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Delinquent and aggressive behaviour among Roma and non-Roma adolescents in Slovakia

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Submitted

Abstract

Background: Rates of aggression and delinquency are assumed to be higher among Roma and other minorities, but sound evidence of this is lacking. Our aim was to assess delinquent and aggressive behaviour among Roma and non-Roma adolescents and the effects on ethnic differences of parental education and social desirability.

Methods: We conducted a cross-sectional study among Roma from separated and segregated settlements in the eastern part of Slovakia (N=330; mean age=14.50; interview) and non-Roma adolescents (N=722; mean age=14.86; questionnaire). The effect of ethnicity on antisocial behaviours was analysed using linear regression, crude and adjusted for gender, parental education and social desirability.

Results: Roma adolescents reported less delinquent behaviour (B -1.64; 95% confidence interval, CI -2.27, -1.00) and physically aggressive behaviour (B -1.52; 95% CI -2.58, -0.47) than Non-Roma; Roma reported more hostility (B 1.01; 95% CI 0.06, 1.96). Parental education did not affect the associations in an important way. Adjustment for social desirability diminished the ethnic differences in delinquency, led to an increase in the differences in hostility, and led to the disappearance of differences in physical aggression.

Conclusion: Our findings indicate that Roma, are not that much different from non-Roma, in terms of antisocial behaviour. Our findings should be confirmed in other settings.

Keywords: *Roma/Gypsy, ethnicity, adolescents, delinquency, aggression, social desirability*

Introduction

Juvenile delinquency and aggression constitute a major public health problem due to their impact on the health of both the perpetrators and the victims (Krug et al., 2002; Vermeiren, 2003). Regarding the perpetrators, delinquency and aggression are associated with illness, particular psychological disorders (e.g. depression), disability and death later in adulthood (Ruchkin et al., 2003; Shepherd et al., 2009). Regarding the victims, delinquency and aggression clearly have negative consequences on health, well-being and society as a whole (Junger et al., 2007; Krug et al., 2002). The public health impact of delinquency and aggression is likely to increase as prevalence rates have risen since the 1990s in many countries, including Slovakia (McQuoid, 1996; Salagaev, 2004; Šúryová, 2001).

Delinquency and aggression are core elements of adolescent antisocial behaviour, which mostly seems to develop on two trajectories. The adolescent limited type usually begins in early adolescence, peaks in middle adolescence and drops significantly with approaching adulthood. The life-course persistent type begins earlier, in childhood, and the people concerned are engaged in antisocial behaviour at every stage of life (Moffitt, 1993; Powell et al., 2010). Both types of antisocial behaviour burden public health, with the heaviest burden being due to the life-course persistent type (Ruchkin et al., 2003; Vermeiren, 2003).

Delinquency and aggression are often perceived to be more prevalent among minorities (Barnes et al., 2002; Hawkins et al., 2000; Jordan & Freiburger, 2010), an example of this being Roma. Roma have been assumed to be highly delinquent and aggressive, with high media attention in several CEE countries including Slovakia (Brearley, 2001; Kušnierik, 2009; Project on Ethnic Relations, 2000; Terenzani-Stanková, 2009). According to Šúryová (2001) Roma criminality exceeds the average level of criminality of the majority population, but their criminality is mostly driven by their bad living conditions. However, reliable statistics on the prevalence of adolescent criminality or delinquency among Roma compared with non-Roma do not exist. Higher rates of delinquency among ethnic or racial minorities have been reported regarding in regard to the USA (Barnes et al., 2002; Hawkins et al., 2000; Jordan & Freiburger, 2010). Studies on Blacks, Hispanics and Asians in that country show these higher rates to be partially an artefact due to differential risks of arrest for crime (Hawkins et al., 2000), sentences being more severe for these minorities (Jordan & Freiburger, 2010) and levels of verbal and physical aggression being higher than among White counterparts (Kim et al., 2010). Evidence on rates of aggression and delinquency obtained via other sources, such as via self-report, may prevent these biases.

