

THE UNSEEN VIOLENCE

Violence in the Family

In 2010, German police registered approximately 6 million offences in their crime statistics. Less than 10 per cent of these offences involved violence against persons. However, police crime statistics do not necessarily reflect actual crime levels, but depend on the willingness of the population to report them. They tell us nothing about the “dark figure” of crime, and this applies particularly to the family domain, which is also not documented separately in German crime statistics.



According to dark figure studies, within any single year, 10 per cent of all women are victims of physical violence from within the family, whereas less than 1–2 per cent of all males and females are victims of physical violence from outside the family. In general, sexual and violent crimes within the family are even considered to be extremely low-risk crimes because of the low probability of prosecution. Due to the anonymity and privacy of intimate relationships, acts of violence within the family or partnership have a very low visibility for observers compared to violence in public spaces. In addition, social taboos greatly impede any communication about such incidents: family violence feeds on privacy. Even the victims are often afraid to make their suffering public. Hence offenses within the family are the exception to the criminological rule that the willingness to report crimes grows with increasing severity. This is why it is often too late when the police and youth offices become aware of such grievances.

For women and particularly for children, there is nowhere else in society where they are more frequently victims of violent assault. The risk from outside the family or partnership does not even come close to being

comparable. Moreover, society does not perceive the quantitatively even more devastating incidents of child neglect as a form of passive violence. Both sexual and physical child abuse, together with neglect, continue to represent one of the most severe grievances in family childrearing. According to this author's recent research on physical violence, at least 20% of all children have experienced severe violence from a parent at least once in their upbringing.

Although dark figure studies indicate that violence is slowly declining in both society and the family, by far the highest risk of being a victim of violence is still to be found within proximal social space. Nobody physically abuses children, women or men more often than their close relatives. As a result, the true risks are misunderstood in the public discourse. The strongest potential threat does not come from violent youth but from partners, friends, and acquaintances. It is not without reason that some scientists studying the family describe it as a "battlefield" or a "violent institution." Nonetheless, from a sober and empirical perspective, the risk of personally becoming a victim or even a perpetrator of violence increases when one founds a family - particularly when the family does not remain childless.

Violence in the family is also not primarily a lower class problem. Although dark figure studies repeatedly reveal a relation between child abuse and membership of the lower social classes along with familial stressors such as unemployment and massive partner conflicts, the fundamental risk of violence is to be found in all families and partnerships.

The public outcry over juvenile violence, however, largely ignores its familial roots. In international research on family violence, it has long been a known fact that an upbringing marked by violence is responsible for numerous developmental risks in children. These include severe psychosocial disturbances, later drug addiction, major problems at school, the emergence of antisocial behavior and subsequent delinquency and, in particular, violent crimes. The experience of violence within the family has a strong impact on children in many ways. Such children more frequently seek violently disposed peer groups and they show a preference for violent media products and computer games. Accordingly, they see themselves as living in a world ruled by violence. Beforehand, however, most of these young people have been exposed to an upbringing marked by excessive violence and other deficiencies. In turn, many of their parents also come from similar multiproblem families. The basic problem here is breaking this vicious cycle.

One important step in this direction is the introduction of an absolute legal prohibition of violence in childrearing. This is why the 1989 Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child internationally agreed on the right to be reared without violence. On a national level, 18 European states have now placed such a right on a legal footing. They have all oriented their legislation toward Sweden, which was the first country to legally prohibit corporal punishment in family childrearing in 1979. Since November 2000, German law also states: "Children have a right to be reared without violence. Corporal punishment, mental cruelty, and other degrading measures are impermissible" (§ 1631 Abs.2. Civil Code [BGB], translated).

