

Who threatens who?

Demographic and situational contexts of Danish verbal threats

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Introduction¹

Across most jurisdictions in the world, threatening to seriously harm someone else, e.g. by saying or writing ‘I will kill you’, is one of the primary exceptions to freedom of expression, due to the serious consequences that this type of communicative action can have. Verbal threats often cause psychological trauma and fear in victims (Smith 2006, Warren et al. 2013). Threats against politicians, opinion leaders and other public figures can even be subversive to democratic participation, since people may abstain from voicing their opinions in fear of the possible repercussions (Bojsen-Møller et al. 2020). As such, not all types of non-fiction (*sakprosa*) genres are edifying (Tønnesson 2012, 2017) or used to cooperate (Grice 1975), to assist institutions or to accelerate societal progress. Instead of applying principles of cooperation, such *illicit genres* (Bojsen-Møller et al. 2020) instead apply principles of conflict and abuse the mechanisms of language and communication (Pinker, Nowak & Lee 2008: 833). Law enforcement, threat assessment professionals² and intelligence services throughout the world perform threat assessment daily (Meloy & Hoffmann 2013, Simons & Meloy 2017) in order to assess whether a threat to cause bodily harm is likely to result in a physical act of violence (Gales 2015). However, threatening to commit any illegal act against someone else is illegal in itself, because of the serious fear this may instill in the victims. It can therefore be considered a psychological form of violence. For these reasons, it is important to gain a better understanding of the people who threaten others and their relationships with the victims. This study thus asks the following research questions:

- What do we know about the people who threaten to harm others?
- What do we know about the victims of threats?
- What are the relationships between threateners and threatened?
- How are different kinds of verbal threats linked to other types of (violent) crime?

¹ This study was part of my PhD, and this article is therefore based upon perspectives presented in my dissertation (Bojsen-Møller 2021). This project is financed by the Carlsberg Foundation in grants CF17-0907 and CF24-1853. I also acknowledge the valuable and helpful comments by the anonymous peer reviewers.

² See, for instance, *The Association of Threat Assessment Professionals* (ATAP).

This article presents the results of a background study of the demographic and situational context of Danish verbal threats in 50 criminal cases tried under § 266 of the Danish Criminal Code. The aim of the study is to uncover some of the contextual factors that surround this type of illicit communication, which according to Gales (2019) is an important but overlooked aspect in threat research.

Threats in Danish law

In the Danish Criminal Code, threatening to commit an illegal act against someone else is primarily tried under § 266, known as the threat statute:³

Den, som på en måde, der er egnet til hos nogen at fremkalde alvorlig frygt for eget eller andres liv, helbred eller velfærd, truer med at foretage en strafbar handling, straffes med bøde eller fængsel indtil 2 år.

‘Whosoever threatens to carry out an illegal act in a way that is fit to provoke serious fear in someone for their own or other people’s lives, health or wellbeing, shall be penalized by fine or imprisonment of up to 2 years’ (The Danish Criminal Code, Chapter 27, § 266. Translation from Christensen 2019)

According to Danish law, it is thus illegal to threaten to harm someone in a way that is ‘fit’, i.e. suitable or qualified, to cause *serious* fear. It is, for instance, not enough to threaten someone with ‘simple violence’ (*simpel vold*) in order for it to be tried under § 266; the illegal act described in the threat must be severe (Toftegaard Nielsen et al. 2017: 530–531). Threats permeate legal systems at multiple levels, and the different tiers of the legal system have different roles to play in handling this type of crime (Bojsen-Møller 2022, Gales 2019). Each tier involves different institutionalized genres that are meant to help the institutional processes of legal systems run smoothly, e.g. legislation, indictments and judgments.

The speech act of threatening

Threatening to commit an illegal act is a type of *language crime* (Shuy 1993), and consequently, this type of communicative act has been a topic of interest for forensic linguists, who apply linguistic science to issues concerning language and law (Bojsen-Møller 2021, Christensen 2019, Gales 2010, Fraser 1998). One of the approaches used by forensic linguists is pragmatic analysis including *speech act analysis* (Coulthard, Johnson & Wright, 2017; cf. Austin

³ Other statutes involving threats include, but are not limited to: § 119, which criminalizes violence and threats of violence against public servants; § 123, which criminalizes threats against witnesses in judicial proceedings; § 216, which criminalizes rape, including when it is achieved by threat; § 260, which criminalizes unlawful coercion, including when it is achieved by threat; and § 288, which criminalizes robbery, including when it is achieved by threat.