The aim of our study is to compare self-reported delinquent behaviour and aggressive behaviour among Roma and non-Roma adolescents and to assess the effects of gender, socioeconomic status and social desirability on differences regarding this.

Methods

Sample and procedure

We obtained information on antisocial behaviours and demographic characteristics among Roma and non-Roma adolescents. The Roma sample was recruited via elementary schools in small towns and villages in the eastern part of Slovakia which met the following criteria: the number of children aged 13 years or older living in Roma settlements (segregated and separated type) was at least 30; the school was able to provide 3 or 4 separate rooms where interviews could be conducted without disruption; and the school made an internal list of children suitable for our study, who could then be randomly chosen and asked to participate in the interview. We contacted 22 elementary schools in municipalities in the study area that had separated or segregated Roma communities whose children could potentially attend schools. Fifteen of these schools fulfilled our criteria, but one of them was not willing to participate in the study. The other 14 were willing to participate. From the lists prepared by the schools of pupils living in Roma settlements, we chose respondents randomly while trying to include a similar proportion of boys and girls. Respondents were interviewed individually during regular class time by community workers with ample experience in working with Roma and who were trained for our study. One hour was scheduled for each interview; they lasted between 30 and 65 minutes.

Because non-Roma pupils in schools with higher proportions of pupils from Roma settlements might not be representative of all non-Roma adolescents, we decided to recruit a non-Roma sample from elementary schools in the same geographical area without an evident Roma community in the neighbourhood. We identified 25 such schools in the Košice and Prešov regions of eastern Slovakia and contacted a random sample of 15 of them. Out of those contacted, 11 schools were willing to participate but two of these were excluded because they did not have at least one class of 8th and 9th grade that was not included previously in a research project of our department. The questionnaires were administered during regular class time (45 minutes) by our research assistants, who had both training and experience. The questionnaire asked the same questions as the structured interview in the Roma sample.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Science at P.J. Safarik University in Kosice in August 2005. Data were collected in May-June 2007. Parents were informed about the study via the school administration and could opt out if they disagreed. Participation in the study was fully voluntary and anonymous with no explicit incentives provided for participation.

The sample of Roma adolescents consisted of 330 Roma elementary school pupils, all living in Roma settlements (the segregated and separated types) in the eastern part of Slovakia, in or near small towns and villages (response: 99.7%). This sample comprised 160 boys (48.5%) and 170 girls (51.5%) with ages ranging from 12 to 17 years (mean 14.50; SD=1.03). The sample of non-Roma adolescents consisted of 722 elementary school pupils attending the 8th and 9th grades (response 95.9%). This sample comprised 354 boys (53.2%) and 312 (46.8%) girls. Ages ranged from 14 to 17 years (mean 14.86; SD=0.63).

Measures

Questionnaires covered *demographic* (age, gender) and *parents' educational level* (father's and mother's highest completed education, with four levels of education distinguished: elementary education, apprenticeship, secondary education with a leaving certificate, and university education), *social desirability*, and scales assessing *delinquent and aggressive behaviour*. All scales were translated from the English original to Slovak by means of a forward-backward procedure (Beaton et al., 2000; Guillemin et al., 1993).

Delinquent behaviour was measured by questions on vandalism, violence and crime against property from the short version of the International Self-Reported Delinquency study II instrument (ISRD) (Zhang et al., 2000), an instrument which was developed by criminologists from 15 western countries. We included 10 items on the frequency of making threats with and using weapons, vandalism and stealing. Each item has a 5-point answering scale ranging from never (1) to three and more times in the last year (5), yielding a total ranging from 10 to 50 points, with higher score indicating higher levels of delinquent behaviour. The internal consistency of the scale was satisfactory (Cronbach's alpha: 0.79).