The author has studied the effects of these prohibitions in a comparative study of European countries. More than 5,000 parents from five different European countries were surveyed in face-to-face interviews. The countries selected for the study were Austria, France, Germany, Spain and Sweden. At the time of the survey in 2007, the only countries apart from Sweden with a legal prohibition were Austria (introduced in 1989) and Germany (2000). Neither France nor Spain belonged to this group. The main finding was that childrearing is freer from corporal punishment in countries with a legally codified prohibition than in countries that do not prohibit it. This can be seen most clearly in Sweden. For generations, regular campaigns and actions have kept public attention focused on the law. The successes in Sweden since the introduction of the legal prohibition show that the level of violence in family childrearing can be more than halved within one generation. This can be seen by looking at three sanctioning subgroups:

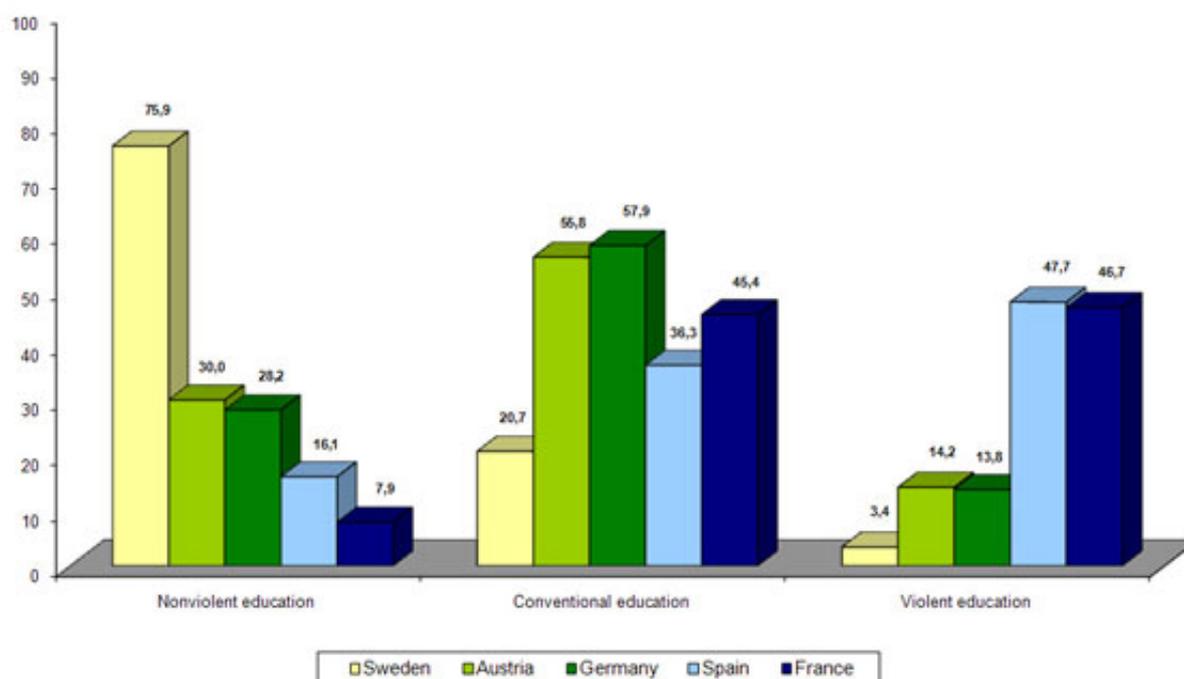
- Nonviolent childrearing: parents who rear their children without even mild forms of corporal punishment
- Conventional childrearing: parents who use mild but no severe corporal punishment
- Violent childrearing: parents who also fall back on severe corporal punishments such as beating with objects, severe beating.

In 2007, three-quarters of Swedish parents were rearing their children without any kinds of corporal punishment. In France and Spain, in contrast, almost one-half of the parents were using severe corporal

punishments. Hence, a legal ban can lead to a lasting break in the intergenerational cycle of violence and open the way for medium-term change. The study also showed that a legal prohibition of corporal punishment reduces psychological forms of violence as well. Moreover, in these countries the ban also makes parents more sensitive toward violence in childrearing. A further important effect is that when parents suspect a case of child abuse in their neighborhood, they are much less likely to do nothing. More of them will turn to family counseling centers to ensure that the abused child receives help. This destroys an important breeding ground for violence in the family - neighbours who look away.

Hence, the results of this study deliver support for several arguments in favor of a legal ban on violence in childrearing. Therefore, other countries should also apply such legal reforms to reduce violence. However, to achieve a sustainable, lasting effect, these need to be flanked by intensive and long-term information campaigns - as the example of Sweden shows. If the prevention of violence is to be effective, it has to be introduced far earlier in the family and in childrearing. There is a need to break the vicious cycle of violence by introducing a legal ban.

Sanction groups (percentages)



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