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***Looking for Orientation. On the relevance of crises as a
social seismograph***

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Expert opinion on the 26. German Prevention Congress 2021

1. Introduction

This year's German Prevention Congress will be held at a time which is increasingly shaping the discourse in society. Especially conspiracy myths and fake news are currently being revealed as powerful and can be seen in the context of political events such as Brexit and the run on the Capitol in the USA, for example. Almost inflationarily labelled with the word crisis, media reports at times of the pandemic is characterised by events such as "Querdenker" gatherings and violations of the Corona Protection Ordinances as well as attitudes and positions related to prejudice, anti-Semitism, racism, advocacy of authoritarian structures and scepticism regarding science. There is a dispute about the question who has the right to interpret something and a common discourse hangs if there is disagreement about the basis of knowledge. Even if some of the phenomena mentioned do not necessarily apply to the majority of society, they are no less relevant because the actions of the supposedly few can also have serious effects on society and individuals. This is even more true in the current situation. For example, an analysis of 153 regions in 19 European countries shows that a high mortality rate in connection with the coronavirus in the first wave of the pandemic was particularly prevalent where a low level of social trust was measured and there was a strong polarisation of the population with regard to trust in politics (Charron, Lapuente & Rodriguez-Pose, 2020).

This year's German Prevention Congress has integrated the concept of orientation into its headline theme and it seems that a kind of disorientation can be identified not only in parts of society,

but also on the meta-level of the observation of social development. To put it more bluntly, questions such as „What is actually happening here?“ and „How is this to be understood?“ arise in connection with the challenge of reacting appropriately or dealing with complex issues such as scepticism towards the state and science as well as deprecating attitudes. However, different problem areas themselves can also be interpreted as signs of disorientation, which currently seem conspicuous and represent different forms of manifestations of social insecurity and fear as well as mistrust in the government. Furthermore, also exclusionary and racist attitudes begin to show. Simplifying explanations, confusing conspiracy myths and stereotypes typically draw a clear line between good and evil, paint a clear image of the enemy and thus identify an originator of problems in complex social or sometimes merely coincidental contexts. Unlike scientific arguments and approaches, which point to gaps in knowledge and possibly overturn previous assumptions with further findings, conspiracy narratives and fake news leave no room for doubt and can in this way lead to a search or a desire for orientation, security and control.

Prevention, on the other hand, is characterised by a basic scientific understanding. Proactive behaviour, which shapes the future in the present, is carried out in the sense of prevention on basis of scientific findings about cause-effect relationships and knowledge about the effectiveness of certain intervention measures. Prevention is quite creative in this respect, since the aim is to change things and to find new ways. Nevertheless, good prevention work is also characterised by evaluation, the scientific examination of the mode of action. It is questionable how, in the current situation, science and especially prevention succeed in guiding action and providing orientation.

Against this background, the present report for the 26th German Prevention Congress addresses selected problem areas that are currently relevant from a sociological and criminological perspective, such as fake news, conspiracy stories and scepticism regarding science, prejudice and right-wing extremism, as well as self-armament. Some of the phenomena mentioned, such as conspiracy myths, are currently also gaining popularity by using corona narratives. Therefore, it seems inevitable to analyse this also in the context of the pandemic-related crisis. In this context, it will be discussed to what extent the corona crisis causes the phenomena

mentioned or whether the crisis rather makes established structures and attitudes more visible. Subsequently, possibilities for finding solutions and prevention will be presented. In this context, in particular, we like to highlight the importance of education.

2. Problem Areas

In the following, selected problem areas are presented in detail, where a kind of disorientation or search for orientation is being expressed and which, due to their extent, their increase or their effectiveness, are relevant today, also with regard to prevention.

2.1 Fake News

The discussion on how to deal with false reports, better known as fake news, has been intensified in recent years, even though the phenomenon itself is by no means new. Fake news has presumably existed as long as there has been news. According to history, there are at least numerous examples dating back to antiquity (Jaster & Lanius, 2019; Schmid, Stock & Walter, 2018; Zywiets, 2018). The term fake news refers to news that is, firstly, false or misleading and where, secondly, the author of the news shows a lack of „truthfulness“ (Jaster & Lanius, 2019, p. 26 ff.). This means that the author of the news is either deliberately telling the untruth, in other words that the author is lying, or it is not relevant for him/her whether the news is true, but rather the effect or the achievement of certain goals is important to him/her. Fake news is not the same as conspiracy narratives, as these are mainly spread by people who actually believe them or consider them to be true. However, fake news and conspiracy stories often work together because fake news can reinforce conspiracy myths and people who have a conspiracy mentality are in turn more susceptible to receiving fake news (ibid., p. 58 ff.).

The distribution of fake news as an instrument for one's own, mostly (power) political purposes is by no means new. But what is new is the dimension of fake news, i.e. its outreach and effectiveness. It is connected to digitalisation, the emergence of social media and the associated „democratisation of media news dissemination“ (ibid., p. 48). While news used to be spread mainly by journalists, social media now enable anyone who can use the associated applications to spread new information in form of

news and opinions. On the one hand, this can be understood as a process of democratisation and expansion of participation opportunities. On the other hand, this can also give less well-founded contributions and the aforementioned fake news a very wide reach. Furthermore, technical innovations should be mentioned in this context, which enable phenomena such as Deep Fake and Social Bots, through which, among other things, the possibilities for spreading attitudes and fake news are also increased.

For traditional journalism, which is financed on basis of broadcasting of news, the effects of social media are farreaching and represent an additional competitive pressure. Increasingly, both in relation to social media and traditional media, advertising revenues are used for financing, which in turn are related to how much attention certain news receives. In today's media landscape, the ability to generate attention, for example in the form of high click rates, is becoming the decisive criterion. This „attention economy“ (ibid., p. 50) in turn reinforces the distribution of news which is outstanding because of its conciseness and sensationalism. To sum up: Fake news can be used to make money.

This development is accompanied by scepticism with regard to established journalistic media, which is popularly expressed in the word „lying press“. According to the long-term study Media Trust, the proportion of those who said they distrusted established media increased by 28% in 2019 (Schultz et al., 2020). This shows a polarisation in attitudes, insofar as the proportion of those who express trust in the media remains constant at 43%, while the proportion of those who are undecided (answer category partly/partly) is decreasing. A change in attitude towards established media does not only manifest itself in an increase of mistrust, but also in an increase of violent attacks. In response to a question from the German Green Party (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), the Federal Government announced that in 2020, 252 criminal offences were recorded nationwide that were directed against the media as such („BT 19/25940“). These included 22 cases of bodily injury, 33 cases of damage to property, 29 cases of threats and coercion, 26 cases of incitement of the people and four cases of arson. These are twice as many attacks as in the previous year. Most of the offences were committed by right-wing motivated perpetrators.