1962, Searle 1969). Within Speech Act Theory, a threat is typically defined as a commissive speech act, i.e. one which commits the speaker to some future action (in the case of threats, a future *harmful* action) (Fraser 1998, Gales 2019, Searle 2008[1965]). A speech act consists of three acts in one, namely:

- *locution*: “the act of ‘saying something’” (Austin 1962: 94),
- *illocution*: “the performance of an act *in* saying something” (Austin 1962: 99), i.e. the meaning behind the words and
- *perlocution*: “[the] consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker” (Austin 1962: 101).

Austin (1962) introduces the notion that speech acts can be either *felicitous* or *infelicitous*, i.e. effective or ineffective, as opposed to true or false. Building on Austin’s (1962) concept of infelicity, Searle (1969: 54 and 66–67) details the felicity conditions that need to be in effect for different speech acts to work. Fraser (1998) specifies the felicity conditions for the speech act of threatening as follows:

- ... the speaker must intend to express by way of what is said
- 1. the intention to personally commit an act (or to see that someone else commits the act);
- 2. the belief that the results of that act will affect the addressee in an unfavorable way;
- 3. the intention to intimidate the addressee through the awareness of the intention in 1 (Fraser 1998: 171)

The core function of a threat is thus to *intimidate* the recipient by the sender directly or indirectly communicating that they will commit a future harmful action against the recipient (Christensen 2019, Fraser 1998). Fraser (1998) also explains that threats differ from warnings in that the intended meaning of a warning “is not to intimidate or coerce, as with a threat, but to bring to the addressee’s awareness a state of the world [...] [which] the addressee should want to avoid” (Fraser 1998: 165). Building on Fraser (1998) and Shuy (1993), Gales (2019) describes the speech act of threatening as follows:

Pragmatically, then, threats of a serious or potentially dangerous nature can be defined as communicated (written, spoken or signed) speech acts, that are proffered to the detriment of the hearer, that are in the control of the speaker, and that are intended to, and have, the effect of instilling fear in or intimidating a recipient. The addition of the perlocutionary force and an understanding of the overall context in which the threat was proffered play a key role in a linguistic interpretation of the speech act of threatening. (Gales 2019: 476)

Gales (2019) here underlines the importance of assessing the perlocutionary effect, i.e. the effect on the victim, and of assessing the overall contextual aspects in relation to the intention to intimidate. The fact that “[l]inguistic

science cannot penetrate the inner motives and thoughts of the human mind” (Shuy 1998: 78–79), makes Gales’ (2019) focus on perlocution and context particularly relevant. The contextual information of this study is therefore important puzzle pieces in trying to understand the nature of threats.⁴

Data and method

The data for this study was collected on October 2, 2019, through systematic searches of the Danish online law database *Karnov*. I collected the last 50 judgments that contain either written or oral (i.e. verbal) threats tried under § 266 of the Danish Criminal Code. Cases that only included non-linguistic threats (e.g. threatening someone with a weapon) were discarded. All 50 judgments have previously been published by the judicial journal *Tidsskrift for Kriminalret* (‘Journal of Criminal Justice’), abbreviated TtK. Only cases that reach the Supreme Court of Denmark or so-called “relevant” cases that reach the High Courts are included in the TtK journal (Karnov TtK).⁵ Half (52 %) of the judgments were tried by the Eastern High Court of Denmark and the other half (48 %) by the Western High Court of Denmark (2 % were also tried by the Supreme Court) (cf. Bojsen-Møller 2022).⁶ Criminal charges in the 50 cases were made between 2013 and 2019.

Ethical concerns

Because the data used in this study includes sensitive and even confidential information about the people involved, all names and places of the already publicized data have been anonymized and pseudonymized. Names and addresses of defendants and victims in the cases were already removed by the courts before journal publication. My further pseudonymization procedure involves using general categories such as prosecutor, defense lawyer, defendant, victim etc. General age indicators (e.g. decades; 30–39) are used instead of the specific age of a person. I do not give details about the specific dates of court proceedings. As the specific identities of the High Courts are not relevant to this study, I have chosen not to disclose their names. When relaying information about the relationship between defendants and victims, I only use very broad categories such as ‘intimate partners’, ‘family’, ‘acquaintance’ or ‘strangers’.

Method

To get an overview of the situational factors surrounding the verbal threats in this data set, I manually read through the judgments and conducted detailed

⁴ For a study on the *textual travels* (Heffer, Rock & Conley 2013) and linguistic traits of this data set, instead see Bojsen-Møller (2022).

⁵ As stated by Bojsen-Møller, “TtK does not explicate which criteria they use to determine what constitutes a relevant high court judgment” (Bojsen-Møller 2022: 10).

