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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The police patrols and children experiencing domestic violence

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Using data from a study on police officers' encounters with domestic violence victims and a study on children experiencing domestic violence, this article examines how officers decide whether and how to communicate with children in emergency situations, and how children experience these encounters. Officers' views on such communication diverge; usually, communication is motivated by the need to determine next actions. Children recall little communication and describe officers as faceless, nameless and genderless. The authors argue for recognizing the preventive role of officers on emergency calls. Official policies and guidelines should formally acknowledge and clarify the importance of communication with children.

Keywords: children experiencing domestic violence; police; prevention; emergency call; response

Introduction

Domestic violence is recognized as a widespread social, psychological, medical, judicial and financial problem across the world, striking against not only men and women, but also children (WHO, 2013). Encounters between the police and children who are victims of domestic violence take place daily around the world. Research has found that children are important in regard to whether or not the mothers report the abuse (Novisky & Peralta, 2015), and that the presence of children increases the likelihood of an arrest (Tatum & Pence, 2015). Nevertheless, it is an overlooked aspect of domestic violence and an issue seldom if ever given the recognition it deserves. Hence, these children can be understood as 'silent victims', even though millions have experiences with the police during emergencies. In fact, the police are the first professionals many children come in contact with in connection to the violence that takes place in their homes. This may also be the first time that the violence becomes visible to anyone outside of the immediate family, as the subject of domestic violence is still very much taboo. As argued by Stanley, Miller, Foster, and Thomson (2011), when police enter onto family premises, it exposes the violence to the public gaze, perhaps after years of episodes behind closed doors. This moment, when the police enter the family home, may be difficult and entail strong feelings of vulnerability, anger or even fear for all involved, but it may also represent a moment of great opportunity.

In this article, we focus on the most common arena where police officers meet children who experience the violence: the family home after an emergency call from a family member, neighbor or someone else acquainted with the family, The family

home is an arena where the patrol may face a number of different scenarios and a multitude of different events. The open, unpredictable and indeterminate nature of police operations, especially in the private sphere, is documented in several previous studies (Aas, 2009; Hoyle, 1998). In addition to focusing on the police officers' entering into the children's home during a domestic violence emergency, in this article, we also consider how children and adolescents themselves understand and experience police interventions. Specifically, we ask: What views do police officers hold on communication with children? How do children understand the role of the police and what are their experiences of encounters with the police during an emergency? Shedding light on these issues should be beneficial to practitioners, policy-makers as well as researchers inside and outside the Nordic countries, as we all share an interest in combating this global problem and improve violence exposed children's lives.

Background

Responding to domestic violence emergencies

The police in both the UK and the USA have been criticized for decades for their practice in relation to domestic violence (Leisenring, 2012; Melton, 1999; Richardson-Foster, Stanley, Miller, & Thomson, 2012). In the USA, for example, police have been blamed for not reporting child maltreatment cases to the relevant authorities (Osofsky et al., 2004), and police training and responses criticized for being gauged to severe violent acts (Eigenberg, Kappeler, & McGuffee, 2012) when in fact 'the hallmarks of violence in abuse cases are its frequency and duration, not its severity' (Stark, 2012, p. 201). However, in recent years, there has been progress in police handling of domestic violence issues, in regard to both identification and response. In particular, argue Richardson-Foster et al. (2012), progress has been made as police have widened their focus to include children as victims. This has been achieved by programmes such as the Domestic Violence Home Visit Intervention which has a special focus on children exposed to domestic violence and their needs (Smith Stover, 2012), and the Violence Intervention Programme for Children and Families which was developed to raise awareness among officers and provide officer training (Osofsky et al., 2004).

Similar progress can be seen in the Nordic countries. The Swedish Police have been criticized by organisations such as Save the Children Sweden for inadequate responses to children involved in domestic violence episodes (Frisk, 2003; Nordin, 2009). The inadequacies are taken up in several policy documents, underlining the importance of recognizing children as victims of domestic violence, reporting to child welfare services and including children in police reports (Rikspolisstyrelsen, 2009). Children experiencing domestic violence have gradually achieved a clearer presence in the governing documents of the Norwegian Police, including recent guidance from the Norwegian National Police Directorate (Politidirektoratet, 2008) and the recent White Paper on 'Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence' (Justis-og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2013).

Limited research on children's experiences of the police

A number of studies and articles have addressed police response to domestic violence (see Aas, 2009; Lundberg, 2001; Melton, 1999; Stark, 2012) and the experiences of abused women with the police (see Grøvdal, 2012; Hoyle, 1998; McGee, 2000), from a range of perspectives. However, there is a paucity of research on the responses of police patrols to children experiencing domestic violence, and on children's experiences of the

police. In the UK, 54 children who had experiences of domestic violence were interviewed about topics including their experiences with the police. The children indicated that the police officers who came into their homes did not acknowledge them or addressed their needs, even if it was the child who had placed the emergency call (Mullender et al., 2002). Also in the UK, Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) interviewed 19 young people with experiences of domestic violence, in five focus groups. The young people described feeling excluded during the incidents, and emphasized the need to be acknowledged, heard and believed. Similar findings are reported by Swanston, Bowyer, and Vetere (2014) who interviewed five children age 8–13, who described feeling powerless and that little was done to keep the family safe.