Furthermore, the change in reporting and media comes along with a new possibility of news reception, in which predominantly content can be obtained that is in line with individual views. The term echo chamber refers to the withdrawal into an exchange with like-minded people and the isolation from reports that do not fit into one's own world view (Jaster & Lanius, 2019, p. 69 ff.). Social science research shows, however, that it is precisely the interaction and exchange of different viewpoints and backgrounds that lead to more differentiated views and a more tolerant attitude (Mutz, 2006). Staying exclusively in a very homogeneous group, on the other hand, can lead to group polarisation, where people reinforce each other's views, which in turn has the potential to promote radicalisation processes (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969). Studies have shown that discussions within homogeneous groups can lead to group members adopting more extreme positions after the discussions than before (ibid.). In this context, there are effects that have been known for a long time from small group research: The more people interact with each other in a social group, the more likely homogenisation effects occur, i.e. people tend to resemble each other in their actions and attitudes (Homans, 1960). One of the reasons for this can be among others the emergence of conformity pressure, which was demonstrated in the well-known Asch experiment: Individual group members are influenced by the majority view of the group and adopt it, partly because they trust the group more than their own views and partly because expressing an opinion that differs from the group is perceived as unpleasant (Sader, 2008, p. 161 ff.).

Influences of the social group such as the pressure to comply as just outlined are, however, only one of many distorting factors of the human psyche that affect the perception and assessment of information (Jaster & Lanius, 2019, p. 48 ff.; Zywiets, 2019, p. 108 f.). These are relevant in the context of fake news as they offer an answer to the question why false reports are spread and why they find followers. As a result of distorting factors of perception, one and the same piece of information can be perceived and evaluated very differently by different people. Here, for example, the so-called confirmation error is decisive, which leads to the fact that a piece of information or news is more likely to be regarded as true if it corresponds to the existing attitudes. However, if the information is contrary to one's own views, this leads to cognitive dissonance. Mistrusting or at least doubting new information that

does not fit into one's own world view is one way of reducing cognitive dissonance. Furthermore, the more often a piece of information has been heard before and is therefore perceived as familiar, the more likely it is considered to be true, especially if it is shared by people we like.

Against the background of the relevance of social media and phenomena such as the aforementioned echo chambers and the like, a new breeding ground for radicalisation processes has been created. This is because on the internet people can join groups that they would not typically meet in their analogue lives. In particular, conspiracy narratives, such as in the context of the so-called Reichsbürger, often manage to form a group in the first place via social media and the internet. In their everyday analogue lives, on the other hand, those who doubt Germany's constitutional status, for example, rarely meet with approval.

In recent years, fake news has been discussed primarily with a political background, especially those that led to farreaching consequences. The discussion about Brexit and the referendum for example was shaped in this context by fake news regarding the supposed financial disadvantages of Great Britain due to EU membership. Likewise, the political style and popularity of Donald Trump is discussed in the context of fake news, partly because he himself has used this term as a „fighting vocabulary“ (Zywietz, 2018, p. 99) against critical journalism. Since the beginning of the Corona pandemic at the latest, however, fake news seems to have taken on just as much criminological significance.

Here, on the one hand, fake news circulates that is less characterised by a (power-)political motivation, but is spread explicitly to commit crime. These are, for example, fake news that use a Corona narrative regarding treatment and protection to commit fraud crimes (fake shops, fake respirators and disinfectants to phishing emails, i.e. the attempt to steal passwords by means of email contact). That means, that fake news has thus become a *modus operandi*, a way of committing crimes.

On the other hand, politically motivated fake news also has an impact on the development of crime. Spread fake news mobilised (groups of) people to the point of acts of vigilante justice against alleged perpetrators in numerous incidents. Furthermore, during the Corona pandemic, fake news with a political background also

lead to people seeing oppression and inadmissible encroachments on fundamental rights in the Corona countermeasures, which in turn, among other things, contributed to the disregard of Corona protection ordinances. Prominent examples of this are certainly the demonstrations in numerous large cities in Germany, where thousands of people gathered without wearing face masks and keeping a sufficient distance. These are mostly administrative offences and thus an area that is typically rather neglected by criminology and prevention. In the context outlined, however, administrative offences become criminologically relevant (and interesting). For in the commission of administrative offences in connection with the Corona protection measures, a mixture of conspiracy assumptions, fake news and fear is expressed, which can be understood as a problem of democracy and the relationship between citizens and the state, and which expresses itself in deviant behaviour. That these demonstrations are not only about a different assessment of how to fight the pandemic becomes clear when looking at the individual groups of actors who, among other things, represent right-wing extremist and anti-Semitic attitudes as well as conspiracy myths.

2.2 Conspiracy myths and scepticism about science

Karl Popper described a conspiracy narrative as an assumption that „(...) asserts that the explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery that people or groups were interested in the occurrence of that event and that they conspired to bring it about.“ (Popper, 2003 [1958], p. 111 f.). Accordingly, a conspiracy myth explains a certain event as intentionally brought about, with interests kept secret. In this context, Popper criticises the idea that all social facts are a result of the intentions of influential persons (ibid.). Michael Butter, referring to political scientist Michael Barkun, also identifies this as one of three characteristics of a conspiracy narrative: „1.) Nothing happens by chance. 2.) Nothing is what it seems. 3.) Everything is connected with each other“ (Butter, 2018, p. 22).

Conspiracy myths usually depict threat scenarios, but can theoretically refer to different political attitudes. However, empirical findings indicate that especially men with politically extreme or anti-democratic attitudes adhere to conspiracy narratives (Butter, 2018; Rees & Lamberty, 2019, p. 213 et seq.). Furthermore, the

results of studies suggest that people who do not think analytically and who tend to think intuitively are more susceptible to conspiracy myths (Swami et al., 2014), a finding that goes hand in hand with scepticism about science as a characteristic of conspiracy mentalities (Rees & Lamberty, 2019, p. 212 et seq). Conspiracy narratives are further closely linked to right-wing extremist, anti-semitic and other inhuman attitudes (ibid., p. 209 et seq.).

The Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG) at the University of Bielefeld conducted a quantitative online survey over a period of two weeks at the beginning of the so-called first lockdown in Germany on 23 March 2020 (IKG, 2020). This was a non-representative survey of N=3,111 people on their perception of the Corona pandemic. On the one hand, the initial results of the survey show that there was a high level of concern for other people among the respondents, as well as a high level of willingness to help. The protective measures regarding restrictions on social contacts, public life as well as freedom of travel were considered sensible by the majority. Against the background that fighting the pandemic has directly led to considerable changes in almost all areas of everyday and social life, a high level of understanding among the population for the politically decided measures, willingness to help and empathy seem to be a positive starting situation.

On the other hand, the survey also revealed that almost a quarter (24%) agreed with the statement that „the media and politics deliberately conceal certain information“ (IKG, 2020, p. 12), and another 24% agreed „partly true“. For almost half of the study participants, this indicates at least a latent distrust of established media and the state or government. 8% agreed with the statement that there are „secret organisations that have great influence on political decisions during the Corona crisis“ (ibid.), while 13% agreed with this statement to some extent. 10% said that they trusted their „feelings about dealing with Corona more than so-called experts“ (ibid.). Considering that in the context of pandemic control the experts are mainly scientists, the agreement with the statement can be interpreted as an expression of scepticism towards science. But ultimately, a considerably larger proportion of respondents (in some cases more than 50%) agreed with political attitudes that advocate adherence to the recommendations of experts and support the punishment of rulebreaking in this context.

Over the two-week survey period, however, the last mentioned attitude decreased, while agreement with the more conspiracy-ideological statements increased. The participants of the study by the IKG of the University of Bielefeld were interviewed again at a later date. The results, which are not yet available, will show to what extent this change within the two-week period has been indicative for a general trend. However, the IKG has also already surveyed the prevalence of conspiracy mentalities in the 2018/2019 survey as part of the so-called "Mitte Studie" (Mid Studies) (Rees & Lamberty, 2019). Recorded using a five-point scale, almost half (45.7%) agreed that there were „secret organisations that have a great influence on political decisions" (ibid., p. 214), with a further 19.7% answering with a bit of both. 32.7% said that „politicians and other leaders are just puppets of the powers behind them" (ibid.), with 26.3% agreeing partly. A quarter (24.2%) said „media and politics are in cahoots" (ibid.; 24.9% a bit of both). Half of the respondents (50.4%; 29.3% a bit of both; ibid.) agreed that they were sceptical about science in the form of the item „I trust my feelings more than so-called experts", whereas fewer 11.6%; (13.4% a bit of both) agreed with the assumption that „studies that prove climate change are mostly faked" (ibid.).

Decker and Brähler (2020) also investigated spreading conspiracy myths during the Corona pandemic in the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study. This is a representative Germany-wide survey that has been conducted since 2002. The focus of the study is the survey of right-wing extremist attitudes. Even though, the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study is not a Corona-specific survey, the survey period of the current study from May to June 2020 captures political attitudes at the time of the Corona pandemic in Germany, especially in the areas of right-wing extremism and conspiracy narratives. Based on the previous surveys, it is also possible to make statements about changes in attitudes. Within the framework of the current study, N=2,503 people aged 14 and over in Germany participated in the 2020 survey.

This revealed a high prevalence of specific conspiracy myths in connection with Corona (Schließler, Hellweg & Decker, 2020). On a five-point scale, 47.8% strongly agreed with the item „The background to the Corona pandemic will never come to light" (ibid., p. 301) (response categories 4 and 5), while a further 14.6% chose the medium response category. The statement „The Corona

crisis was blown up so big in order that a few could profit from it" was strongly agreed with by 33%, with a further 15.4% citing the middle answer option. A linear regression analysis was also used to examine which factors exert an (independent) influence on belief in the two Corona-related conspiracy myths (*ibid.*, p. 302 et seq.). The result showed, on the one hand, in an expected manner, that a basic conspiracy mentality exerts an influence on agreement. Furthermore, an attitude in the sense of conventionalism (existing structures and behaviour should not be questioned) and authoritarian aggression (unconditional enforcement of social norms) also have an independent effect. Moreover, the view that the political system lacks legitimacy increased the likelihood of agreeing with the aforementioned corona-related conspiracy myths. With regard to socio-demographic characteristics, age (young) and gender (male) were influential factors.

Within the framework of the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study, the phenomenon of the conspiracy narrative has been surveyed since 2012 (Schließler, Hellweg & Decker, 2020). It becomes clear that from 2012 to 2018, approval behaviour towards conspiracy myths was on the decline, but since then it has been rising until the last survey year 2020 (*ibid.*, p. 204).

Scientists at the University of Heidelberg conducted a representative population survey in the summer (30 June-7 July, N=1,351) and at the end of the year (30 November-11 December, N=1,099) 2020 (Kirsch, Kube & Zohlhöfer, 2020). Among the findings was that while over half (55%) of respondents were satisfied with the pandemic containment measures, this proportion was lower than at the first survey point (68.3%). The willingness to follow the rules related to the Corona protection measures remained high at 83%. The willingness to get vaccinated, on the other hand, dropped to 46% between the two survey dates. Here, the findings suggest that age (higher age), satisfaction with the Corona policy and trust in science are associated with a higher willingness to get vaccinated. At the end of 2020, support for conspiracy myths has increased from 11% to 17%.

In contrast, the Hans Böckler Foundation (2020) came to a different conclusion in an online survey of N=6,100 people in November 2020. Participants in the survey had already made statements in April and June. Concerns about their own health and social

cohesion increased compared to the previous survey date. In November, on the other hand, almost one third fewer than in June agreed with the corona-related conspiracy myth that one could imagine „that the pandemic is being used by elites to advance the interests of the rich and powerful“ (ibid.). The fact that a decline is noted here in contrast to the other studies mentioned could result, among other things, from different item formulations or the sample composition (online access panel).

Overall, there is a high prevalence and an increase in conspiracy narratives and a greater visibility of scepticism about science. In this context, the internet contributes to a strengthening of dissemination, especially in the context of the aforementioned echo chambers. The internet, however, also provides other functions. For example, Butter notes that the internet is likewise a way of gathering information to refute such narratives (2018, p. 179 et seq.).

