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FAMILY VIOLENCE - Police house calls in Helsinki, Finland in 1977

Abstract

The data in this paper were collected in 1977 in the main police units of Helsinki. Altogether 264 house calls (cases when the police is asked to solve problems at homes) were recorded over a two-week period.

Family violence is found to consist of three categories: battered children, family disputes and mental cruelty. Police are mainly called to solve family disputes. Only three cases of battered children were recorded during the police observation period.

Family conflicts are characterised by the very common use of alcohol. Police are generally called to visit "underdog" families. Every fourth case of police house calls was to families already known by the police for the same problems.

Unrestrained use of verbal aggression is characteristic of the content of disputes, in which those involved shout at and threaten each other. Physical violence appeared in every fourth case of police house calls.

The nature of family violence is discussed and comparisons with foreign studies are made. Further studies are proposed.

Family violence has aroused much discussion in the 1970's. From a hot debate (see e.g. Pizzey 1974) a number of studies have gradually emerged (see Eekelaar & Katz 1978, Freeman 1979, Martin 1978, Steinmetz & Straus 1974). Research has, however, been greatly influenced by the public debate, and many fundamental questions have remained vague and in dispute. In this paper I shall seek to discuss the concept and content of family violence and its links to some social problems. Material is derived from a police study where house calls by the Helsinki police were investigated in autumn of 1977.

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Concept

Family violence is often understood as physical violence. This is especially stressed in the terms "battered women" or "wife beating", which are often taken as synonyms for family violence and which define the phenomena too narrowly, in my opinion. Family violence has been limited to physical violence by Miller (1975), who concentrates on studying only attested physical assaults, and by Gayford (1978, 19), who thinks that mental cruelty is too vague a concept to be used in this connection.

There are also a number of studies in which a broader concept of family violence is employed (Straus 1978, Jaffe et alia 1978). Rarely has the concept, however, been systematically considered (a notable exception is Steinmetz & Straus 1974).

First of all, I think it is important to make the distinction between acute and chronic family violence (figure 1). Mental cruelty in its Hollywood-divorce connotation then falls into the chronic box of the figure, usually being long-lasting and sometimes reciprocal. A good example of this kind of family violence is found in Albee's classic play, "Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

Of course, it is not very easy to draw the line between acute and chronic family violence. Even acute family disputes may occur quite chronically, as it is in fact shown later. Here, however, greater interest lays in the deed itself and less in the reproductivity of the crisis.

It seems important also to differentiate between family violence which is directed towards children and the disputes between the grown-up members of the family. There are many studies showing a non-overlap of these and many differences in their characteristics (Gibbens 1975, Gil 1973, Marsden 1978, McClintock 1978, Thompson 1978). These differences are e.g. sex of the assaulting party, time of the deed and the role of alcohol. Gayford (1978) and Martin (1978) stress, however, the common elements of these two kinds of family violence in order to emphasize possible common explanation theories (learning theories) and treatment policies. In my opinion, the distinction between the battered children

syndrome and the conflicts of adults is important just for same reasons. One could think that a mother hitting her baby and a husband assaulting his wife may need different treatment services.

In acute family violence I have also made the distinction between verbal and physical family violence, as a Finnish psychiatrist states: "a slap with words may hurt as much as a physical blow." (Mattila 1978).