Aggression was measured with the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992). We used two subscales: physical aggression (9 items) and hostility (8 items). Physical aggression involves hurting or harming another, representing the instrumental or motor component of the behaviour. Hostility consists of feelings of ill will and injustice, representing the cognitive component of the behaviour. Respondents were asked to rate each item on a 5-point scale ranging from extremely uncharacteristic for me (1) to extremely characteristic for me (5). Total scores were computed and used for analyses. They ranged from 9 to 45 for the physical aggression subscale and from 8 to 40 for the hostility subscale. Higher scores indicate a higher level of aggression. The internal consistency of both subscales was satisfactory (Cronbach's alphas for both: 0.79).

Social desirability is the tendency of respondents to reply in a manner that will be viewed favourably by others. Higher social desirability thus can affect the validity of the results. It was measured using the Social Desirability Response Set (SDRS-5) (Hays et al., 1989). The scale inquires about common situations in which people are prone to respond favourably (e.g.: "No matter who I'm talking to, I'm always a good listener"). The five items are then rated with a five-point Likert scale (definitely true, mostly true, don't know, mostly false, definitely false). The total score is counted only from the extreme answers of each item (scored 1 point), with a higher total score indicating a higher level of socially desirable responses. Cronbach's α for the current sample was 0.53, but the mean inter-item correlation (MIIC) was 0.19. According to Clark & Watson (1995) and Parker, Taylor, & Bagby (2003), consistency is acceptable if the MIIC is above 0.15.

Statistical analysis

As the first step we computed baseline statistics (prevalence rates and means) for the background characteristics and antisocial behaviours of Roma and non-Roma

adolescents. We tested the statistical significance of the differences between them by using chi-square tests for categorical variables and t-tests and U-tests for continuous variables. Next, linear regression analyses were used to assess whether ethnic differences existed in delinquency, physical aggression and hostility and whether these were affected by gender, socioeconomic status and social desirability. We used four models for the explanation of ethnic differences in the outcomes. Model 1 tested the crude effect of ethnicity on the outcome variables; in Model 2 we added gender, in Model 3 parental education, and in Model 4 social desirability was added.

All analyses were performed using the statistical software SPSS 16.0 for Windows.

Results

Roma parents were more frequently low educated than non-Roma (Table 6.1). In general this reflects the situation of Roma in Slovakia and in the CEE region as a whole. Table 6.1 also shows that Roma adolescents reported significantly less delinquent behaviour and less physical aggression but more hostility and social desirability than non-Roma adolescents.

Linear regression analyses show a significant effect of Roma ethnicity (Model 1, crude effect) on delinquent behaviour, physical aggression and hostility (Table 6.2). The effects of ethnicity on delinquency, physical aggression and on hostility remained statistically significant after adjustment for gender. Introduction of parents' highest educational level resulted in a decrease of ethnic differences regarding physical aggression and in loss of significance of the ethnicity effect on hostility after the same adjustment.

Introduction of social desirability into the model changed the effect estimates changed, however. The effect of Roma ethnicity on delinquency decreased remarkably. Regarding physical aggression, the direction of the ethnicity effect changed and was no longer statistically significant. On the other hand, the effect of Roma ethnicity on hostility increased after adjusting for social desirability and gained significance. Gender and parental education did not affect the association between ethnicity and problematic behaviour outcomes in a crucial way; their effect was rather trivial or small. Social desirability proved to be an important confounder of the ethnicity effect on antisocial behaviour.

Table 6.1: Sociodemographic characteristics, self-reported delinquency, aggression, hostility and sensitivity for social desirability among Roma and non-Roma adolescents

<i>Categorical variables</i>	Roma		non Roma		p value
	N=330	%	N=722	%	
Gender					
Boys	160	48.5	354	53.2	not significant ^a
Father's education					
Elementary	169	54.2	18	2.6	p<0.001 ^a
Apprenticeship	116	37.2	144	21.2	
Secondary	20	6.4	328	48.2	
University	7	2.2	190	27.9	
Mother's education					
Elementary	231	74.3	32	4.6	p<0.001 ^a
Apprenticeship	62	19.9	114	16.5	
Secondary	16	5.1	340	49.1	
University	2	0.6	206	29.8	
Parents' highest education					
Elementary	154	47.8	9	1.3	p<0.001 ^a
Apprenticeship	132	41.0	82	11.6	
Secondary	28	8.7	338	47.9	
University	8	2.5	277	39.2	
<i>Continuous variables</i>					
	Mean (SD)		Mean (SD)		p value
Delinquent Behaviour	11.42 (2.97)		13.00 (5.28)		p<0.001 ^b
Physical Aggression	22.85 (7.80)		24.09 (7.34)		p<0.05 ^b
Hostility	22.96 (7.10)		21.68 (6.57)		p<0.05 ^b
Social Desirability	2.17 (1.29)		1.00 (1.08)		p<0.001 ^c