2.3 Prejudice and right-wing extremism

Findings on the extent and development of right-wing extremist attitudes during the Corona pandemic include the aforementioned Leipzig Authoritarianism Study (Decker & Brähler, 2020). Right-wing extremist attitudes are measured in six dimensions: „Support for a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship, anti-Semitism, social Darwinism and trivialisation of National Socialism (elements of a neo-NS ideology) as well as chauvinism and xenophobia (elements of ethnocentrism)“ (Decker et al., 2020, p. 34). Each dimension was surveyed by means of three extreme-right statements on a five-point scale.

All in all, there are high agreement values for the individual statements, which will be briefly described on the basis of four of the total of twelve items. „What Germany needs now is a single strong party that embodies the national community as a whole“, with a further 21.2% choosing the middle answer category here (partly agree, partly disagree) (ibid., p. 37). 10.2% of respondents agreed mostly or fully with the item „Even today, the influence of the Jews is too great“, with a further 24.6% agreeing partly to this (ibid., p. 39). With regard to the item „Germans are actually superior to other peoples by nature“, 11.0% chose the two strongest answer categories, and a further 21.4% showed latent agreement (middle answer category; ibid., p. 40). More than a quarter of

the respondents (28.4%) agreed with the item „Foreigners only come here to take advantage of our welfare state“, 31.0% partly agreed. Clear differences were evident in the response behaviour with regard to East and West Germany, since approving attitudes were higher in the new federal states than in the old ones.

In relation to the development of the six dimensions of right-wing extremist attitudes examined, an increase in support for a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship, anti-Semitism (although only very mild), the trivialisation of National Socialism and chauvinist attitudes is found in eastern Germany, which is not evident in relation to Germany as a whole (ibid., p. 44 et seq.). Furthermore, social Darwinist attitudes and xenophobia are decreasing in both West and East Germany. Closed right-wing extremist attitudes, in the sense of high agreement values for the six dimensions, are found to correlate with low education and male gender. Overall, the authors of the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study have noted a downward trend in right-wing extremist attitudes in Germany since 2002 (ibid., p. 70 et seq). Nevertheless, they see increases at individual points in time, especially in connection with (perceived) crises. Furthermore, despite a decline, a polarisation and radicalisation of right-wing extremist attitudes is noted. Equally worrying for the research team are the overall high approval ratings of attitudes related to ethnocentrism and inequality over the years.

Similarly, the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency (2020a) noted an increase in counselling requests due to racial discrimination in relation to the reporting year 2019. Compared to 2015, numbers have more than doubled (ibid., p. 12). A total of 1,176 enquiries were registered, 33% of which concerned experiences of discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin (ibid., p. 12; 44). Racism manifests itself on the one hand in violent attacks, homicides and manslaughter, but on the other hand also in a variety of experiences of discrimination in everyday life. This is also indicated by the results of a representative survey conducted in 2019 on behalf of the Anti-Discrimination Agency (ibid., p. 13 et seq). Among the respondents with a migration background who had looked for a flat within the last ten years, one third stated that they had experienced discrimination. In relation to all participants in the study, 41% stated that „they would have very great or great concerns about renting a flat to an immigrant“ (ibid.). Furthermore, a first report on the activities of the Federal

Anti-Discrimination Agency at the time of the Corona pandemic is available (2020b). Up to 20.4.2020, 100 counselling cases were recorded that involved experiences of discrimination in connection with the Corona virus. Approximately half (58 cases) of these are discrimination cases based on ethnic origin. In particular, people attributed with an Asian origin experience hostility and exclusion. Racist resentment in the context of Corona can also be found in media reports – the sixth issue in 2020 of “Der Spiegel” is just one of many possible examples.

Furthermore, data from state authorities point to radicalisation tendencies and the increase of democracy-deficient and right-wing extremist attitudes. For example, an exchange between the federal and state constitutional protectors in December 2020 indicates an increase in right-wing extremists by 1,200 to 33,300 supporters. The scene of the so-called Reichsbürger (citizens of the German Reich) increased by 1,000 to 20,000, 1,000 of whom were also classified as right-wing extremists. Furthermore, right-wing extremist groups have shown an increased willingness to use violence. An answer of the federal government to a small question of the parliamentary group “Die Linke” shows that in October 2020 a total of 1,139 criminal offences classified as „politically motivated crime-right“ were registered, 53 of which were violent offences (BT-19/25538).

Attitudes and mindsets are guiding action and are therefore not just a matter of opinion. The fact that prejudices and right-wing extremism are also based on crimes is also evident in relation to crime. With regard to the development of crime in Germany in recent years, two phenomena are particularly striking: On the one hand, the increase in right-wing motivated crimes and, on the other hand, an increasing tendency to arm oneself (see 2.4). It should be emphasised at this point that these developments are taking place against the background of a crime rate that has been falling for years, especially with regard to violent and street crime, and are thus contrary to the general development of officially registered crimes. In the case of right-wing motivated offences, on the other hand, an increase can be recorded over the past ten years, from 2018 to 2019 they rose by 9.4% (Federal Ministry of the Interior and Home Affairs & Federal Criminal Police Office, 2020, p. 2 f.). 63.8 % of these cases involved propaganda offences, such as the use of symbols of unconstitutional organisations.

Right-wing motivated violent crimes, on the other hand, decreased by 14.7 % compared to the previous year, but are still higher than in 2012 with a number of cases of 986 (*ibid.*, p.4).

2.4 Self-arming

Even though self-arming has not yet been surveyed in relation to the period of the Corona pandemic, this phenomenon is nevertheless part of a current development, which, in terms of possible motivation and cause structures, shows references to the previous problem areas. In particular, this could express a deficient relationship between citizens and the state (more details below). Since the introduction of the small firearms licence in 2003, the number of applications has been rising steadily: Nationwide, the National Weapons Register registered 670,567 holders of a licence for small firearms as of the last cut-off date on 31.01.2020 (BT 19/17961). This means that the numbers have more than doubled within five years.

Furthermore, data of the reported delinquencies reported to the police show that weapons are increasingly used in connection with the commission of crimes. Thus, according to the Police Crime Statistics (PKS) 2019, the number of offences in which a firearm was threatened increased compared to the previous year (PKS 2018: 3.819, PKS 2019: 4,512) or shot (PKS 2018: 4,524, PKS 2019: 4,639) was committed (German Federal Office of Criminal Investigation (Bundeskriminalamt), 2020a, p. 8). Compared to the previous year, this is an overall increase of 9.7%, with cases in which a firearm was threatened even increasing by 18.1% (Bundeskriminalamt, 2020b). The use of so-called SRS weapons, which are addressed by the small firearms licence, is not recorded separately by the PKS. However, some federal states record the use of knives in connection with criminal offences. Due to different recording guidelines, among other things, it is difficult to make a precise statement on this; however, there are indications of an increase in knife use for some federal states.