FIGURE 1. Different types of family violence

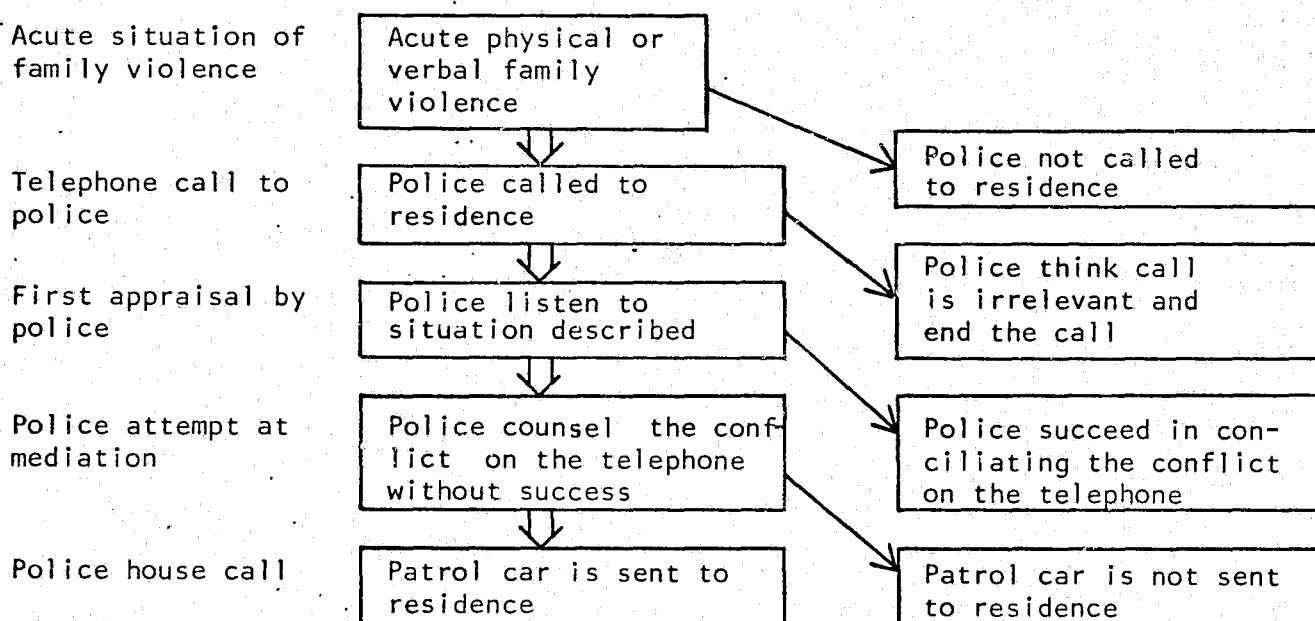
| | | Acuteness | |
|--------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| | | Acute | Chronic |
| Degree of violence | Non-physical | Verbal family violence (Police) | Mental cruelty (Courts) |
| | Physical | Battered women (Police, hospitals) | Battered children syndrome (Hospital, child care) |

Method

There are very few surveys of family violence based on representative samples (in the USA, Straus 1978). It is difficult to evaluate their reliability because of the privacy that surrounds family violence to keep it hidden. Straus (1978) suggests that their estimates of family violence in the US are strongly underrepresentative and also give a doubled figure of its incidence. That seems to be a common feature in studies on family violence, and Marsden (1978, 112-113) claims that researchers have more often overestimated figures in their zeal to convince the public that it is a real social problem. Persson (1977, 17) is in fact very sceptical as to whether it is at all possible to reveal family violence in surveys. The same problem is constantly encountered, however, in alcohol research, and delicate methods have been developed in this field to improve the capability of surveys, so why not here (Mäkelä 1971).

Another way to study family violence is to trace cases originating through physicians, hospitals, social agencies and police. Here it seems to me that one's selection of authority will strongly influence the kind of family violence one goes to study (see figure 1). In this study, police were chosen because the role of police seems much more prominent than that of other authorities and, unlike most other agencies, police keep records on family violence. (Similar studies are e.g. Cumming et alia 1965, McClintock 1978, Nelson 1979).

FIGURE 2. Relations between family violence and police house calls.



A crisis recorded by the police naturally does not cover all kinds of family violence. There is a multistep selection process (figure 2) from the acute family violence situation to the recorded house call to the police. There is not much known of the process of notifying police and the selection process thereby. (Some criteria are discussed in Peltoniemi

& Puustinen 1979, based on the same material used here.) One might expect, for instance, that cases which come to the attention of police are the most aggravated ones although there are hints that even that is not always so (Cumming et alia 1965, Peltoniemi & Puustinen 1979, show some exceptions).

Data

The unit of this research was a house call. This is how police refer to situations when they go to a house to settle a conflict after one of the disputing partners or somebody in the neighbourhood notifies the police.