⁶ Denmark has twenty-four district courts, two High Courts (The Western High Court in Viborg and the Eastern High Court in Copenhagen) and one Supreme Court.

coding of the following information that could be extracted from the judgments:

- the defendant's gender,
- the defendant's age,
- the victim's gender (the victim's age was not stated in the judgments, so any information on this is from *Statistics Denmark*),
- all available information about the relationship between defendants and victims before the threat had been uttered,
- whether the victim is also the recipient of the threat or not,
- the victim's reaction to the threat (if information about this was explicitly stated in the judgments),
- other charges against the defendant besides threatening,
- charges of violent crime against the same victim,
- the means of communication of the threat,
- the defendant's guilty or not guilty plea and
- the court's guilty or not guilty verdict

When available, I compared the situational factors from the examined threat cases with the situational factors of threat cases provided by *Statistics Denmark*⁷ in order to estimate whether the sample set reflects general tendencies of threat cases in Denmark. Contrary to the examined data set of judgments, *Statistics Denmark* includes both verbal and non-verbal threats (e.g. threats with a weapon), and no specific statute is specified for the threats.

When I coded the relationship between the defendant and the victim, I divided them into four categories:

- 1) strangers (predominately public servants, but also people on the street or in bars),
- 2) intimate (predominately former intimate partners, but also current intimate partners, family members and friends),
- 3) acquaintance (colleagues, superficial relationships, friend of a friend) and
- 4) unknown (meaning no information about the relationship is disclosed).

In terms of the victim's reactions to the threats, after initial explorative examinations of the judgments I found different subcategories, namely that the victim:

⁷ *Statistics Denmark* is a state institution that collects statistical information about Danish society.

- 1) took precautional action (tried to avoid being harmed by the defendant)
- 2) took the threat seriously (i.e. thought that the defendant would commit the harmful act that they threatened to commit)
- 3) felt intense fear and shock
- 4) felt fear
- 5) felt unsafe/nervous
- 6) felt angry
- 7) felt no fear
- 8) no mention of reaction

When I coded whether the victim was also the recipient of the threat, I only counted the recipient once, if the same recipient received more than one threat. The following result section will be structured according to the list of information provided at the beginning of this section.

Results

Gender and age of defendants

Below, I have listed the distribution of gender (figure 1) and age (figure 2) of defendants, comparing the 50 judgments with the general statistics from threat cases in Denmark between 2013–2018 (Statistics Denmark).

The distribution of defendants’ gender in the judgments resembles the overall distribution in Danish threat cases (figure 1), which shows that most prosecuted threats in Denmark are committed by men.⁸

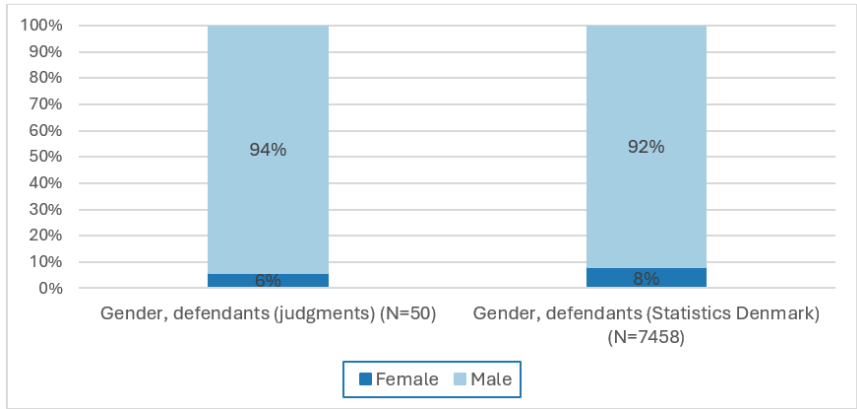


Figure 1: Gender, defendants (N=50)

⁸ The data material only operates with a binary gender categorization (female/male), which is therefore also reflected in my account in figure 1.

The age distribution of defendants in the data set diverge somewhat from the overall distribution of defendants in Danish threat cases (figure 2 below) but both show a predominance of younger defendants.