Further findings are available in the form of studies about the number of unreported cases. A representative survey of N=1,012 of the German-speaking population (aged 18 and over), conducted in early 2017 by infratest dimap on behalf of NDR, found that 11% carry irritant gas or a weapon to defend themselves (infra-

test dimap, n.d.). Since this was a panel survey, it was also possible to record changes in behaviour. In this context, 63% stated that they do this more often than two years ago.

The State Criminal Police Office of Lower Saxony (LKA Niedersachsen) has been conducting representative surveys on non-registered crimes in Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein since 2013 and the State Criminal Police Office of Schleswig-Holstein since 2015, using the same questionnaire (Dreißigacker, 2016; Dreißigacker, 2017, LKA Niedersachsen, 2013; LKA Niedersachsen, 2016; LKA Niedersachsen 2018). The current study found that 5.8% of respondents in Lower Saxony (LKA Lower Saxony, 2018, p. 38) and 6.6% of respondents in Schleswig-Holstein (Dreißigacker, 2017, p. 32) carry irritant gas, a knife or another weapon to defend themselves. Two years earlier, by contrast, only 3.7% in Lower Saxony (LKA Lower Saxony, 2016, p. 26) and 4.4% in Schleswig-Holstein (Dreißigacker, 2016, p. 22) stated this. Women did this more often than men and older persons less often than younger ones.

The finding of the age effect is also evident in even younger respondents. In a longitudinal survey of ninth graders conducted by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony (Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen e.V.), for example. (KFN) in Lower Saxony in 2013, 2015 and 2017, they were asked how often weapons such as knives, brass knuckles, batons or tear gas or pepper spray were carried to school or during leisure time (Bergmann et al., 2019, p. 60.). In 2017, 7.8% of students reported carrying at least one of the first three weapons at school and 21.8% during their leisure time (ibid., p. 61). These values are significantly higher than in the previous survey in 2015 (school: 5.9%, leisure time: 18,7%). There were equally strong increases with regard to tear gas or pepper spray: In 2017, 7.8% of respondents reported that they carried those things to school (2013: 5.9%) and 10.4% (2015: 5.9%) affirmed this for leisure time (ibid.).

The increase in armament is also perceived as a problem within police crime prevention, so that the first prevention projects addressing this problem area are already available.

2.5 Interim conclusion: Crisis as seismograph

According to Émile Durkheim, a crisis represents a „disturbance of the collective order“ (Durkheim, 1983 [1897], p. 278). Accordingly, crises are characterised by the fact that the social order in the sense of the general norm structure no longer exists or exists only inadequately. When the binding force of norms breaks down, it is unclear what the actions and aspirations of the individual should be guided by, a status that Durkheim also refers to as anomie. It is questionable, however, to what extent the lack of orientation associated with the crisis causes the empirical observations outlined above or whether these were not already socially anchored before the crisis. Problematic phenomena and developments with regard to the spread of fake news, prejudiced and right-wing extremist attitudes, scepticism about science and conspiracy myths as well as practices that point to a deficient relationship between citizens and the state have not only been empirically observed since Corona.

While conspiracy myths, especially those using a Corona narrative, are currently experiencing visibility and attention, conspiracy mentalities are not a new phenomenon but, as already mentioned above, widespread in society (Rees & Lamberty, 2019; Schließler, Hellwig & Decker, 2020). Furthermore, the Mid Studies from 2002 to the 2018/2019 survey point to a „stabilisation of anti-human attitudes in the German population“ (Zick, Berghan & Mokros, 2019, p. 79). Although the approval ratings for most forms of group-based misanthropy stagnated from the last to the previous survey year 2016, they are still at a high level in some cases. For example, more than half of the Germans surveyed (54.1%) held derogatory attitudes towards asylum seekers (ibid., p. 80). Based on the Mid Studies, the authors note an increasing polarisation of attitudes and attitudes in society, which intensifies especially in crisis contexts such as the financial crisis (Zick, Küpper & Berghan, 2019, p. 17 f.). In particular, they observe an increasing willingness and approval of violence within the middle of society and a „(...) stable antisemitism, a high level of misanthropic opinions towards the long-term unemployed, asylum seekers, Sinti and Roma“ (ibid.). Furthermore, they indicate a tendency of „deconsolidation of democracy“ (ibid., p. 18).

The new dimension of the effectiveness of fake news is also not a phenomenon that only emerged in connection with the pandemic (see above). Linking to the previously mentioned attitudes,

Zywietz wonders whether fake news is „(...) less a cause than a result and expression of the worldview, i.e. whether it is produced, sought and accepted on the basis of already existing attitudes and attitudes“ (emphasis in original; 2018, p. 108 f.).

However, the pandemic as a crisis situation may represent a social caesura and be associated with a multitude of difficulties and challenges that many people have not faced before. Nevertheless, the reactions to it and the handling of emerging concerns and uncertainties are based on existing patterns of attitude and action. This also explains why individuals and societal systems differ in their attitudes and in the way they deal with the pandemic. In this respect, the crisis situation itself cannot offer a causal explanation for the problem areas selected here. Rather, its effect unfolds like an amplifier of what already exists: In the crisis, existing social inequalities and injustices (gender, education and equal opportunities, discrimination practices, security of employment, etc.) as well as specific deficits (degree of digitalisation in the education system) become clearly apparent. Existing world views, attitudes and positions represent the perspective from which the crisis situation is also viewed and evaluated and which thus also represents a basis for action with regard to individual reactions and conclusions. In this respect, crises can be seen as a kind of seismograph of social developments that clarify structural features and, not least, show how crisis-resistant a system or a society is. At present, the problematic structures and attitudes just explained are emerging. In order to understand these in more detail, it seems useful to embed them in theory.

3. Theoretical References

A theoretical framework for the problem areas outlined above creates a necessary starting point for the development of prevention measures that address the specific causes. However, the problem areas addressed in this report are already highly complex in themselves and cover a wide range of social issues. For this reason alone, an attempt to draw on a single theoretical explanation must fail. On the other hand, the problem areas outlined have not been selected incoherently. Rather, what they have in common, as indicated in the title of this expert opinion, is that they can be understood as expressions of a search for orientation, the need to understand the world and (re)gain control. For example, a conspiracy ideology can give a sense of security and control, as

the „machinations“ are penetrated and the „enemy“ is identified (Schließler, Hellweg & Decker, 2020, p. 287). Among other things, conspiracy myths are characterised by a strong dualism of good and evil and often have right-wing extremist, racist and antisemitic references. The „advantages“ of simplification and clear categorisation of good and bad are also found in prejudices and stereotypes. Furthermore, one’s own upvaluation is a well-known motive for devaluations through prejudiced and racist attitudes and practices.