Information about these house calls was collected by questionnaires in two main police districts of the city of Helsinki. These districts have a staff of 331 policemen and 36 patrol cars at their disposal. They cover practically the whole city and their share of all house calls was 89 per cent in 1977. Questionnaires were completed by officers at the police dispatch desk where telephone calls from the public are answered and patrol cars dispatched. Another questionnaire was completed by officers in patrol cars who actually went to deal with the crisis.

In 1977 there were 8 821 house calls in Helsinki. Of these 320 occurred during the two-week research period in the autumn of 1977 (Oct. 21st - Nov. 4th). There were 222 questionnaires returned from the dispatch desk and 149 from patrol cars. They are naturally mostly overlapping so that there is at least partial information on 264 of the recorded cases (83 per cent).

Reasons for non-response were later traced in discussions with police officers during observation periods. One distinct reason was that house calls center on late weekend nights which are very busy and sometimes did not allow any time to fill in the questionnaires. It was assessed from the interviews and observation material that the data fairly well represent the actual house call situations.

Distribution of house calls

The police of Helsinki have statistics on house calls since 1974. Their

number has grown irregularly, ranging between 8 821 in 1977 and 9 515 in 1975. In 1977, there were more calls at the turn of the year and later in April (figure 3). The number of calls is at a minimum in summer. Monthly fluctuation is rather low.

FIGURE 3. Number of house calls per month in Helsinki in 1977.

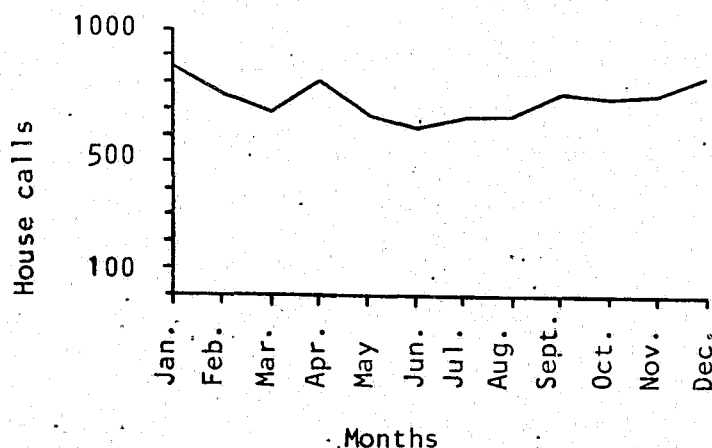


Figure 4 shows the distribution of house calls by weekday and hour: shaded differences in the time boxes illustrate the number of calls. The darker the box, the more calls were made. House calls are heavily concentrated on weekends and late nights. Saturday covers 28 per cent of the cases. Nearly half (43 per cent) of the calls were made between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. Sunday (11 per cent) seems to resemble weekdays. Perhaps the knowledge of a beginning week of work has an influence on social life, as the number of calls reaches a minimum on Monday (8 per cent).

Figure 4 also closely resembles a similar chart of the distribution of alcohol consumption occasions in Finland. These are also concentrated on weekends and the late hours (Simpura 1978, 241). This already indicates that there is a potential link between family violence and the use of alcohol, a link supported by other data. The concentration in itself is natural. Cumming et alia (1965, 278) comment on a similar finding in their study by stressing the special nature of weekends as a socially active time when many types of social phenomena take place. So the correlation does not yet reveal anything about any causal relationship between family violence and alcohol.