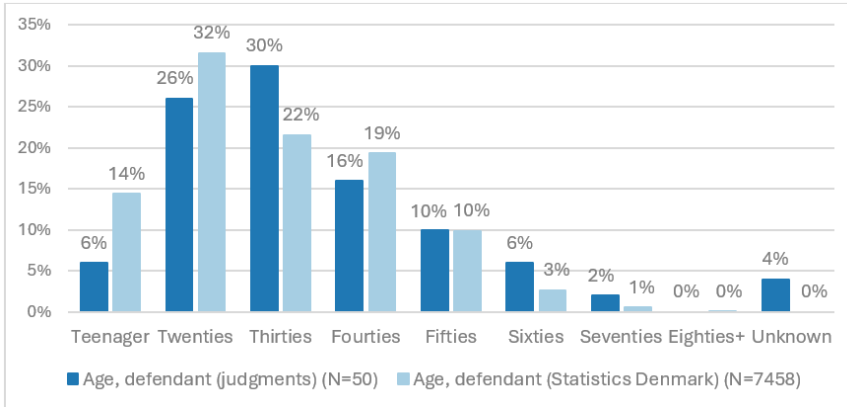
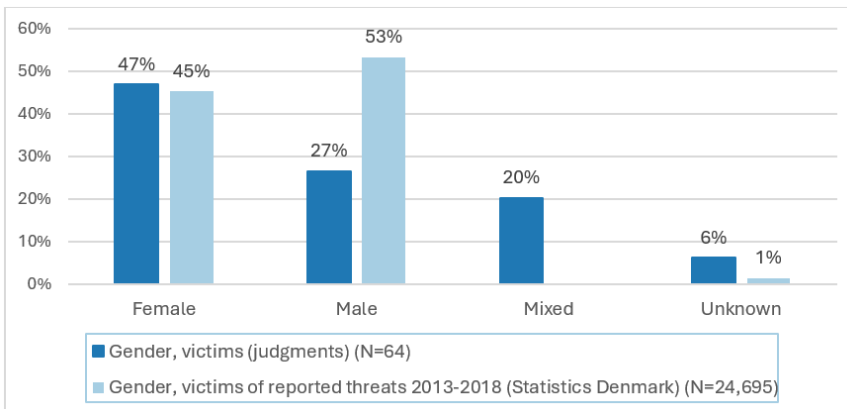


Figure 2: Age, defendants

Gender and age of victims

Figure 3 (below) shows the gender of the victims in the 50 judgments and the gender of all victims of *reported* threats from 2013–2018 (Statistics Denmark).⁹ The 50 judgments all consist of *prosecuted* threats, which is a significant difference between the two data sets (discussed further below). Since there is sometimes more than one victim of a threat, I included the category ‘mixed’, which is used when the victims are of different genders. Statistics Denmark has no ‘mixed’ category, so it is non-discernible how they have counted victims of the same threat that are of different gender.



⁹ Because I show the results without decimals, the numbers from *Statistics Denmark* of victims of reported threats add up to 99 % and not 100 %.

Figure 3: Gender, victims

As already mentioned, Statistics Denmark does not report the gender distribution for the victims of *prosecuted* threats, only victims of *reported* threats. The large disparity between threats with male victims that were *reported* (Statistics Denmark) and threats with male victims in the judgments (which were all *prosecuted*) invites consideration of how reports by male victims are taken up by the legal system. I see at least five *possible* reasons for the difference (and more than one may hold at the same time):

- 1) more *non-linguistic* threats have male victims,¹⁰
- 2) more threats tried under other sections of the Danish Criminal Code have male victims (my study only includes cases tried under § 266, but Statistics Denmark does not specify which sections they include in their statistics),
- 3) Statistics Denmark tend to categorize victims of the same threat that are of different genders as male,
- 4) the judicial journal Tfk (that published the judgments in the data set) is less prone to publish cases with male victims,
- 5) more *reported* threats towards women are *prosecuted* than those towards men,
- 6) more threats towards women go on to the High Courts than those towards men (since only cases that are tried by the High Courts are included in the judicial journal Tfk).

If 4), 5) or 6) should be correct, then that would indicate that there is a bias in the system against male victims of threats. Perhaps they are not taken as seriously as female victims of threats are, or perhaps they do not fit the stereotype of what a victim of a threat is supposed to be. However, it is not possible to draw any conclusions on this question, due to the limited data set in this study and the fact that the two data sets are not directly comparable. For this, further studies would be needed.

The victims' ages were not available in the 50 judgments in the data set. However, according to Statistics Denmark, 21 % of victims of threats (between 2013 and 2018) were 30–39 years old, 19 % were 40–49 years old, 13 % were 20–24 years old, 12 % were 50–59 years old (the remainder being either under 20 or over 59 years old). The following sections (except 4.8) of this article does not contain information from Statistics Denmark, but only from the 50 judgments.

Relationship between threatener and victim

The relationship between the defendants and the victims in the 50 judgments is shown below in figure 4.

¹⁰ In the 9 cases that were not included in this study because they only involved non-linguistic threats (e.g. threats with knives), two-thirds of the victims were in fact male.