According to Compensatory Control Theory, the belief in conspiracy narratives, an overpowering force and the like represents a compensation for one’s own experiences of loss of control (see Schließler, Hellweg & Decker, 2020, p. 299). The perception of insecurity and loss of control also becomes a central criterion in the so-called generalisation thesis. So far, the generalisation thesis has been discussed and examined primarily to explain fear of crime (see, among others, Blinkert, 2010; Hirtenlehner, 2006; Scherr, 2014; Sessar, 2010). The basic assumption of this theory is that based on their own perceived (social) fears people believe that a certain general state of society is real. For example, they generalise their own fears of relegation and insecurities to other areas of society. There is also empirical evidence of this. In his analysis, Hirtenlehner (2006) comes to the conclusion that there are direct correlations between the four sub-dimensions fear of crime (concern about criminal offences), social fears (concern about economic or ecological risk scenarios, for example economic crises, environmental destruction), fears about life (for example the influx of foreigners, lower standard of living) and signs of social disorganisation (dirt, decay of buildings). The fears are interrelated and thus influence each other. Blinkert (2010) also finds confirmation for the generalisation thesis. Based on data from the European Social Survey, he compared European countries with each other. The effectiveness of the state’s monopoly on the use of force and the degree of social welfare as well as distributive justice were found to be factors influencing the fear of crime. From this, Blinkert concludes that fear of crime is an expression of a lack of trust in the „immediate social environment“ and in the „political system“ (2010, p. 122).

This generalisation thesis could also be applied to other „social facts“ such as self-armament. Fears of decline and uncertainties about further (also international) social development dynamics

could contribute to overestimating one's own threat situation, which in turn, against the background of a lack of confidence in the state's ability to act, could lead to the need to arm oneself and might therefore represent a form of conative fear of crime, i.e. behaviour to avoid becoming a victim.

The sociological debate on domestic security discourses in Western industrialised nations, which has existed since the 1980s, can also be seen in this context (see, among others, Scherr, 2014). Here, an increase in social (descent) fears, triggered by economic crises, unemployment and a rapid change in the world of work, is seen as the cause of an intensified domestic political discourse about more security and authoritarian tendencies. In this context, anti-terrorist measures, stronger state control and surveillance possibilities function as a kind of compensation for feelings of the uncontrollable or one's own lack of self-efficacy and express a need for more security, permanence and stability. Garland (2001) observes a „culture of control“ in relation to legislative developments and public debates on social order in the USA and Great Britain, which is based on a transformation. According to this, in the 1960s the „(...) underlying problem of order was not a Durkheimian problem of solidarity (...) but a Hobbesian problem of order (...)“ (Garland, 2001, p. 196), which resulted in a call for a strong, assertive state with „zero tolerance“ and similar measures. In the 1990s, on the other hand, the (supposed) realisation prevailed that the state or the criminal justice system had „failed“ (Garland, 2001, p. 205), that crime and social disorder could not be contained and controlled by the state - pointedly expressed in the popular saying „nothing works“. This view was closely linked to a questioning of the sovereignty and control capacity of the state. As a result, a system developed in Great Britain and the USA that relies on responsabilisation (the citizens' own responsibility to protect themselves) and privatisation (for example, through the increased use of private security services) in dealing with crime control.

In this context of the failing state, whose welfare state measures as well as the ideals of steady economic growth and full employment failed, which does not live up to the role of the Leviathan, the increase in self-armament as well as approval of authoritarian forms of state could also be understood. To remain in the image of the Hobbesian understanding of the state: Citizens surrender their power to a central authority solely in order to achieve a state

of peace and security. If the competence of the original state task of providing order and security is doubted, a logical conclusion is to provide or have to provide for one's own security and not to hand over violence.

Overall, the problem areas addressed in this report can be understood against the background of the theoretical references outlined as manifestations of insecurity, perceptions of loss of control and fear of social decline or the feeling of being left behind. These are closely linked to (perceived) social situations in society. For example, social and economic deprivation can be an explanation for pejorative and exclusionary attitudes and practices (Zick, Küpper & Berghan, 2019, p. 29). Furthermore, with regard to the keyword of loss of control, it should be pointed out that this does not only refer to individual lifestyles, but also to the perception of self-efficacy with regard to socio-political decisions and design, i.e. the extent to which political influence can be exercised (ibid., p. 31). Ultimately, against a theoretical background, it can be assumed that the cause structure of the problems mentioned is multi-layered and cannot be sought solely at the level of the characteristics. This should also be taken into account in connection with ways out and prevention.

4. Ways out and prevention

Strengthening scientifically based anticipatory action, prevention, as an orientation is associated with various challenges. These include the question of the right way to deal with or react to false reports, scepticism about science and exclusionary attitudes.

4.1 Prevention through (social) politics

The areas of phenomena identified in this report have already been related many times to social (decline) fears, social deprivation and perceptions of loss of control as well as the search for orientation. Addressing these areas is above all a political task. The much quoted sentence by Franz von Liszt, who wrote more than 100 years ago that „social policy“ is „the best and most effective crime prevention“ (von Liszt, 1970 [1905], p. 246), could therefore also be applied here. Social division and social deprivation are also related to socio-economic differences. It should therefore be a goal of politics or social policy to minimise differences in social living conditions within society.

However, financial precariousness is not the sole cause of problematic attitudes and actions. This is shown, for example, by the Mid Study, which found that although income has an influence on various forms of group-based misanthropy, it is not always the low-income groups that show the highest approval ratings (Zick, Berghan & Mokros, 2019, p. 89 et seq.). The devaluation of asylumseekers, for example, has the strongest expression in the middle income group with 55.8%. Nevertheless, the strongest income group shows the lowest levels of approval.

In connection with these findings, it should also be noted that experiences of social deprivation are subjective perceptions and thus do not necessarily depend on actual income levels. The Leipzig Authoritarianism Study showed that feelings of a lack of recognition and political deprivation as well as a negative assessment of one's own economic situation exert an independent influence on right-wing extremist attitudes (Schließler, Hellweg & Decker, 2020, p. 297 et seq.). However, this connection is reinforced by the presence of a conspiracy mentality.

