

CHILD AT RISK: FROM ACTIVITY TO UNDERSTANDING

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CHILD AT RISK: **FROM ACTIVITY TO UNDERSTANDING**

***METHODOLOGICAL GUIDE
ON RISKY BEHAVIOUR AND MENTAL HEALTH
IN THE V₄ COUNTRIES***

Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková et al.

Hradec Králové

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PREVALENCE OF RISKY BEHAVIOR AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Mário Dulovics

INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT OF RISKY BEHAVIOR IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

The phenomenon of risky behavior among children and youth in Slovakia is one of the fundamental problems faced by teachers, prevention workers in schools, parents, and decision-makers. Risky behavior among children and youth represents a serious social and educational problem. It encompasses a wide range of behaviors that can have negative consequences for physical and mental health, social relationships, and school performance.

The concept of risky behavior in Slovakia is influenced by Western (Jessor & Jessor, 1977) and, above all, Czech models. The influence of the Czech concept of risk behavior has also been reflected in the national project *Standardization of the Counseling and Prevention System for Inclusion and Success in the Labor Market*, within which *Content Standards for Professional Activities in Counseling and Prevention Facilities and in Schools* were developed, containing several comprehensive documents. Specifically, in the document *Professional Activities for the Prevention of Risky Behavior* (Tichý et al., 2023), its authors rely heavily on authors such as Miovský and Zapletalova (2006), Nielsen Sobotková et al. (2014), and others in defining risky behavior.

It can be said that there is a certain ambiguity in the understanding of the concept of risky behavior from a terminological and typological point of view. Emmerová and Bělík (2022) justify this fact by stating that risky behavior encompasses a wide spectrum of maladaptive behavior.

The document *Professional Activities in the Prevention of Risky Behavior* (Tichý et al., 2023) states that: "This term can replace the previously used term 'sociopathological

phenomena." As stated by Tichý et al. (2023): "The term 'sociopathological phenomena' is stigmatizing in the field of education, normatively biased, and places too much emphasis on group/social norms."

We agree with the view that, in relation to children and adolescents, it is more appropriate to use the term "risky" rather than "pathological" behavior, but these are not entirely identical phenomena. The reason is that risky behavior is temporary in nature and is typical mainly for the period of adolescence; it may or may not develop into social pathology. This fact is also stated in the document *Professional Activities for the Prevention of Risky Behavior*, which states: "The common denominator of all the mentioned types of risky behavior is the criterion of pre-pathological manifestations, i.e., there are no signs of pathology (e.g., drug addiction, eating disorders, personality disorders).

Čerešník and Gatíal (2014) synthesize a typology of risky behavior based on an analysis of the 10th revision of the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD-10) and the typology defined by Miovský and Zapletalová (2006), which includes the following forms of risky behavior:

- "Behavioral disorders: socialization disorder (socialization disorder with aggression), socialized behavioral disorder (e.g., group delinquency, truancy), oppositional defiant disorder, other unspecified behavioral disorders.
- Use of psychotropic substances: primarily alcohol, tobacco, and cannabinoids, but also opiates, cocaine, hallucinogens, solvents, etc.
- Addiction and impulse control disorders: pathological gambling, theft, arson, etc.
- Abuse of non-addictive substances, use of antacids, steroids, hormones, vitamins, laxatives, antidepressants, etc.
- Sexual behavior disorders: fetishism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, etc.

In the document *Professional Activities in the Prevention of Risky Behavior* (Tichý et al., 2023), we find the following classification of risky behavior. In the narrowest sense, we classify the basic types of risky behavior as follows:

- a) truancy,
- b) bullying, cyberbullying, and extreme manifestations of aggression,
- c) extreme sports and risky behavior in traffic,
- d) racism and xenophobia,

- e) negative influence of sects,
- f) risky sexual behavior,
- g) behavior leading to addiction.

In a broader sense, the following three areas are included in these seven areas, which, in terms of their prevalence in the population, are becoming the focus of preventive work, but which cannot be clearly included in the concept of risky behavior:

- h) disorders and problems associated with child abuse and neglect syndrome,
- i) the spectrum of eating disorders,
- j) self-harm.

However, even this typology does not fully cover all forms of risky behavior. Czech authors Miovský and Zapletalová (2006) and Širůčková (2015) also include crime and delinquency among risky behavior. At the same time, experts in Slovakia also include the issue of online risky behavior in the category of risky behavior (Dulovics et al., 2023; Vagaská et al., 2023; Niklová, 2024).

Given that the issue of risky behavior is extremely broad, the following section will focus on analyzing the prevalence of only selected forms of risky behavior among children and young people.

