



# 8. Teenage Violence: High-spirited or hooliganism? Accidental or intentional?



**Regardless of whether teenage violence is "intended" or accidental, Thai society should not leave teenagers to defend for themselves. We have to change our attitudes, so that we take care of all children, and not just our own. Adults, who were once teenagers themselves, have to help each other find a solution to the problem.**

In 2004, the number of cases of teenage violence again increased alarmingly. Police statistics show that in Bangkok alone, between October 2003 and August 2004, there were more than 3,000 cases of teenagers fighting one another. The high incidence of teenage violence prompts questions about contemporary Thai society. What is happening to young people, the future of the nation? What are these acts of violence: accidental or intentional



## The patterns of teenage violence in 2004

When teenagers join up with their friends they become a powerful force. This is a good thing when the teenagers are doing something constructive, but is dangerous to the health of society when the teenagers lack self-control. The crimes committed by teenagers in 2004 reflect weaknesses in the institution of the family and weaknesses in Thai society. (The discussion will not consider sexual crimes, which are discussed in an earlier section of the report.)

• **Theft by teenagers** To obtain money for entertaining themselves, teenagers steal money from defenseless individuals. Teenage thieves use motorbikes and knives, and patrol for victims at night. An example is the crime that took place on 5 January 2004, when three teenagers stole the property of two male students from Kasetsart University within a short period at a bus stop. The students were beaten from behind until they were unconscious. The three teenagers slashed another person on the face and arms so that he required 50 stitches.

The favorite target of teenage thieves is mobile phones, since they are easy to steal and easy to sell. For instance, a 15-year-old boy in Yasothon Province was riding home on his motorbike when he was attacked by four teenagers. The teenagers slashed the boy with a knife until one of his fingers was nearly severed, and then stole his mobile phone. The police apprehended the attackers the next day. A worrying feature of this crime was that the teenagers appeared to be imitating a scene from a movie.

Another teenage crime was particularly frightening because it occurred in a temple, indicating that nowhere is safe. The crime occurred on 19 August 2004. A 17-year old thief was attempted to enter the temple to steal goods. A nun who happened to be passing saw him and called out. The thief attacked her with a knife, cutting her on the head, face, and arms in an attempt to kill her. The nun required 205 stitches.

• **Teenagers disturbing the peace** Aside from fighting, which has become a regular occurrence, teenagers also destroy public property, such as telephone booths and traffic lights, and vandalize cars. They show no respect for the laws or the police. For instance, in Chiang Mai in January teenagers in a motorcycle gang set fire to four shops on a main road, for no apparent reason.

Another shocking event was the death of a well-known comedian. A teenager threw a rock at the comedian's car when he was traveling on the highway. The rock hit the victim in the face and cracked his skull. The teenager confessed that he did this because he was angry at the van for turning its headlights on full. The teenager stated that he always kept rocks with him to throw at barking dogs.

• **Boy racers** Teenagers modify their motorbike exhausts to increase the noise. They ride their motorbikes in a near-suicidal manner, with no concern for safety of the friend or girlfriend sitting behind them. Boy racers are a difficult issue for police: many officers have been hurt while chasing offenders. Ordinary people who try to stop the racers have also been injured.

The boy racers also damage public property. One such incident occurred on 12 September 2004. About 50 police officers from Phayathai Police Station set up a checkpoint to apprehend members of a motorcycle gang who had been disturbing the peace. Gang members responded by vandalizing traffic lights and control boards in the Phayathai area.





### Studies of why teenagers use violence

• **Gang warfare** There are frequent reports of teenage boys fighting one another, sometimes using guns, with no fear of the law. Innocent bystanders have been injured or killed. For instance, in one case teenagers fired at each other in a public bus, and killed a young computer programmer. In another case, a third-year university student from the Pathumwan Institute of Technology was stabbed to death by students from a rival college while riding a bus.