In this respect, not social policy alone offers opportunities to influence the problems focused on here. Rather, opportunities for political action also arise in the relationship between citizens and the state, whereby communication and participation are two significant concepts that could be used in this context. Furthermore, politics can also have an effect on the phenomena of fake news and science scepticism, especially by strengthening certain educational offers, which will be discussed in more detail below.

4.2 Dealing with fake news, conspiracy narratives and derogatory attitudes

It may seem obvious at first to counter false reports with facts. For some time now, established media have been developing fact checks, such as the ARD (German broadcaster) Fact Finder. This is intended to make the spread of false information obvious and to present the respective topic in its complexity. This is certainly one way to react to fake news. Ultimately, however, this can only be one building block in the field of fake news prevention, partly because it is assumed that this approach is only effective to a limited extent (Jaster & Lanius, 2019, p. 98 ff.). On the one hand, fact checks can reach people who are not strongly influenced by fake

news. Background knowledge can ensure a certainty of discussion in order to counter fake news in conversations. On the other hand, however, people who believe fake news are less likely to be reached by fact checks. It is questionable whether these are even taken note of (keyword "echo chamber"). Apart from that, even the attempt to refute the claim could be interpreted as a confirmation: If there was nothing to the story, why are so many concerned about it and making an effort to argue against it? But even if the one false report has been exposed as such, it is doubtful to what extent this fundamentally calls into question the attitude behind it. Fake news not only has news value, but also functions as a „communalisation“ (Zywietz, 2018, p. 123) of certain positions. This is all the more true when „(...) it is less about the concrete reality anyway, but about the abstract, ‚felt‘ truthfulness of the report“ (emphasis in original; *ibid.*, p. 123 f.). That is, even if the one event to which a false report referred is disproved, this does not invalidate the attitude behind it *per se*.

Another problem in dealing properly with fake news is the confirmation bias mentioned above, which often shapes human perception and evaluation of information: The more often a piece of information has been heard, the more plausible it seems. Dealing with fake news, for example in the form of fact-checks, often also requires that the false news, which the goal is to refute, is repeated or told. The context in which this is reproduced is not relevant for the activation of the confirmation bias. In this respect, when dealing with fake news, it should be avoided as far as possible to name or elaborate on it.

The outlined problems regarding the proper handling of fake news present pitfalls and difficulties in the (public) debate on false news and conspiracy narratives. Ultimately, however, public and shared discourse remains essential and relevant, on the one hand because it is a basic element of democracy and can prevent processes of division, and on the other hand because there is no alternative (Jaster & Lanius, 2019, p. 105). It is also important to counter the establishment of homogeneous discussion groups in the sense of echo chambers, so that encounters take place with ways of looking at things and attitudes that do not correspond to one's own. Consideration could be given here to how both digital and analogue public space could be used more strongly and creatively to make different opinions visible and tangible.

Despite political efforts, such as the Net Enforcement Act, which obliges the operators of social platforms such as Facebook to accept complaints and delete illegal content (Schmid, Stock & Walter, 2018, p. 85 f.), from a criminological perspective it can hardly be assumed that the devastating effects of false reports can be contained through legislative initiatives or repression alone. On the one hand, the respective content is initially in the world despite deletion and is read, shared and disseminated. On the other hand, it is a general finding of crime prevention that problems can rarely be „banned“. For example, zero-tolerance strategies and a so-called „policy of a thousand pinpricks“ regularly fail, whereas prevention measures prove to be effective in which, in addition to repressive measures, cooperation between different groups of actors is increasingly established, enabling a joint exchange and solution finding.

In the context of belief in fake news and conspiracy myths, another aspect seems relevant: It is not a „seduction phenomenon“. It does not do justice to the complexity of the issue to understand people who adhere to conspiracy narratives as those who have been enticed to do so by radicalised, extremist groups from the „fringes“ of society. Agreeing with a conspiracy narrative presupposes a certain conspiracy mentality (Schließler, Hellweg & Decker, 2020). This differentiation is not trivial, as the idea of „seduction“ and the exploitation of the „concern of the citizens“ goes hand in hand with the idea of a „good“ and democratic centre of society and a danger emanating from the extremist fringes. This notion, which is also reflected in particular in the term right-wing extremism (see, among others, Decker & Brähler, 2020, p. 31), has been empirically refuted at the latest since the Mid Studies (Zick, Küpper & Berghan, 2019). The Mid Studies show that right-wing extremist and anti-democratic attitudes are by no means only represented within radical groups, but across the whole of society.

This finding is particularly important for prevention, as programmes and measures should not be exclusively targeted at specific groups that are characterised by a strongly disadvantaged social situation. Rather, prevention is also needed in the so-called middle of society, in milieus of well-integrated people, especially with regard to attitudes of group-based misanthropy and racism. On the one hand, the Mid Studies (Zick, Küpper & Berghan, 2019) point to this need. On the other hand, the relevance of dealing with derogatory and

exclusionary attitudes in society as a whole, especially with regard to racism, becomes clear. At present, a problematic understanding of racism and the location of the phenomenon on the „extreme right fringe“ of society still stand in the way of a social debate on racism (Ogette, 2020). The common way of looking at racism mainly focuses on the intention (racist is what was meant to be racist) and less on the racist content and the effect of statements and actions. This prevents a real discussion about and visibility of racism within social structures and socialisation processes. If one also takes into account the lack of social debate and reappraisal of (also German) colonial history, it can be concluded that a real debate on racism in Germany has not yet been seriously started across society.

In addition to an intensive confrontation with prejudices and discrimination practices, contacts and encounters are also important building blocks of prevention. This applies, on the one hand, to encounters with other opinions and views with regard to avoiding echo chambers, but also to reducing prejudice. According to the contact hypothesis, interactions with people of other groups or realities than one's own contribute to the reduction of stereotypes and derogatory attitudes.

4.3 Importance of science

However, a discourse that exchanges common knowledge and elicits interpretations and deductions from findings needs a common understanding of how bodies of knowledge are compiled or when a secure body of knowledge exists. In this context, the relevance of analytical thinking also becomes clear. Analytical thinking means positioning oneself critically and reflectively in relation to facts that initially seem to have a simple intuitive solution (Stahl & Prooijen, 2018, p. 156). The ability to critically question one's own ideas and to reflect on what certain assumptions are based on makes it possible to doubt undercomplex explanatory models and to change views as new knowledge emerges. Critical thinking makes it possible to „(...) deal rationally with arguments, weigh reasons against each other, evaluate evidence and sources, recognise logical pitfalls, evaluate statistics and (...) counteract biases“ (Jaster & Lanius, 2019, p. 106). As noted above, research findings show that people who make assumptions about the world more intuitively and who have less analytical thinking are more likely to believe conspiracy narratives.

