



Introduction. Youth violence: De-escalation strategies and socio-legal responses

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Abstract

Despite media suggestions that youth violence is the result of an epidemic of young thugs “out of control”, this paper argues that youth violence is emblematic of complex political, economic and socio-cultural conditions. This introductory paper discusses some of the key themes and articles from our special issue on *Youth violence: De-escalation strategies and socio-legal responses*, which is the result of a workshop held at the Oñati International Institute for the Sociology of Law in July 2019. It seeks to reflect the rich tapestry of factors, contexts and processes that can place young people at risk of offending, or, perhaps even more importantly, at risk of criminalisation, as presented in the special issue collection. We reflect on the range of perspectives presented across the special issue on youth violence and the de-escalation of such violence, which seek to advance knowledge, and identify strategies for regulating and preventing this behaviour.

Key words

Young people; de-escalation; youth violence; desistence

Resumen

Pese a insinuaciones de los medios de que la violencia juvenil es consecuencia de una epidemia de jóvenes matones “fuera de control”, este artículo argumenta que la violencia juvenil es emblemática de circunstancias políticas, económicas y socioculturales complejas. Esta introducción expone algunos de los temas claves de los

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artículos de nuestro número especial titulado *Youth violence: De-escalation strategies and socio-legal responses*, que es fruto de un seminario celebrado en el Instituto Internacional de Sociología Jurídica de Oñati, en julio de 2019. Se busca reflejar el rico mosaico de factores, contextos y procesos que pueden poner a los jóvenes en riesgo de delinquir o, quizá más importante, en riesgo de criminalidad, como se presenta en el número especial. Aquí reflejamos la variedad de perspectivas que se presentan en el número especial sobre violencia juvenil y la desescalada de dicha violencia, lo cual pretende adelantar el conocimiento e identificar estrategias para regular y prevenir ese comportamiento.

Palabras clave

Jóvenes; desescalar; violencia juvenil; desistencia

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Introduction

This special issue is the result of a workshop held at the Oñati International Institute for the Sociology of Law in July 2019 – prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic – on *Youth Violence: De-Escalation Strategies and Socio-Legal Responses*. The workshop was primarily prompted by the organisers' 2016 article (Flynn, Halsey and Lee 2016) which focused on the discourses of what was colloquially termed 'one punch' violence in Australia. This was a phenomenon in which people, mainly young men, were being killed and/or seriously injured by a typically unprovoked "king hit" (or single punch) thrown by another young male, who was usually a stranger to the victim, and which generally followed the use of alcohol and/or other drugs (Quilter 2014). In that paper, we argued that political and legal responses to one-punch violence were based on fairly cursory understandings of how and why these events were occurring. By way of contrast, we suggested that one-punch fatalities (and non-fatalities) were emblematic of deeper undercurrents of antisocial conduct and dispositions in late modern Australian life – that these seemingly random events had complex backstories. In an effort to "break open" the discursive limits of one-punch violence, we used perpetrator narratives – a missing voice in these debates – to show how and why a more nuanced understanding of male-on-male violence is necessary.

In sum, we found that one-punch violence connects to larger and more complex stories about masculinities, life histories, bodies, leisure and the interpretation and reaction to social cues in particular contexts (Flynn, Halsey and Lee 2016). In other words, this was a type of violence reflective of a much broader sociocultural milieu. Crucially, we argued that it is not possible to effectively respond to, or understand this type of offending, without considering the existence of such key factors as gender, socioeconomics, spatiality, and the socially and culturally constructed "truth games" (Rabinow 1984) concerning what does and does not count as violence in everyday life. Ignoring such factors would risk legislative and regulatory changes apt to further criminalise young people. Arguably, it is the underlying precursors to violence and the manner by which these form a "subterranean convergence" (Matza and Sykes 1961) with socially (if often covertly) approved forms of violence that requires further analysis.

Shortly after publishing this paper, we began thinking more broadly about representations of violence, and more specifically, youth violence, and found that increases in youth violence were being widely reported in media outlets globally. While moral panics (Cohen 2011) about young people and violence are not uncommon, there appeared to be a more globalised character to these latest representations. There were claims of violence from Australian "teen street gangs" (*Herald Sun* 2018) with "kids as young as 12 [being] out-of-control" (Brender 2017) and depictions of American "kids ... [who are] irredeemable, no-good thugs" (*Fox News US* 2017) or Irish "hoodie-clad thugs" (Turner-Cohen 2021). As is discussed in more detail within this special issue, in Melbourne – the capital city of Australia's second most populated state – there have been consistent reports of a rise in African youth gangs allegedly engaging in increasingly brazen and violent crimes, including car-jacking, armed robbery, and destruction of public property. *The Australian* (2018) newspaper described this as a "reign of fear in Melbourne's west", while the tabloid newspaper, the *Herald Sun* (2018), referred to it as a "youth crime wave". While concerns around youth violence are generally not limited

to race or geographical location, what is common among this so-called epidemic of youth crime was the style of reporting, which worked against a sustained analysis of the complex combination of factors underpinning such violence. As a consequence, a series of predictable causal tropes (e.g. “disrespect”, “innate aggression”, “immorality”) were used to describe its causes, and arguments to decrease the age of criminal responsibility, treat juvenile offenders as adults, give police increased powers (e.g. move-on laws), and the like, were posed as “youth crime solutions”. Such blunt measures, of course, can really only serve to increase the numbers of young people brought into the justice system.

