: 1/ The continuing central role played by competition for the possession of material goods (resulting in predatory criminal acts sometimes accompanied by physical violence); 2/ an increasing denunciation of violence in social relations in general, which undoubtedly results more from changes in representations and sensibilities than from changes in behaviours; 3/ a concentration of certain forms of delinquency—especially those that target institutions—in “forgotten” neighbourhoods; and 4/ the gradual increase in disciplinary measures against drivers.