CRIME AND DELINQUENCY AMONG CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Crime and delinquency are specific in that they are closely intertwined with other forms of risky or pathological behavior, such as bullying, cyberbullying, substance and non-substance addictions, risky behavior in traffic, and, in certain circumstances, truancy and the like. At the same time, delinquent behavior in children and youth is the subject of interest in several sciences, such as criminology, law, sociology, psychology, pedagogy, and scientific disciplines such as the sociology of education, social pedagogy, and forensic psychology. Although crime and delinquency are classified by authors as socio-pathological phenomena (Hroncová et al., 2020; Ondrejko, 2001), another group of authors, especially forms of property crime committed by minors and juvenile offenders, describe it as risky behavior (Dolejš, 2010; Širůčková, 2015).

Under Criminal Code No. 300/2005, the age of criminal responsibility in the Slovak Republic is 14 years. Specifically, Section 22 of the Criminal Code states that "A person

who, at the time of committing an otherwise criminal act, has not reached the age of fourteen, is not criminally responsible."

Crime is a less frequent topic in research and scientific studies in the Slovak Republic. Research and studies focused on children and young people are even rarer in this area. When this issue is addressed, it is mainly in connection with other forms of risky behavior or in connection with marginalized groups of the population, especially the Roma ethnic group.

One of the authors who has dealt with crime among Roma children and adolescents is Daňo (2003). Based on research conducted between 1995 and 1998 among 370 Roma pupils under the age of 15, he states that the average age of a Roma child who commits a crime is 11.26 years. He also states that up to 56.76% of those surveyed had committed a crime, and the recidivism rate among children in the research sample at that time was 28.92%.

Sejčová (2009) states that the most common antisocial acts among children and young people include: "...theft, robbery, disorderly conduct, bodily harm, sexual offenses, vandalism, manifestations of ethnic, racial, and national intolerance. Other crimes, such as arson and murder, are not typical of the child and youth category."

This fact is also confirmed by *the Strategy for the Prevention of Crime and Other Anti-Social Activities in the Slovak Republic until 2028*, which, according to statistics from the Police Force Presidium for the period 2016 to 2021, states that there has been an increase in crime committed by minors in the area of property and sexual offenses. Juvenile offenders under the age of 14 most often committed theft of property on land and, strikingly, the production and distribution of child pornography. During the pandemic, the most common crime was theft of property on land, which was committed by 279 juvenile offenders in 2021. On the other hand, there was an overall decline in crime among juveniles. However, problems persist with theft, sexual abuse, and, as with minors, child pornography, which has grown by dozens of cases in recent years.

The strategy further states that: "Problems with the sexuality of children and young people were also reflected in computer crime during the pandemic, when there was a rapid increase in the number of cases of production and distribution of child

pornography by minors and juveniles. By way of comparison, while only 19 such cases involving minors were recorded in 2016, there were already 90 in 2021."

DRUG EXPERIMENTATION AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Drug experimentation among children and young people is a serious public health problem with far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, and society. The adolescent age group is particularly vulnerable, as it is characterized by a phase of identity seeking, a need for social acceptance, and a tendency toward risky behavior. Experimenting with drugs can be seen as a form of rebellion, curiosity, or a response to various psychological and social pressures.

In Slovakia, the incidence of drug experimentation among children and young people is regularly monitored through a number of studies and surveys. Among the institutions that monitor drug experimentation among children and young people is *the Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology*, which, in cooperation with *the Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic*, conducted *the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD – European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs) in the Slovak Republic for 2024*. The aim of the ESPAD survey was to obtain data on the prevalence of drug use among 9th grade students and students of all grades of secondary schools.

The report states that statistics on the prevalence of tobacco use among girls and boys show significant changes: "In 2007, 50.3% of boys and 38.2% of girls started smoking their first cigarette at the age of 13 or younger. This proportion gradually declined in subsequent years, reaching 24.0% for boys and 25.2% for girls in 2024. On the other hand, the proportion of respondents who had never smoked cigarettes in their lifetime increased significantly. In 2007, 21.6% of boys and 23.7% of girls had never smoked, while in 2024 this proportion increased to 48.5% for boys and 44.0% for girls. The proportion of regular smokers who smoke 1–5 or more cigarettes a day has also changed significantly. In 2007, 33.4% of boys and 31.8% of girls smoked regularly, but by 2024 this proportion had fallen to 17.0% for boys and 17.2% for girls. The decline was even more pronounced among those who regularly smoke 20 or more cigarettes a day. In 2007, this proportion was 3.9% for boys and 1.9% for girls, but by 2024 it had fallen to 2.1% for boys and 0.8% for girls.