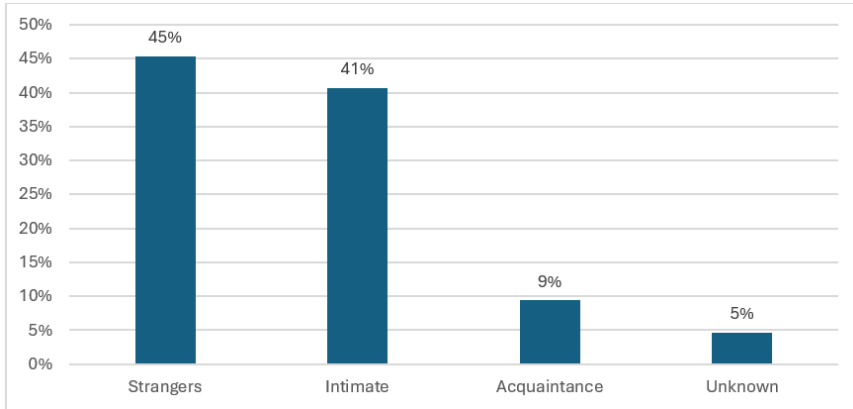


Figure 4: Relationship between the defendant and the victim (N=64)

Simons and Tunkel (2021) emphasize the importance of the relationship between victim and threatener, since it can have a significant bearing on threat assessment (2021: 201–202) (see discussion below). As detailed in section 3.2 above, the category ‘strangers’ predominately consists of victims who are public servants but also of institutions and random people on the street, whereas the category ‘intimate’ mostly consists of victims who have previously been romantically involved with the threatener.

In the judgments, there is a noticeable difference between the type of relationship that defendants and victims have when the victim is female versus when the victim is male. In 67 % of the cases where (almost exclusively male¹¹) defendants threaten female victims, there has previously been a close relationship between the two parties (most often they had previously been romantically involved). In contrast, 71 % of the cases where (almost exclusively male) defendants threaten male victims, there is either no relationship or a distant relationship between the two parties; most often, the victims are complete strangers.

Recipient versus victim

An important aspect to consider when it comes to threats is that the recipient of a threat is not always the victim of the threat. The following threat is from a case where the recipient of the threat is merely an interlocutor. The victim is another man (‘him’) to whom the threat is later relayed:

¹¹ In the three cases (out of 50), where the defendant is female, the relationship between the defendant and the victim is split between having an intimate relationship (1 case) and having been strangers (2 cases), but since the data set has so few female defendants, no conclusions can be drawn from this.

- (1) Oral threat, spoken in person (not recorded, so cannot be taken as verbatim).
From judgment TfK2016.155¹²:

Jeg er pisse ligeglad, jeg skyder ham kraftedeme
'I don't bloody care, I'm gonna fucking shoot him'

In (1), the utterance was still prosecuted as a threat that was 'fit' to cause the victim of the threat serious fear (see § 266 above) because it was considered probable that the victim would later be told about the threat.

Figure 5 (below) shows that 78 % of the recipients in the data set are also the victims (or one of the victims) of the threat in question. In 17 % of the cases, the recipient is someone else than the victim. Finally, in 5 %, the threat has been uttered on a social media platform (e.g., on the defendant's own Instagram or Facebook wall), where recipients are potentially unlimited and thus may or may not include the victim or people close to the victim.

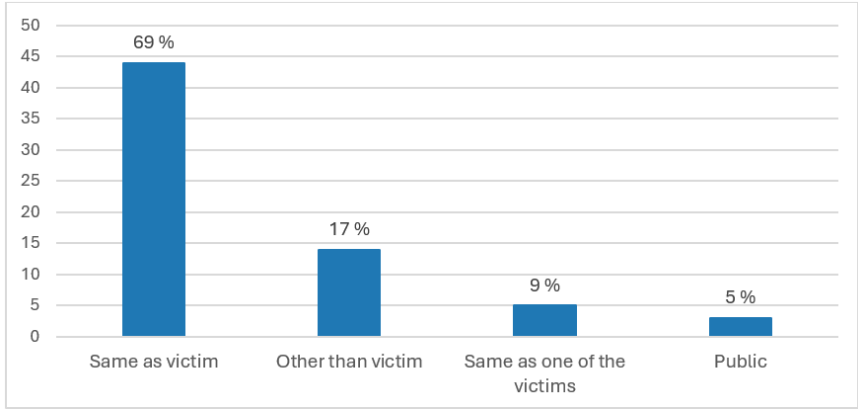


Figure 5: Recipient same or other than victim (N=64)

Most of the threats in this study are thus aimed directly at their victims. This result is not surprising, since threats have often been linked to exertion of control or power over someone else (Bojsen-Møller et al. 2020, Gales 2010, Muschalik 2018). This power will likely be more easily achieved by communicating the threat directly to the victim.

The victims' reactions

Figure 6 (below) shows an overview of the most frequent types of reactions that the victims had to the threats (the perlocutionary effect of the threats), according to the judgments.

¹² Title of the judgments used in *Karnov*.