SD=standard deviation

^a Chi-square test

^b Mann-Whitney U-test

^c Student's t-test

Table 6.2: The effects of ethnicity on self-reported delinquency, aggression and hostility between Roma and non-Roma adolescents adjusted for gender, parental educational level and social desirability in four models: betas (B) and 95% confidence intervals (CI)

	Delinquent Behaviour B (95% CI)	Physical Aggression B (95% CI)	Hostility B (95% CI)
Model 1			
<i>Roma ethnicity</i>	-1.64 (-2.27 : -1.00) ***	-1.52 (-2.58 : -0.47) **	1.01 (0.06 : 1.96) *
Model 2			
<i>Roma ethnicity</i>	-1.57 (-2.19 : -0.96) ***	-1.42 (-2.41 : -0.43) **	0.99 (0.04 : 1.93) *
<i>Male gender</i>	2.53 (1.95 : 3.12) ***	5.18 (4.22 : 6.13) ***	-0.90 (-1.82 : 0.01)
Model 3			
<i>Roma ethnicity</i>	-1.61 (-2.60 : -0.63) ***	-2.09 (-3.70 : -0.49) **	0.80 (-0.72 : 2.33)
<i>Male gender</i>	2.54 (1.95 : 3.13) ***	5.18 (4.22 : 6.14) ***	-0.90 (-1.81 : 0.02)
<i>Parents' education</i>			
- elementary	0	0	0
- apprenticeship	-0.22 (-1.20 : 0.77)	-0.18 (-1.41 : 1.76)	-0.63 (-2.14 : 0.87)
- secondary	-0.20 (-1.42 : 1.03)	-0.85 (-2.84 : 1.13)	-0.18 (-2.06 : 1.70)
- university	-0.08 (-1.36 : 1.20)	-0.75 (-2.84 : 1.35)	-0.80 (-2.79 : 1.19)
Model 4			
<i>Roma ethnicity</i>	-1.08 (-2.12 : -0.04) *	0.45 (-1.14 : 2.07)	2.43 (0.87 : 3.99) **
<i>Male gender</i>	2.48 (1.90 : 3.07) ***	4.87 (3.95 : 5.78) ***	-1.09 (-1.99 / -0.19) *
<i>Parents' education</i>			
- elementary	0	0	0
- apprenticeship	-0.23 (-1.21 : 0.75)	0.09 (-1.41 : 1.60)	-0.69 (-2.16 : 0.77)
- secondary	-0.18 (-1.40 : 1.03)	-0.82 (-2.70 : 1.07)	-0.25 (-2.09 : 1.58)
- university	-0.04 (-1.32 : 1.24)	-0.48 (-2.47 : 1.51)	-0.74 (-2.68 : 1.20)
<i>Social desirability</i>	-0.40 (-0.66 : -0.15) **	-1.95 (-2.35 : -1.56) ***	-1.31 (-1.70 : -0.92) ***

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Discussion

The aim of our study was to compare self-reported delinquent behaviour and aggressive behaviour among Roma and non-Roma adolescents with regard to the effect of gender, socioeconomic status and social desirability on the differences. We found that non-Roma adolescents reported more delinquent and physical aggressive behaviour than Roma adolescents, but that Roma reported more hostility. Social desirability affected these ethnic differences in an important way. Adjustment for social desirability diminished the ethnic differences in delinquency and physical aggression, with the latter fully disappearing, but increased the differences in hostility.