In contrast to the conceptual reductionism of many current regulatory and legal responses, this special issue, and the workshop from which it emerged, sought to consider youth violence as emblematic of more complex political, economic and socio-cultural conditions than an epidemic of young thugs “out of control”. It attempts to reflect the rich tapestry of young people’s demographic backgrounds and socio-cultural contexts, and accordingly, the processes by which they might find themselves at risk of offending, or, perhaps even more importantly, at risk of criminalisation. The articles contained in this special issue suggest that youth violence often emerges within cultures or sub-cultures which tolerate or celebrate particular types of interpersonal conflict, and which reflect and/or reinforce particular gendered, typically masculinised, identities. In this context, youth violence can stem from the demise in legitimate rites of passage, from deep-seated feelings of alienation or humiliation, and from a desire for “vengeance” against political and economic systems that appear to privilege the well-being and rights of the wealthy and powerful, over and above those of the young and/or socially excluded (Flynn, Halsey and Lee 2016). Youth violence also emerges as an unfortunate accompaniment of the pleasure and night-time economies – particularly in relation to the over-consumption of alcohol and/or co-consumption of illicit drugs (Tomsen and Crofts 2012).

In framing this special issue, we were acutely aware that *the techniques for engaging in youth violence have changed substantially in recent years* – chiefly as a result of globalisation and the digitalisation of modern life. This has in turn led to fundamental changes in the nature, intensity and scale of youth violence, and violence more generally. Social and legal mechanisms for dealing with activities such as cyber-bullying, image-based sexual abuse, youth radicalisation, online “swarming” behaviour, and so forth, have struggled to keep pace with these and similar events (see e.g. Flynn and Henry 2019). The multiple and complex causes of youth violence therefore pose many challenges for those concerned with the social and legal regulation of such behaviour.

A chief concern for us in developing the workshop and creating this resultant special issue was that political, social and legal responses to violence – such as boot camps, designing out crime, tougher sentencing, as well as mass media campaigns – have contributed to a discourse of fear which itself mitigates against a sustained and nuanced inquiry into the aetiologies of youth violence (Garland 1996, Lee 2007). Given this, the aim of the workshop was to bring together a diverse group of international scholars and practitioners to focus on a) the deconstruction of dominant representations of youth violence, b) the de-escalation – in the broadest sense – of youth violence, and c) the diversion of so-called “wayward” or “dangerous” youth into contexts and initiatives

that promote desistance from violent behaviour (including, the contexts that give rise to and reward/validate such behaviour). This special issue explores these issues across five key themes – (1) political violence, (2) alcohol and drug related violence, (3) online violence, (4) radicalisation and terrorism, and (5) “gang” violence.

The first paper (by Jump) explores young men’s perceptions and understanding of violence, and the use of boxing as a vehicle in the prevention of repeat victimisation. Jump argues that by engaging in the use of physical (or bodily) capital, young men are able to “fight off” attacks on their standing and identity to “rebuild” respect. Lee, Halsey and Flynn subsequently explore understandings and perceptions of violence by identifying and deconstructing examples of the populist media and political narratives on youth gangs. Drawing on two examples – the “Gang of 49” and the “Apex Gang” – the authors draw out the more complex, counter narratives of this type of offending.

Moving onto responses to violence, Mythen and Baillergeau discuss the strategies implemented in Britain to respond to youth extremism and explore alternatives to risk-focused counter-terrorism measures, including whether locally grounded, materially focused approaches constitute a more productive way of addressing religious and politically motivated violence. Weston then examines problematic responses to violence and crime, exploring the outcomes of adopting a broad umbrella of drug policy that uses a framework of risk-based strategies designed to regulate and control, arguing that it culminates in disadvantage leading to further experiences of stigma, physical and mental ill health, unemployment and threat of homelessness.

The special issue then shifts towards exploring changes in the location of violent offending from the street to online. In this space, Pina examines image-based sexual abuse perpetration, and the role of myth acceptance regarding online antisocial behaviour. Fileborn then explores the development of online activism and counterpublics – digital spaces in which dominant social, cultural and political norms can be contested and disrupted, as a way to counter unsafe spaces online. Following this, Irwin-Rodgers and Billingham consider the ways in which content uploaded to online platforms can act as a catalyst and trigger for incidents of serious violence in real life, and consider the extent to which online social media activity constitutes a distraction from more pressing issues that simultaneously underpin serious violence. Drawing on a sample of young people who commit violent acts in Britain, they explore what it means to “matter”, and how a young person’s sense of “mattering” can be diminished, and ultimately reinstated through violence.

Overall, this special issue seeks to advance knowledge of youth violence, as well as the socio-legal strategies for regulating and preventing such behaviour. Given the diversity of the papers collected within it, it provides a unique opportunity to engage with and learn from international experiences and approaches towards the de-escalation of youth violence.

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