With regard to alcohol consumption among adolescents, the ESPAD survey provides data on the type of alcohol consumed (beer, wine, spirits, cider, alcopops). The 2024 findings show that 18.5% of respondents had never drunk alcohol and 45.3% of students had never been drunk. The first consumption of alcohol at the age of 9 or younger was reported by 7.4% of respondents. At the same time, only 1.7% of them reported that they had also gotten drunk. At the age of 13, 11.5% of respondents had their first contact with alcohol, and 5.8% of respondents had also gotten drunk at this age.

With regard to trends in alcohol consumption in recent years, the ESPAD results indicate that risky consumption of individual types of alcohol is declining among both boys and girls compared to previous measurements. In this context, the average values of alcohol consumption at the time of last use, expressed in grams, were surveyed. As stated in the report, spirits, for example, show consistently high average values, especially among boys. "In 2007, the average values were 34.4 g, which increased to 47.1 g in 2011. After a slight decline in the following years, they reached 43.7 g in 2019 and 32.1 g in 2024. Among girls, average consumption of spirits appears to be relatively stable, with a slight increase to 37.5 g in 2019 and a decrease to 26.9 g in 2024."

In terms of illegal drugs, at least one-time use of marijuana has been declining, reaching its lowest level in 2024 (28.4% of boys and 25.3% of girls). There is a downward trend in experimentation with ecstasy, with 5.7% of boys and 5.2% of girls experimenting with it in 2024. Other drugs with low prevalence included amphetamines and methamphetamine, LSD, magic mushrooms, heroin, cocaine, and synthetic cannabinoids.

According to research conducted as part of the international *HBSC (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children)* project, which was carried out on a sample of nearly 10,000 students aged 11, 13, and 15, it is reported that: "In the last 30 days, about one-fifth of 15-year-olds and one-tenth of 13-year-olds smoked cigarettes, and about one-third of 15-year-olds and less than one-fifth of 13-year-olds drank alcohol at least one day. About one-fifth of 15-year-olds, 5% of 13-year-olds, and less than 2% of 11-year-olds have been drunk at least twice in their lives." The report also states that the incidence of smoking and alcohol consumption has been declining since 2010, which can be at least partly attributed to changes in the social environment, probably related to the increase in online communication, as well as the enforcement of relevant legislation.

Another institution that monitors drug-related issues is *the National Health Information Center* (NCZI), which, unlike the ESPAD report, focuses on data related to the treatment of drug addiction. In 2024, 3,023 people underwent treatment for drug use in Slovakia, of whom 76.6% were men and 23.4% were women. In terms of age structure, 200 people under the age of 19 were treated, with a long-term downward trend in this age group. A total of 834 people aged 20–29 were treated, which is the second most frequent age category after people aged 30–39, of whom 1,045 were treated in 2024.

Currently, it is important not only to monitor the prevalence of drug experimentation among children and young people, but also to promote prevention strategies based on proven principles of effective prevention. Preventive measures should include school prevention, support for parental education, and building skills in children and adolescents focused on coping with pressure and strengthening their resilience. Effective links between schools, health care facilities, local governments, and non-profit organizations are also key.

In conclusion, it can be said that although drug experimentation among Slovak youth is not increasing dramatically, its existence and specific characteristics require the focused and systematic attention of all actors involved in shaping the healthy development of young people.

BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Bullying is a persistent form of pathological behavior in the school environment. At the same time, it is one of the most common forms of human rights violations. Based on a comparison of studies conducted by *the Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information* (CVTI) in 2005, 2009, 2014, 2020, and 2022, Janková (2023) states that from 2005 to 2022, the number of students who were victims of bullying increased by 12% and, compared to the 2009 study, by as much as 20%. In her survey, the author identified 25% of students as victims, 9% as aggressors, and 43% as witnesses. Differences according to gender were confirmed among the aggressors. Boys (12%) were identified as aggressors more often than girls (6%).

In the classroom, primary and secondary school students most often experienced vulgar insults (44%), ironic comments, and ridicule (36%). To a lesser extent, their classmates

ignored them (17%) or physically assaulted them (12%). Approximately one in ten respondents had their personal belongings destroyed by aggressors (9%), were threatened, given nonsensical orders that they had to carry out (8% each), had various things extorted from them, and were sexually harassed (7% each) (Janková, 2023).

Sejčová (2021) presents research conducted in 2018, which identified up to 51% of victims and 30% of perpetrators of bullying. The perpetrators committed bullying in the form of physical (5%), psychological attacks (5%), theft (4%), ignoring the victim (4%), etc.