FIGURE 4. Distribution of police house calls by weekday and hour.

| HOUR | MO | TU | WE | TH | FR | SA | SU | TOTAL | |
|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|----------|
| | | | | | | | | N | PER CENT |
| 00-01 | /// | /// | /// | /// | | /// | /// | 11 | 4 |
| 01-02 | | | /// | /// | /// | | | 14 | 5 |
| 02-03 | /// | | | | | | /// | 7 | 3 |
| 03-04 | | | | | | | /// | 6 | 2 |
| 04-05 | | | | | | | | 1 | 0 |
| 05-06 | | | | | | /// | | 1 | 0 |
| 06-07 | | | | | | | | 0 | 0 |
| 07-08 | | | | | | | | 0 | 0 |
| 08-09 | | | | | /// | | /// | 3 | 1 |
| 09-10 | /// | /// | | /// | /// | | /// | 8 | 3 |
| 10-11 | | | | | /// | /// | /// | 4 | 2 |
| 11-12 | | | | | | /// | | 2 | 1 |
| 12-13 | | | | | /// | | /// | 2 | 1 |
| 13-14 | | /// | /// | | /// | /// | /// | 6 | 2 |
| 14-15 | | | /// | | /// | /// | | 3 | 1 |
| 15-16 | | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | | 13 | 5 |
| 16-17 | /// | /// | /// | /// | | | /// | 10 | 4 |
| 17-18 | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | 16 | 6 |
| 18-19 | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | 27 | 10 |
| 19-20 | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | 34 | 13 |
| 20-21 | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | 32 | 12 |
| 21-22 | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | 21 | 8 |
| 22-23 | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | 21 | 8 |
| 23-24 | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | /// | 22 | 8 |
| N | 22 | 31 | 33 | 31 | 45 | 73 | 29 | 264 | 99 |
| % | 8 | 12 | 13 | 12 | 17 | 28 | 11 | 101 | |

Social concentration

House calls in Helsinki are concentrated on certain parts of the city. These are areas where residential density is high, the level of income is low and where residents often live on welfare payments. This becomes even more evident when house calls are categorised by the form of housing. There were 13 calls per 10 000 residents in subsidised housing units compared to only four calls per 10 000 residents living in other types of dwellings. A policeman at the dispatch desk says: "In the subsidised housing unit areas there are lots of house calls. These are the most regretful places to work. Many times we already know the family

when the alarm comes. It feels so hopeless to go every week to certain families and take the head of the family to jail. It is so sad to find some people's lives so full of despair with no change for the better. Time after time they fight about the same matters."

The names of those involved in house calls as disturbing parties were compared to the files of city welfare agencies and alcohol clinics. Almost half (43 per cent) of the cases recorded in this study were found to be clients of these agencies. Due to the poor recording methods police used in collecting the complete names and addresses, these figures most probably are minimum estimates. Similar findings appear in McClintock (1978), Nelson (1979) and Thompson (1978). The same is also found in Finnish refuges, in which there is a strong overrepresentation of lower class clients (Peltoniemi 1980).

In spite of the fact that police intervention is a response to an acute crisis, these crises seem to take place quite chronically in some families. Every fourth house call made during the research period were to places already known by the police. In fact there is a "list of trouble cases" on the dispatch desk visible next to the microphone. The list contains addresses for which house call alarms are frequently made. Addresses include brief remarks, like "has a gun", "a vicious dog", "a very aggressive former wrestler" and so on. These places are regarded as dangerous and usually two patrol cars are sent.

The same chronic family violence also occurs in Finnish refuges. During the first six months of operation 11 per cent of calls were repeated (Peltoniemi 1980).

Data on house calls seems to indicate that family violence is concentrated on the lower social strata. Police officers often referred to cases of family violence in middle or upper class families although few such cases existed in the actual data. A few cases were, however, recorded during the research period.

Content of house calls

The house call usually begins with a phone call. The person asking for

help is usually the spouse (42 per cent) or some other near relative. Outsiders (neighbour, housekeeper) making calls form about one third of calls. Approximately one half of the house calls were conflicts between spouses. Conflicts between other family members were also common, especially conflicts between parents and teenage children. The researched house calls can be divided into three types:

- Family conflicts (60 per cent)
- Conflicts between the family and outsiders (16 per cent)
- Non-family conflicts (24 per cent)

About one fourth of the house calls cannot easily be included in family violence but are rather quarrels between drunken persons drinking in a home environment. The classification also reveals the complexity of the situations. Besides marital violence an important group is violence between one or both of the parents and teenage children. Often the situation was that an adult son threatened his mother to get some money. In some conflicts a close outsider (sometimes even a lover of the wife) was involved in the marital dispute.