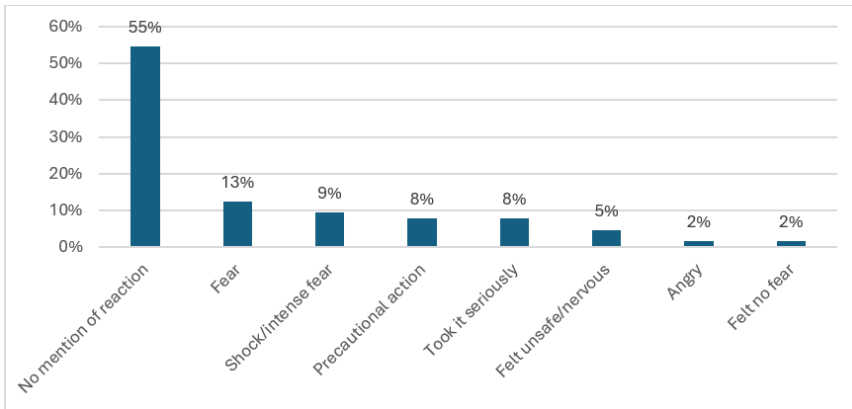


Figure 6: Reported reactions by victims (N=64)

Considering the emphasis on whether the threat is ‘fit to create fear’ (§ 266 of the Danish Criminal Code; see section 1.1 above), it is not surprising that different degrees of **fear** are the most often reported reactions in the judgments. In many cases, victims took what I call ‘precautional action’. Such actions include, but are not limited to, escaping the defendant, going into hiding, keeping a knife by their bedside and enduring rape to avoid the threat being carried out. These results clearly show that threats cause severe distress for victims in and of themselves and therefore have serious personal consequences. Of course, it is an empirical question, whether cases that *actually* cause fear, and are not only ‘fit’ to cause fear, have a larger propensity to be prosecuted or found guilty. It is not possible to draw conclusions on this from this data set, since only two cases have not-guilty verdicts (see 4.8).

Surprisingly, half of the judgments (55 %, cf. figure 6 above) did not refer to the victim’s actual reactions, but only to the abstract notion of the threats being ‘fit to create fear’. This lack of emphasis on the victim’s *actual* reaction (the perlocutionary effect) in these judgments, in a type of crime that is characterized by the likely effect of causing fear, on the one hand seems peculiar. On the other hand, it is in line with the emphasis in the legislation on abstract fitness or likelihood. As such, it downplays the subjective experience of the victims and instead sets out more objective rules on what people in our society are allowed to say or write.

Additional charges against the defendant

Threats that are prosecuted by the judicial system are often, but by no means always, combined with other criminal or dangerous activity. In figure 7 below, I have listed the most frequent additional charges contained in the 50 cases:

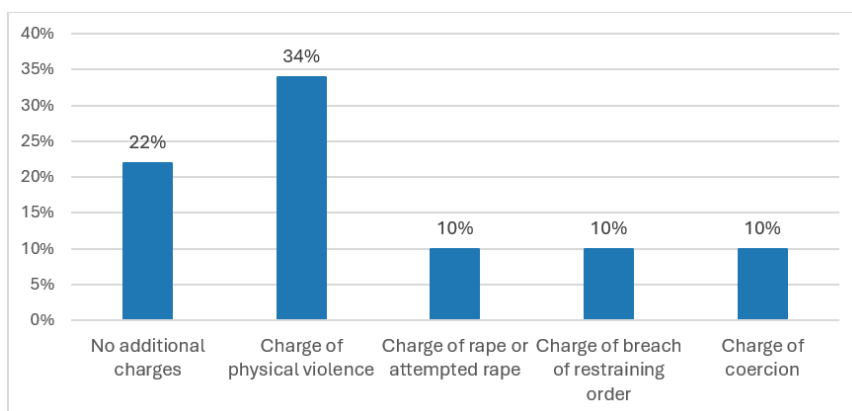


Figure 7: Additional charges besides § 266 against the defendant (N=50)

Only 22 % of the cases contained no other charges besides threats under § 266, while 78 % of the cases had one or several other charges included in the case. Some of the cases contain more than one of these or other additional charges, and because of this, the percentages in figure 7 will not amount to 100 %. In 34 % of the 50 cases, the case also contains charges of violence or dangerous violence; not necessarily as part of the situations that involve the threats and not necessarily towards the threat victim. In 10 % of the cases, charges of rape or attempted rape are also part of the indictment, and 10 % of the cases include breach of restraining orders, which indicates stalking. In 10 % of the cases, the indictments also contain charges of coercion, which is in line with the fact that threats are often linked to coercive control (Gales 2010, Muschalik 2018).

It is not possible to conclude from this data set whether crimes of bodily (or, in the case of stalking, psychological) harm are particularly frequent when it comes to people who threaten. Other possible reasons for this could be (but are not limited to):

- 1) that threat cases are mostly prosecuted if the defendant is allegedly involved in other crimes,
- 2) that threat cases mostly go on to the High Courts if the defendant is allegedly involved in other crimes (since all these judgments have been tried by the High Courts).