The finding of less self-reported delinquency and physical aggression among Roma compared to non-Roma contradicts previous findings on ethnic differences in delinquent behaviour (Barnes et al., 2002; Hawkins et al., 2000; Jordan & Freiburger, 2010) and the general opinion of Roma being delinquents or criminals, as is frequently presented in the media (Brearley, 2001; Kušnierik, 2009; Project on Ethnic Relations, 2000; Terenzani-Stanková, 2009; Šuryová, 2001). In particular, after adjustment for the tendency to respond in a socially acceptable way Roma differ little from non-

Roma in delinquent behaviour and do not differ at all in physical aggression. This may be explained by the fact that a higher sensitivity for social desirability leads to more underreporting of delinquent and aggressive behaviours, and that Roma adolescents are in general more sensitive for social desirability than non-Roma adolescents. Such an influence of social desirability on outcomes between culturally diverse samples was also shown by Randal et al. (1993).

In general, the validity of self-reports may differ between the minority and the majority group (Hawkins et al., 2000). On the other hand, data collected in routine databases such as police crime statistics may be biased towards over-recording offences committed by Roma (MacDonald, 2001). The results of our adjustments for sensitivity towards social desirability show that the first provides at least some explanation, but the latter is likely too, Roma being generally highly discriminated against (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009). In addition, the cultural conceptualisation of antisocial behaviour may differ between Roma and non-Roma and may thus affect the level of reported antisocial behaviours.

The higher hostility among Roma might reflect the negative personal experience of Roma people when in contact with non-Roma. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2009) reported the Roma as the most discriminated against group surveyed by EU-MIDIS. The Hostility subscale consists of resentment and suspicion items which might be higher among Roma and thus score higher on the hostility subscale (Buss & Perry, 1992).

Strengths and limitations

Strengths of our study are that it was conducted on a Roma sample which is a hard-to-reach population. We succeeded in recruiting a considerable number of Roma adolescents. Also we reached relatively high response rates in both samples.

Besides these strengths our study also has some limitations. First, adolescents most engaged in deviant behaviours may not attend a school (Aebi, 2009), leading to an underestimation of differences. Second, self-report tends to underestimate the most serious types of delinquency (Aebi, 2009). Finally, we used a different approach to collect data among Roma and non-Roma adolescents. This could have led to higher levels of social desirability among Roma as disclosure may be lower in an interview (Bowling, 2005). Fortunately, we were able to adjust for this but we cannot exclude some remaining information bias.

Implications

Our findings refute the public opinion that Roma are highly delinquent and aggressive (Kušnierik, 2009; Project on Ethnic Relations, 2000; Terenzani-Stanková, 2009). As such, they may contribute to a more valid view of this ethnic group among the general public and among policy makers.

Our results show that Roma and non-Roma adolescents are very similar regarding the level of reported antisocial behaviours. Thus, interventions aiming at prevention of antisocial behaviour should focus on the entire population, but even then a different approach may be needed for ethnic minorities such as Roma. Whether the latter is the case requires additional study, preferably framed in a longitudinal design following Roma and non-Roma from adolescence to early adulthood and including qualitative assessments.

Our survey was conducted in mostly a rural setting, and a survey in an urban setting might yield different results as well, rates of delinquency being generally higher in urban settings (Salagaev, 2004). Thus our study should be replicated elsewhere, also outside the classic Roma settlements, as Roma communities have been shown to vary in terms of regional settlement patterns, integration levels, economic and social development (Ringold et al., 2005) and health (Filadelfiová et al., 2007; Vaňo & Mészáros, 2004).

Conclusion

Delinquent behaviour and physical aggression seem to be reported less frequently by Roma adolescents, but this may be mostly due to social desirability. After adjustment for social desirability, ethnic differences in delinquent behaviour and physical aggression diminished or disappeared, and only hostility appeared to be more frequent among Roma adolescents.

Our findings provide a rather new perspective, indicating that Roma, a minority group, are not so different from non-Roma, the majority group, in terms of antisocial behaviour. Further research on this sensitive topic is needed.