In two out of three house calls the main disturbing party was a male. Police estimated that in every seventh case a female was clearly more in the role of a disturbing party and in the remainder of the cases it was hard to determine who caused disturbance and who was the victim. In interviews policemen also stressed that in recent years the proportion of females causing disturbance in house calls had rapidly increased.

Children were the object of battery only in three cases. Similarly in Finnish refuges, violence against young children was recorded only in eight per cent of the cases (Peltoniemi 1980). Though family violence was not usually directed towards children, they often witnessed quarreling. In 42 per cent of the researched cases there were small children in the house. Even verbal family violence between adults may of course be harmful to the children as they do not understand the quarrel between their parents but feel concerned and worried about it (cf. Cork 1969). This finding also seems to confirm that violence on small children and on adults are different.

The course of events

Most house call conflicts are characterised by verbal arguments, shouts, threatening expressions and destruction of property. Threatening may have some physical traits as e.g. pushing. House calls are, however, not as violent as one would imagine. In every fourth case (26 per cent) some member of the conflict has been battered: in nearly half (45 per cent) of the cases this was the wife and in ten per cent of the cases it was the husband. In Finnish refuges, more physical violence was experienced. In nearly half (47 per cent) of the cases there had been elements of physical violence (Peltoniemi 1980).

The small amount of battering is surprising as it is expected that the police are probably called most often in a real emergency. This finding seems so to justify the differentiation between physical and verbal family violence.

Table 1. Content of conflicts evoking police house calls.

| | Number | Per cent of all conflicts ¹⁾ |
|--|--------|---|
| Loud arguing | 56 | 38 |
| Threatening behaviour | 64 | 43 |
| Destruction of property | 22 | 15 |
| Throwing family member(s) out of the house | 14 | 9 |
| Battery | 39 | 26 |
| Not known | 12 | 8 |
| Total | 207 | 139 ²⁾ |

¹ N=149

² The percentage exceeds 100 because more than one event may be reported in a given conflict.

Alcohol

The viewpoint of the police is that alcohol almost always has a role in quarrels which result in house calls. A policeman states: "If the cause

of the house call is not a drunken person it is a question of a mentally disturbed person. When sober people are quarreling they do not call the police."

Of a total of 320 house calls 39 involved cases of battery. In these cases the assaulting party was nearly invariably drunk (90 per cent) and in 58 per cent of the cases both parties were drunk. In Finnish refuges, somebody involved in the last acute crisis had been drinking in 64 per cent of the cases (Peltoniemi 1980). Earlier it was shown how police house calls are concentrated largely on the same times when alcohol is consumed in Finland. According to Wolfgang & Ferracuti (1967) alcohol is often involved in violence in general. Family violence seems in this respect be similar to other kinds of violence.

The role of the police

The policemen in Helsinki feel that house calls do not belong to the "real work of the police". The statement is linked to the finding that in house calls the police turn from a professional to an amateur (Cumming et alia 1965, 227). Police feel that the role of maintaining order is closer to their ideal and feel uneasy about the role of a peacemaker. (On these two roles of police: see Manning 1977, 112, Banton 1964).

In spite of the uneasiness police feel in dealing with house calls which differ from their traditional role, a good peacemaker is appreciated by the police. The police also emphasize that they like to resolve conflicts through discussion rather than with the traditional more severe measures. In reality, however, police usually seem to rely more on concrete measures (table 2). One sign of this is that the police stayed inside a residence only on an average of 25 minutes. In most cases, calming down the parties through discussion received attention, but instead the measures taken were concrete. Discussion alone was resorted to in 15 per cent of the cases.