Critical thinking goes hand in hand with a scientific attitude and approach and is therefore not a specialised knowledge that is only needed in an academic context. Science has its roots in the Enlightenment, in emancipative human aspirations and in the attempt to free oneself from ideologies and constraints and to expose myths as such (Trappe, 2015). But how can science come to the conclusion that a claim or a finding is true? According to Karl Popper (see Bauberger, 2016, p. 32ff.) the answer is clear, namely not at all. This is precisely the relevant basic insight regarding the possibility of scientific knowledge, that it only has a „conjectural character“ (Popper 1995, p. 89, quoted from Bauberger, 2016, p. 33). Therefore, it is always only a matter of hypotheses about reality, which cannot be verified, i.e. proven, but which can only be falsified. These are the tasks of science, namely to try to refute statements, assumptions and theories, whereby those that have withstood numerous attempts to refute should be given special priority. Popper connects this with the ideal image of a scientist: “(...) they try to find out whether their ideas are right by trying to find out whether they might not be wrong“ (Popper 1995, p. 104 quoted from Bauberger, 2016, p. 37). Accordingly, a scientific attitude also means being able to err and to talk about errors and misconceptions. Furthermore, it is also linked to justifying and arguing assumptions (Trappe 2016). At this point, no further transition is necessary to emphasise the relevance of such a scientific attitude for democratic exchange and decision-making processes.

Accordingly, science must increasingly be taken out of its sole academic location and the importance of science and prevention must be understood as scientifically based, forward-looking action as a basis for democracy and a possibility against polarisation. In this respect, in addition to education, sensitisation and the initiation of discourses and debates, education is of central importance through which this is conveyed.

4.4 Prevention through education

The relevance of education can be seen in several dimensions. Higher education, for example, is associated with a lower conspiracy mentality (Schließler, Hellweg & Decker, 2020, p. 290) and a lower rate of right-wing extremist attitudes, as shown, among other things, by the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study (Decker et al., 2020, p. 52). However, with regard to right-wing extremist

attitudes, the authors note that the cause could be less the level of education than the specific socialisation experiences, which are related to the achievement of higher educational qualifications and the integration into different types of schools (*ibid.*).

In addition to the fundamental effect of education, specific educational missions could also be considered for prevention in the problem areas outlined in this report. On the one hand, the strengthening of media competence and critical media reception should be emphasised here (Schmid, Stock & Walter, 2018, p. 86). This certainly also makes sense in view of other dangers posed by internet use for children and young people (reference is made here, for example, to cybergrooming and cyberbullying as well as sexting). On the other hand, in the context of the problem areas outlined here, education should more strongly address the teaching of analytical or scientific thinking and a scientific attitude.

In order for prevention, as scientifically based anticipatory action, and a scientific attitude to provide orientation, scientific thinking must be taught in the education system (both in the children, youth and adult sectors). In this context, the just mentioned importance of science beyond the academic context must also be communicated and made tangible. Communicating this could also be an effective response to the increase in scepticism about science, which can be observed not only in statements by Corona deniers but also at the political level, for example in the context of the debate about studies within the police regarding illegal police violence and political attitudes.

But a study from the USA points to the fact that meaningful communication is also important here. The core findings confirm that it is not only analytical thinking ability that reduces the likelihood of believing in conspiracy myths, but also motivation (Stahl & Proojien, 2018). For respondents for whom reasoned assumptions (epistemic rationality) did not represent a value, an analytical thinking ability did not exert any influence on the agreement with irrational beliefs. In this respect, it may not only be a matter of conveying argumentation in the sense of formal logic, but also of contributing to the internalisation of a value, especially in relation to democracy and society, of science-based decision-making and judgement.

Ultimately, this consideration can be included in the discussion about a stronger competence orientation rather than curriculum orientation in the education system (see, for example, Reusser, 2014). Thus, not only with a view to the needs of the current world of work, but also with regard to the problem areas outlined here, the strengthening of specific skills seems to be more important than the mere teaching of knowledge content. This is also confirmed by Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education at the OECD, who refers to the so-called 4K model, which sees four core competences as groundbreaking for the present and the future: Communication, Collaboration, Creativity and Critical Thinking (Schleicher, n.d.; Schleicher, 2018). In this context, the Chancellor of the Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences, Myrle Dziak-Mahler, calls for less focus on imparting knowledge and more on accompanying and supporting students in their learning. In addition to the four core competences mentioned above, she adds, among other things, a „change competence“, since, as she says, „the rapid permanent change frightens many“. In the context of the problem areas outlined in this article, competences in the areas of communication, socio-political participation, critical reflection and debate in the sense of a scientific attitude appear to be particularly important.

Karl Popper (2003 [1958]), as stated above, in connection with his critique of conspiracy myths, spoke out against understanding social facts as the product of a plan. Rather, the results of intentional action are often not the intended ones. When asked why this is so, he states:

“Because this is probably generally the case in social life - with or without conspiracy. Social life is not only a trial of strength between opposing groups, but it is action within a more or less conflicting framework of institutions and traditions. And it leads, apart from conscious counteraction, to many unforeseen reactions within that framework, some of which cannot be foreseen at all.” (Popper, 2003 [1958], p. 113).

Social reality is complex. Understanding it and changing it for the better through prevention is no less so. A common basis of knowledge, argumentation and exchange, which is shaped by a scientific attitude, can offer a possibility that can be democratic,

rational and thus not least effective and efficient. Education and prevention have a decisive role to play in creating an appropriate space for this.

The present report on the 26th German Prevention Congress presented specific problem areas that appear relevant from a sociological-criminological perspective. It was emphasised that the current crisis situation, in the sense of a social seismograph, highlights certain deficient structures and attitudes, some of which have been firmly anchored in society for a long time. It is a common expression that crises also contain opportunities. It remains to be seen whether every crisis necessarily also offers new opportunities. An attempt to see forward-looking opportunities in the current Corona pandemic might recognise that this crisis has clearly highlighted manifest problem areas in society. Recognising these problem areas creates a basis for prevention, addressing them and shaping the future with foresight.

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