As part of the international HBSC (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children), a report entitled *Social Determinants of Schoolchildren's Health from 2019* points out that the number of students who were victims of bullying (aged 11, 13, and 15) ranged from 4% to 8% depending on age and gender. The highest number of victims among boys (7%) and girls (8%) was among 11-year-old pupils. The number of aggressors of both sexes was highest in the 15-year-old age group (girls 6%, boys 8%).

Extensive research in the field of cyberbullying was conducted by Dulovics et al. (2023). In a research sample of 2,768 secondary school students, the authors identified 11.6% of victims of cyberbullying, of which 51.6% were boys and 48.4% were girls. Cyberbullying perpetrators accounted for 9.3% of students, of whom 66% were boys and 34% were girls.

The author Hollá (2016) pays close attention to the issue of cyberbullying, its monitoring and analysis in various contexts. In one of her studies, based on a sample of 1,619 respondents aged 11 to 18, she examined the interrelationships between cyberbullying and sexting. The author found that among the victims of cyberbullying, up to 63.4% were boys who did not engage in sexting. A quarter of the boys (25.8%) who were victims of cyberbullying were also recipients of sexting. This means that they were victims of online attacks associated with cyberbullying as well as recipients of sexting. In the group of boys in the position of victims, 8.5% were also senders of sexually explicit content. In the group of girls, 64.6% of victims did not engage in sexting. Less than a quarter of girls (22.5%) who were victims of cyberbullying were recipients of sexting. Girls who were victims of cyberbullying also acted as senders of sexting in 12.9% of cases.

Hollá (2017) states that the most common forms of cyberbullying among students include *vulgar or offensive language* in cyberspace, which is more common among boys (28.9%) than girls (17.6%), followed by *the publication of vulgar or offensive photographs* on the internet (19.6% of boys, 11.1% of girls). These results largely correspond with the findings of Dulovics (2018), who, based on his research, states that the most frequent forms of cyberbullying among primary and secondary school students (N=931) are *threats/insults via online communication* (13.6%) and the publication of offensive photos (9.7%).

ONLINE RISKY BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Online risky behavior has been on the rise in recent years. A wide range of online risks pose a threat to the younger generation and can leave a deep mark on the psychosocial development of young people, affecting them for the rest of their lives. In response to the new social situation, which is linked to the transposition of a significant part of the free time and a wide range of activities of children and young people into virtual space, several strategic measures have been adopted at national and international level. Protecting children in virtual space and preventing their digital vulnerability is becoming a global challenge.

Several studies focused on monitoring risky online behavior among children and young people have been conducted in Slovakia. One of the most comprehensive studies was carried out as part of the *EU Kids Online Slovakia* project, which focuses on the activities, opportunities, and risks of children and adolescents in the virtual environment. The research was conducted on a sample of 969 children and adolescents aged 9 to 17. The findings show that 9.1% of respondents aged 9 to 10 had come into contact with some form of sexual content in the last year, with the number of respondents increasing in direct proportion to age. Boys (31.6%) encountered sexual content to a greater extent than girls (28.6%). Up to 72.5% of respondents came into contact with sexual content online, again more often boys (75.2%) than girls (69.3%). Almost half of the respondents (48.7%) repeatedly encountered sexual content on Facebook or Twitter (now X), 60.9% on Instagram, 22.7% in online games, and 30.7% of respondents viewed pornographic websites directly, most of them aged 15–17 (42.8%). Alarming, children aged 9–10 also came into contact with sexual content to a high degree on social media (approx. 21%).

However, it should be noted that children of this age still come into contact with sexual content more often through traditional media such as *television and film* (91.4%) than online (43.2%). Only a few children aged 11–12 had experience with sexting, 7% aged 13–14, and one in seven young people aged 15–17 (Israel et al., 2022).

Another topic addressed in the *EU Kids Online Slovakia* report is excessive use of the internet and social media. Izrael et al. (2022) state that "1.3% of the Slovak population of children and young people meet four out of five criteria, which can be interpreted as behavior very close to excessive internet use leading to addictive behavior." The authors further state that: "A total of 10% of the representative sample meets at least one of the four criteria for excessive internet use. These 10% can be considered children and young people with a tendency towards excessive internet use and suitable candidates for preventive programs in this area. The toughest criterion in the survey appears to be the item *"I did not eat or sleep because of the internet,"* which was selected by only 1.2% of participants. The highest percentage, 5.1%, selected the item *"I tried to limit the time I spend on the internet, but unsuccessfully."*