Table 2. Measures taken by the police in house calls:

| | Number | Per cent |
|---|--------|----------|
| <u>No measures needed as</u> | | |
| - the disturbing party had left the residence before police entered | 20 | 14 |
| - the situation calmed down once police entered | 10 | 7 |
| <u>Measures taken by</u> | | |
| - reasoning with disputing partners | 21 | 15 |
| - removing disturbing party from residence | 42 | 30 |
| - taking disturbing party to jail | 49 | 34 |
| Total | 142 | 100 |

(No information in 7 cases)

In about two thirds of the cases some concrete measures are taken by either removing the disturbing party from the residence or by arresting the person. Police rarely take any further steps. Only in 13 per cent (or 20) of the cases did police resort to some other agency and usually that involved the investigation office of the police. In some more cases (38 per cent or 56) police advised a partner in the crisis to contact other agencies. Also here, referral advice most often concerned the investigation office of the police or hospital, both in order to bring a case to court against the assaulting. (According to the Finnish Penal Code the victim and not the police has to bring the case to court in minor assaults.) Problems in the role of the police in the treatment of family violence have been noted especially in Canada and the USA, and special crisis intervention systems have been developed (see Wolfgang & Ferracuti 1967, 301-303, Bard & Zacker 1974, Jaffe et alia 1978).

Discussion

The distribution of family violence in different social strata and the role of different social problems in it seem to be controversial issues in public debate. Much of the old everyday knowledge is presented as

false myths. Steinmetz & Straus (1974) to name class myth, sex myth and catharsis myth and many others. Pizzev (1974) adds the alcohol myth to the list. A closer look at these myths often reveals that this is a question of controversial explanation theories and that little evidence is provided for or against these myths. Various samples and methods of studies also often make a reliable comparison of results very difficult, if at all possible and complicates reviewing the literature. I concentrate here on two findings in this study which seem to have the most practical consequences: concentration of family violence on lower social strata and the powerful role of alcohol in house calls.

Steinmetz & Straus (1974, 7) state that "the evidence for concluding that working class and lower class families are more violent than middle class families is by no means clear." Later, however, they conclude that it is likely that family violence increases the lower one goes in the social strata continuum. This could be explained, for instance, by Goode's (1977) resource theory, pointing out how lower class people have fewer possibilities to solve their crisis and therefore use more violence. There are many studies which seem to confirm the strong overrepresentation of family violence in lower social strata (McClintock 1978, Nelson 1979, Thompson 1978).

It is certainly important to make surveys of family violence in different subgroups of society as well as in different cultures to be able to compare the nature and incidence of family violence. In studies which show differences in the incidence of family violence there is also nearly always the comment stressing the fact that "family violence is more likely to become visible in lower social strata." From a treatment-oriented point of view, this is equally important. To be able to treat family violence we need to know the mechanism which possibly causes that family violence diversely comes to the attention of the authorities and treatment organisations (and researchers).

Cumming et alia (1965, 286) state how "only a certain kind of citizen take his marital troubles to (the police)." A Finnish policeman in Helsinki states that a policeman "really has to think over intervening in a conflict in a well-to-do family." These statements point to the different appearance of family violence, not only from the side of

families but also from the standpoint of the authorities. So instead of just referring to possible differences, empirical research on this aspect is needed.

Thompson & Gilby (1979, 7) regretfully state that "the issue of whether or not alcohol is related to family assaults cannot be determined by reviewing the literature." There are here a number of studies showing positive correlation between family violence and alcohol (Gayford 1978, Nelson 1979, Thompson & Gilby 1979) and others where correlation is found to be much smaller (Bard & Zacker 1974, Dobash & Dobash 1977). Both findings may naturally hold as much truth, as researched populations often markedly differ. Again there is little empirical evidence available on this point. Epstein et alia (1977, 552) state how: "despite historical and popular acceptance of alcohol's role in marital violence, modern day empirical evidence to support such claims is quite limited." Further and deeper research is urgently called for in this respect as it certainly is of great practical importance in the treatment of family violence.

And, finally, it seems to me that even the concept of family violence needs greater clarification before we can successfully try to treat this problem. Family violence has been understood too simply as a totality. I feel that there is a complex phenomenon in question, and perhaps even several phenomena loosely interlinked. To treat family violence properly would require an understanding of this complexity and the treatment of each kind of family violence in a specific manner. Family violence in this way largely resembles the concept of alcoholism which was thought to be a total concept and was not really broken down into different subfactors until very recently.

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