Even though it is not possible to draw final conclusions from the results presented in figure 7, it is striking and noteworthy that so many of these cases involve defendants who are accused of other *violent* crimes, besides the verbally violent act of threatening.¹³ In the following section, I will zoom in

¹³ Another noteworthy factor is that 22 % of the cases include possession of a knife within the situation where the threats are uttered. In what may be a stark contrast to countries more

on additional charges of violence in the judgments against the same victim that the defendant has threatened to harm.

Charges of physical violence or rape towards the victim of the threat

Approximately one-third of the cases (36 %¹⁴) include charges of physical violence or (attempted) rape against the victim of the threat – most of these offences occur within the same situation as the threats or afterwards. There is, however, a noticeable difference between the cases in the category ‘intimate’ and the categories ‘strangers’ and ‘acquaintance’ when it comes to charges of violence or (attempted) rape against the victim of the threats. See figure 8:

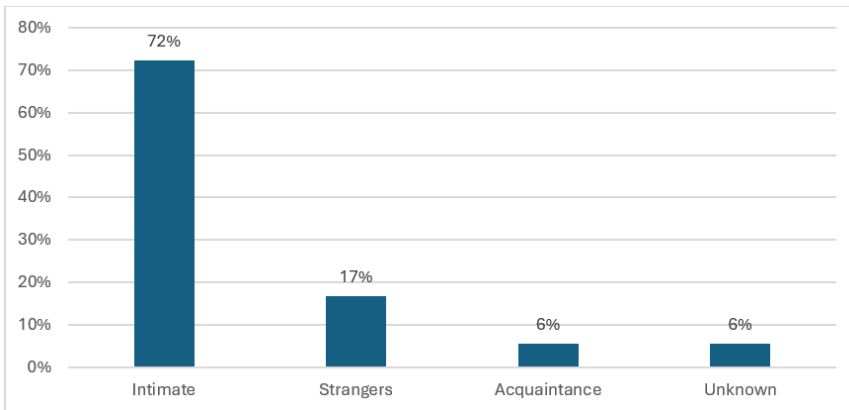


Figure 8: Physical violence or rape against the threat victim (N=18)

Out of the 18 cases that contain violence or rape against the threat victim, 72 % of the cases are within the category ‘intimate’, and all besides one of these 18 cases consists of threats against a former intimate partner. Three of the 18 cases include charges of rape or attempted rape, two of them against a former intimate partner and one of them against an acquaintance. The significance of these results will be discussed below in section 5.

Means of communication, threats

The 50 judgments contain a total of 121 prosecuted threats (Bojsen-Møller 2022: 11), 68 % being oral threats and 32 % being written threats. The means of communication for the threats is shown below in figure 9.

prone to gun violence than Denmark, none of the cases mention possession of guns within the threatening situations.

¹⁴ The remaining cases in figure 7 that include charges of violence or rape have different victims than the threatened victims.

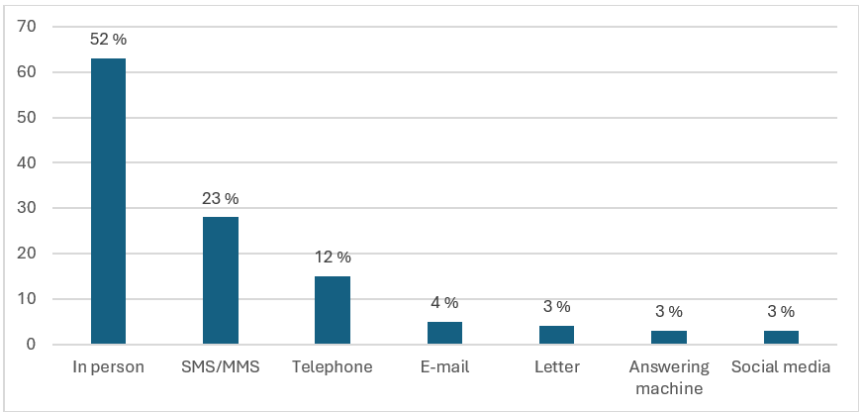


Figure 9: Means of communication, per threat (N=121)

Approximately half of the threats were communicated directly in person to the victim of the threat, while 23 % of them were written in an SMS (or MMS). As stated by Bojsen-Møller (2022), the non-recorded, oral threats cannot be taken as verbatim renditions of the original threat.

Guilty and not guilty verdicts

Figure 10 (below) displays how many of the 121 threats that the defendants *plead* guilty (21%) or not guilty to (79 %), and how many of the threats they were *found* guilty (95 %) or not guilty of making (5 %).