Further empirical research in the field of online risky behavior was conducted by Dulovics et al. (2023) on a sample of 2,768 secondary school students aged 11 to 15. The research focused on monitoring excessive internet use, online risk challenges, social isolation due to problematic use of digital technologies, FoMO syndrome, and cyberbullying (discussed in the previous section). The CIUS (Compulsive Internet Use Scale) research tool was used to measure excessive internet use, with milder criteria set for determining excessive internet use. Based on the results, up to 56.61% of students fall into the category of excessive internet users. At the same time, a statistically significant relationship was found between social isolation and excessive internet use, as well as between FoMO syndrome and excessive internet use. The research identified 24.35% of students who participated in one or more risky online challenges at the same time. In terms of gender, 50.45% of boys and 49.55% of girls participated in risky online challenges once or repeatedly. The risky challenges identified included, for example: the Cinnamon Challenge (12.0%), the Choking Challenge (6.9%), and the Eyeballing Challenge (5.2%).

Another form of risky behavior in the online environment is the disclosure of personal data and information about oneself. Janková (2024) monitored this issue in her research. The author states that "...students who had at least one profile on a social network most

often published their surname (56.8%), and slightly less often a photo (48.7%). Significantly fewer, approximately a quarter of respondents, reported an overestimated age (25.5%) and a similar number reported their real age (24.5%). One in ten students had a phone number (9.9%) and information about their school (8.8%) on their profile. Less than 5% of respondents also published their address (4.1%). 17.2% of students did not provide any of the above personal information on their most frequently used profile, which was . At the same time, the author states that 10.5% of respondents had experience with the misuse of personal data.

PREVALENCE OF XENOPHOBIA AND RACISM AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Racism and xenophobia are significant social problems that are not absent from the school environment. While public discussion of these phenomena often focuses on the adult population, education in tolerance and respect begins in childhood. School is the place where initial attitudes towards diversity are formed, and it is therefore important to pay attention to the extent to which prejudices, racial stereotypes, and xenophobic views are present among children and young people.

Research conducted in Slovakia and abroad shows that elementary school students are not immune to these phenomena. Although younger school-age children often do not yet understand the complexity of concepts such as "race" or "ethnicity," manifestations of intolerance and discrimination can already be seen in the first grade of elementary school. They most often affect children from the Roma community, migrants, or children of other faiths.

Research published in a report by *the Slovak National Center for Human Rights (2018)*, which was conducted among children and young people aged 11 to 19 (N=1333) throughout Slovakia, it appears that 33.18% of respondents do not feel safe around people of other racial, religious, cultural, and ethnic groups, which may indicate certain manifestations of xenophobia among respondents. The opinion of young people on the statement: "*All people, regardless of culture, ethnicity, race, nationality, and religion, are equal.*" 8.5% of respondents disagreed with the statement. Of all respondents who gave negative answers, 62.8% were men. In terms of age, young people aged 16 and 17 most often disagreed with the statement. Respondents identified Roma (8.7%) as the most

problematic group in society. The majority of respondents, more precisely 51.40%, have a negative perception of Roma.

In her research report, Pétiová (2020) analyzed the attitudes and opinions of elementary and secondary school students on extremism and racism, comparing research conducted in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019. The author states that "Since 2016, there has been an increase in the number of boys and girls who have seen frequent manifestations of extremism at school (2016 – 5.6%; 2019 – 8.4%). Occasionally, fewer respondents experienced this in 2019 (48.4%) than in 2016 (60.4%). There has been a significant decrease in the number of boys and girls who have not had these negative experiences at all (2016 – 34%; 2019 – 5%)."

Hate speech, discrimination, and violent extremism in the online space are also addressed in the *EU Kids Online Slovakia* research report. Israel et al. (2022) state that "... among children and young people aged 11-17, 29% of respondents said that they had encountered hateful or humiliating messages or comments directed at individuals or groups of people on the internet in the last year. Boys are more likely to have had this experience than girls." At the same time, 9.7% of respondents had searched for websites or articles on the internet in the last 12 months that spread hateful, humiliating messages or comments against people or certain groups (migrants, Muslims, Roma, Jews, etc.). This was more common among boys (12%) than girls (6.3%), most often among those aged 11-12 (11.8%).

Manifestations of racism and xenophobia also occur in primary and secondary schools, although they are often underestimated or not directly labeled as such. We therefore consider it essential to pay attention to this issue in the context of preventive and educational work, primarily through the long-term integration of the themes of equality, empathy, and diversity into the preventive program of schools and everyday teaching. Only in this way can a school environment be created in which every child, regardless of their origin, feels safe and accepted.

CHILD AT RISK: FROM ACTIVITY TO UNDERSTANDING

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Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková et al.

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