

# English summary

## Violent assaults on children

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In Sweden, the number of reported assaults against children aged 0 to 6 registered by the police has increased substantially during the 1990s. Offences committed by a perpetrator known to the child more than doubled, for example, between the years 1990 and 1998 (from 330 to 709 reported offences). The current study into violence against young children reported to the police is to be seen against the background of this rise in the level of reported offences, in combination with a growing interest in and an increased need for expertise relating to this type of offence.

The study's objective is to provide new insights into this form of crime and also to attempt to discover the causes behind the substantial increase in the number of reported assaults against children registered by the police during the 1990s. The study relates to assaults on young children (0 to 6 years of age) within the family, and is based primarily on a sample of police offence reports from the years 1990 and 1997<sup>1</sup>. Cases of violence within the family, which are thus the focus of the study, comprise approximately 70 per cent of the total number of assaults against young children reported to the police.

### The victims and the perpetrators

The survey includes 434 victims. Boys comprise a larger proportion (57 per cent) of the total number of victims than girls (43 per cent). The number of children assaulted within the family context increases with age.

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<sup>1</sup> All the reports from 1990, and a systematic sample of those from 1997 (every other report), nation-wide.

Just over two-thirds of the perpetrators are men, and slightly less than one-third are women. Stepparents comprise 15 per cent of perpetrators. Fully two-thirds of the victims have divorced parents. This means that the family situation of the victims is markedly different from that of children in Sweden as a whole.

## Injuries resulting from the violence

The majority of assaults against children reported to the police result in minor physical injuries or no injuries at all. Assaults on children are characterised however by fact that in certain cases the most serious injuries may be of a psychological nature. We might also compare with adults who report that they have been assaulted. Two-thirds of these also have only minor injuries or no injuries at all. The proportion of assaulted children receiving serious injuries has fallen from 13 to 10 per cent whilst the number of victims has increased.

The data show that at least 38 per cent of the victims included in the study have been exposed to repeated violence. The real figure is very probably considerably higher than this, however.

## Changes in reporting patterns

There have been a number of changes with regard to the groups reporting assaults of this kind. The proportion of cases reported by doctors and other health-care professionals has dropped from 16 per cent in 1990 to 5 per cent in 1997. At the same time there has been an increase in reports from the social services. Doctors probably see cases of assault that are much more clear-cut than those that social services (or child-care) personnel come into contact with. This finding indicates an increased propensity to report cases of this kind.

## New sections of the population are being reported for assaults on children

Individuals with a limited education and those on low incomes are clearly over-represented among the perpetrators relative to their proportions in the population as a whole. Unemployment levels are also higher among the perpetrators of these assaults than in the population in general. This over-representation remains when controls are run for levels of education and income.

Between 1990 and 1997 there has been a pronounced change in the sub-groups of the population that are being reported to the police for assaults on children. The proportion of individuals with high levels of education and high incomes has increased noticeably among the suspected perpetrators. The proportion of individuals with a university (or equivalent)

education has for example increased from 4 per cent in 1990 to 18 per cent in 1997 (compared with an increase from 23 per cent to 28 per cent in the population as a whole). Despite this change in pattern, individuals with a lower socio-economic status remain over-represented. These findings indicate two things; firstly that there is a negative relationship between socio-economic status and assaults on children. Even if differences between sub-groups of the population regarding the risk of being reported to the police are taken into account, the relationship would probably remain. Secondly, the dark figure relating to assaults on children has dropped as a result of the increased propensity to report. This has led to new groups being reported for the offence.

### **An over-representation of unemployed persons among the perpetrators**

Whilst the unemployed are still over-represented among those reported to the police for assaults on children, their level of over-representation diminished between the years 1990 and 1997. The reason for this is that during the 1990s unemployment has affected completely new groups, where the potential risk for assaults on children is considerably lower than for those counted among the unemployed in 1990.

### **Perpetrators with a criminal record**

Among the perpetrators there is a group of individuals with extensive criminal records. Almost half of the perpetrators had been convicted of offences prior to being reported for the assault on a child. These individuals had accumulated a substantially higher average number of convictions than that of the population of convicted offenders in general. Furthermore these individuals constitute a group of convicted offenders with a high propensity for using violence.

### **Country of birth**

Immigrants (persons born abroad) are over-represented among the perpetrators. They comprised 35 per cent of the perpetrators in 1990 and 39 per cent in 1997, compared with 9 and 11 per cent of the population respectively. Swedes with an immigrant background on the other hand (persons with at least one parent born abroad) were not over-represented in relation to their proportion in the population as a whole.

Positive attitudes toward the practise of corporal punishment in child rearing is probably one of the reasons for the over-representation. There are only a few countries besides Sweden where it is forbidden for parents to physically chastise their own children.

## An increased reporting propensity

A number of the study's findings indicate that there has been an increase in the propensity to report cases of assault on young children, and that it is this increase that is responsible for most, if not all, of the rise in the number of such offences reported to the police.

A closer examination of the official statistics relating to offences reported to the police during the 1990s also suggests an increase in the propensity to report. Cases of less serious violence have increased during this period whilst the more serious assaults have decreased. If the actual level of assaults against children were increasing, this ought to result in an increase in the number of cases of more serious assault.

The changed socio-economic structure, with a much larger proportion of well-educated and high-income households, is also suggestive of an increased reporting propensity. If there had been a real increase in the level of assaults against children at the societal level, then it is highly unlikely that such an increase would be most tangible among groups with a higher social status.

## Real changes in the level of assaults against children

The results presented in this report cannot provide a definitive answer to the question of whether assaults on children have increased during the 1990s or whether they have remained at a stable level or even decreased. There are a number of empirical findings however that suggest that the level of such assaults has remained stable or even fallen. At the same time no indications have been found which contradict this picture. This in no way obscures the fact that the level of this type of offence is far too high. It is important to be aware that the reported offences are no more than the tip of the iceberg.

## How is the number of assaults against children to be reduced?

What measures can society employ in order to reduce this form of crime? One conclusion that can be drawn from the current study is that it is important even in the future to ensure that the level of attention focused on these offences remains high, and preferably that this level of attention increases. This has two effects. It means that more and more people are made aware of the fact that it is in fact a crime – and what is more a serious one – to hit one's children. In addition, the risk of being reported is felt to be greater, which may be particularly effective among groups with a higher social status.