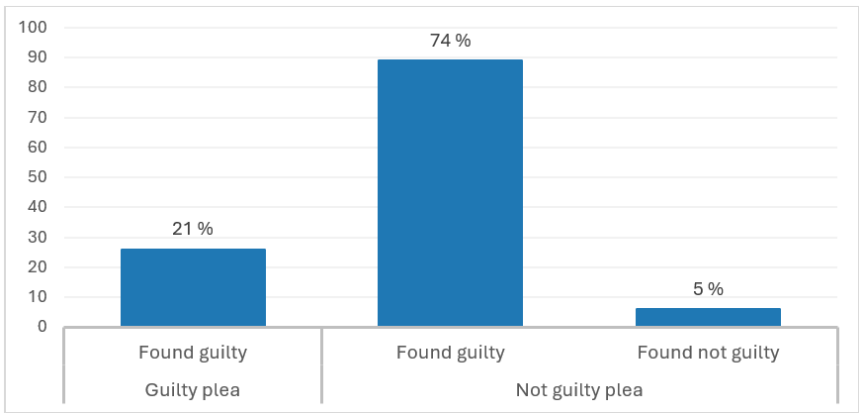


Figure 10: Plea and verdict (N=121)

For comparison, Statistics Denmark found that defendants in all threat cases between 2013–2018 were found guilty in approximately half of the cases, and not guilty in the other half of the cases. Since only 2 cases (5 %) of the judgments in my data set had a not guilty verdict, this could possibly indicate

that TfK, and thus *Karnov*, mostly publish guilty verdicts, or that most cases that go to one of the two High Courts of Denmark end up with a guilty verdict.

Interestingly, in the judgments, the defendants often admit to having produced the written threats, but most of them claim that the utterance meant something else or cannot be taken as a threat. In comparison, the defendants seldom admit to having produced the oral threats at all. This is perhaps not surprising, since cases concerning oral threats seldom include direct access to the original spoken utterance (i.e. most of them are not recorded), and therefore, these cases will often have to rely primarily on (often opposing) hearsay evidence by witnesses and defendants. Contrary to this, the written threat messages most often exist as direct, physical evidence that must have been available to the police and the prosecution, since most of them are quoted with “spelling errors or anacoluthic structures” that indicate authenticity (Bojsen-Møller 2022: 16).¹⁵

Discussion and conclusion

From the results of this background study of the demographic and situational factors of Danish threats, I have found that the typical threat prosecuted under § 266 in the Danish High Courts is uttered by a male in his twenties or thirties. Typically, the threat will be communicated directly, often orally in person, toward 1) a female that the male defendant has previously been in a romantic relationship with or 2) a male who is a stranger or an acquaintance of the defendant. The victim will typically react with fear and distress to the threat, and they will often take precautional action against the threatener to avoid the threat being carried out. This strengthens the proposition made by Fraser (1998) that “[i]nherent in every threat is the intention to send fear into the addressee” (Fraser 1998: 161). However, as is also argued by Gales (2019), the perlocutionary effect (i.e. the actual fear and precautional actions of the victims), and not just the illocutionary act (i.e. the intention of the sender), should play a larger part in the definition of the speech act of threatening. Threats are not merely characterized by “the intention to intimidate the addressee” (Fraser 1998: 171) but also by the serious consequences they can have on the victims; consequences that will sometimes coerce the victims into acting in ways that cause them further harm, such as enduring rape or going into hiding.

The written threats will typically be communicated through SMS, while the oral threats will almost always be communicated face to face. This entails that the defendants in cases of oral threats tend to deny ever producing the threatening utterance, whereas they will be more likely to deny having meant a written utterance as a threat.

¹⁵ No correlation was found between ‘intimate’ versus ‘distant’ relationships between the parties when it came to guilty or not-guilty pleas.

In this data set, threateners often have additional charges against them for a (physically) violent crime, and one-third of the cases contain violence or (attempted) rape against the threat victim. As such, verbal threats are closely linked, ideologically and, in some instances, also physically, to the violent or harmful act that they either explicitly mention or to which they implicitly allude (Gales 2015, Hurt 2020, Simons & Tunkel 2021). It is therefore important to investigate the interaction between violent words and physical violence (Smith 2006). However, it is necessary to distinguish between different kinds of verbal threats in this, i.e. to distinguish between threat cases that have different contextual factors. In cases regarding intimate (ex)partner violence, numerous studies show that verbal threats often precede physical acts of violence (Almond & Douglas 2025, Brewster 2000, Campbell et al. 2003, Monckton Smith 2019, Simons & Tunkel 2021). Similarly, this study finds that additional charges of violence or rape against the threatened victim predominately occur in cases where defendant and victim have previously been in an intimate partner relationship. This substantiates the claim that the existence of verbal threats in (former) romantic relationships should be considered a definite warning sign.

Literature

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