• **Teenage murderers** There have been cases of teenage contract killers working for small amounts of money. There have also been revenge killings, murders combined with thefts, and murders of rape victims. A particularly strange and tragic case was that of the 15-year old boy who brutally killed his victim, simply because of sexual desire and a need for money, and then returned home as if nothing had happened. When he was arrested, he said that his victim was generous to him, and used to give him snacks and sweets.

In 2003, the ABAC Poll research organization from Assumption University studied the violent behavior of male students in secondary schools and technical colleges in Bangkok. They found that the influences that prompted violence were as follows.

Rank	Influence (respondents could choose more than one)	Percent
1.	Movies	57.9
2.	Peers	56.3
3.	News reports on violence	43.8
4.	Video games	32.4
5.	Internet	30.8
6.	Television	27.2
7.	Other	23.4

Source: [www.abac-ksc.poll.th.org](http://www.abac-ksc.poll.th.org)



Researchers from the Thailand Research Fund found that ten years ago, fighting was mainly found at sports matches, but at present, fighting occurs at concerts, school events, and shopping malls. The research showed that about 78 percent of fights occurred in public places, and only 16 percent occurred at sports events.

Research from Thailand and overseas has shown that exposure to violence in the family or community can make children themselves violent. Children become permeated by a culture of violence, whether from the home, the community, peers, or the media, but particularly from movies and television. Through these means, violence is perpetuated.

These effects are illustrated by the phenomenon of dek chang (a slang term for mechanics student). Being a dek chang means refusing to acknowledge the norms and standards of wider society, and risk-taking as a way of life and an important part of personal identity. A dek chang considers that using violence to assert leadership and win respect is



Diverting teenagers energy from harmful activities to constructive ones is an important challenge for families, schools, and every other part of society. We need to find a way so that all groups cooperate to address the causes and the effects of teenage violence, and help teenagers escape from it.

The government needs to ensure that its policies towards youth are consistent. Youth should be given the opportunity to gain work experience while at school. The curriculum should be flexible, and should include contents that help reduce violence.

There needs to be a data system covering every family in the country to identify youth experiencing problems. Television, radio, and the mass media should have high quality programs for children and youth in the evenings. Children need to be protected from violent and inappropriate environments. For instance there should be bans on pornography and there should be zoning in Internet cafes so that children cannot play violent games or games involving motorcycle racing.

Currently, one factor that greatly influences violent behavior among children is the media. The government needs to act against media that encourage violence, particularly movies that lead to copycat crimes. There needs to be a classification system that prohibits young children from watching violent movies, because of the possible effects on behavior when they become teenagers. Non-violent entertainment needs to be promoted.

The family has a vital influence on the training of young people. But in contemporary society, many adults are too busy working to attend to children's problems. Evenings should be times for families to come together, to eat and to watch television. But this is rare, and never occurs in some families, whether rich or poor.

Employers therefore need to give staff opportunities to spend time with their children after work and on school holidays. Employers could allow older children to obtain work experience with their parents during the holidays. Governmental and non-governmental organizations need to work with families in which economic difficulties, alcohol, or other factors lead to violence against children. However, this type of social work needs to be on a voluntary basis.



Educational institutions need to provide students with skills in critical thinking, and need to teach them to use their free time constructively, such as doing part time jobs or community work. Schools need to promote activities where youth can use their energy constructively.

Youth at risk of committing crimes should not be isolated from society. Educational institutions need to work with parents to change the young people's behavior. Schools need to encourage positive thinking among parents.

At the same time, quality peer groups need to be developed, so that young people have a chance to socialize with good role models. This is because peers are the group with the greatest influence on the attitudes of teenagers. The last question is whether the government, families, schools or communities have tried enough to eradicate the culture of violence among Thai teenagers, and whether they can divert these young people excessive energies into constructive activities. If concerned people could achieve this, it would help teenagers realize their potential.

In response to this challenge, the government will provide 200 million baht in April 2005 to support students to earn incomes during school holidays. The policy emphasizes activities that strengthen youth development in educational institutions, such as music, sport, and computers. It is now important to ask how children who are not at school can be assisted.

If we can divert the energies of young people towards constructive activities, then the problem of teenage violence will be solved.