Methods and analysis

This article is based on data collected for an evaluation of Norwegian police activity regarding domestic violence. The purpose of the evaluation was to contribute to White Paper 15 on ‘Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence’ (Justis-og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2013). In this study, 24 police officers were interviewed about their experiences of domestic violence. One of the central questions in the interviews focused on how children were handled in emergency situations. The police officers were first asked to talk freely about their professional experiences with children. They were then asked more specific questions regarding conversations with children at the scene, how to safeguard children and their collaboration with other stakeholders such as the Child Welfare Services.

The informants served in four different police districts (Oslo, Hedmark, Salten and Søndre Buskerud). They operated in both frontline service and specialized functions related to domestic violence. The specialists had between 15 and 20 years of service in the police. Police officers who still worked in operational service (patrol duty) had on average worked in law enforcement for 10 years. The group included 13 male officers and 11 female officers. As an employee of the Police College, the second author has amassed a large network of police officers over the years. Some of the informants were recruited through local management. Police officers were informed by e-mail about the project and the purpose of the interview. The letter stressed that the participation was voluntary, and the informants’ anonymity was assured. The interviews, lasting on average 1 h, were conducted individually at the officers’ local police station or at the Police University College.

This article also draws on a study of 25 children and adolescents from 8 to 20 years old (the majority between 13 and 17 years old) who live or have previously lived at refuges for abused women in Norway. Ten of them are immigrants, defined here as born in another country or having biological parents born in another country than Norway. All of them had experienced their stepfathers’/fathers’ violence against their mothers, most of them for the majority of their lives, and half of them had been physically abused themselves. The purpose of the study was to shed light on the actions of the children during violent episodes. All children were asked in the interviews about their contact with authorities, including the police. Thirteen of the 25 children had been in contact with the police. A few had only occasional contact, but most could recall numerous times the police had come to their home after a violent episode. Some remembered periods of weekly or monthly visits by the police. One child had made an emergency call to the police himself during an episode in which the perpetrator threatened the lives of both him and his mother.

The mothers and children were selected by the refuge staff and the researcher together, on the basis of age, psychosocial situation and security issues. The staff and the researcher informed each mother and child about the project. If they were interested in participating, written consent was obtained from both the mother and the child. The children were informed both orally and in writing of their right to terminate participation at any time. The services of an interpreter were used when needed. Furthermore, the mothers were informed of the obligation of the researcher to inform Norwegian Child Welfare Services if the well-being of any child was at stake.

Both studies followed the ethical principles recommended for the social sciences in Norway and were subjected to standard ethical investigations by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service.

Taking our starting point in the research questions, all discourse on communication with children (interviews with officers) and the understandings and experiences of the police (interviews with children) were thematically analysed by first and second author individually, in order to identify patterns in the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes identified in the data from the interviews with officers were then compared to and contrasted, by both authors jointly, against the themes from the interviews with the children. The findings as a whole were then placed in a context.

Findings

We will now look at the children's perception of the role of the police, regardless of if they have had personal experiences of the police or not. We will continue by showing how children who have met the police during an emergency have experienced these encounters. To gain a deeper understanding of this empirical data, the second part of this section provides insight into police officers' views on communication with children, analysing obstacles and divergences.

How children understand the role of the police

Only two children in this study remembered any communication from the police, but many expressed, in a number of ways, that they would have appreciated more contact. In general, the children in the study had great respect for, and trust in, the police. When asked whom to call if they need help, the answer was often family members or friends, but if the situation was serious, the answer was the police. Isabell, 18 years old, explained that the windows in their apartment 'shook from his loud screams' all through her childhood, but the neighbours never called the police. If the call had been made, years of suffering could have been avoided, she concluded. An intervention by the police means an end to the violence. However, many children expressed uncertainty and concern about what they could expect from the police. Simon was 13 years old and had lived all his life with his biological father, who had subjected his mother to severe physical violence. When asked if he has ever thought about calling the police during one of the episodes, he responded:

It would have been kind of weird to call the police. 'Hi, I live on X Street and my father is beating up my mother right now'. That would have been weird ... they would have come, and then mom would have taken dad back. And I would have gotten beaten up. He has threatened us so many times. If anyone ever called the police he would kill us. He would put duct tape on our mouths and lots of those kinds of things.

As for most children in this study, calling the police to ask for help was not an option for Simon. Like the rest of the children, he had contemplated it, reasoned about pros and cons, and come to the conclusion not to do it. There are several possible explanations for this. In the interview, Simon reasoned about what to say if he called the police, what words to use and if they would believe him. The very situation of being a child asking for help for his mother feels ‘weird’. Simon also brought up another important reason why children might be reluctant to call the police against the will of their mother or father: the result might be retaliation and severe punishment, or perhaps, in Simon’s understanding, even death.

In line with Powell et al. (2008), some children in this study described the police as using brutal methods and unlimited force, focusing on the high power and punitive role of the police, rather than on ways the police assist people in times of need. It is important to note however that these children do not have any actual experience of the police. The image of the police as an institution that catches criminals at any cost rather than helping victims has made them reluctant to seek help. Grace, who was 18 years old, had lived all her life with an extremely violent father. During the interview, she explained that she did not dare to call the police because ‘they might have kicked down the door like on TV or something, I didn’t know’. Along the same lines, Makena, age 12, explained that she never thought of calling the police since all they do is ‘catch thieves and such, people who are mean, they take them to prison’. Since her father was neither a thief nor mean, and since she only wanted him to stop being violent, not be punished by being sent to prison, she did not call for help. This image of the police as a punitive authority mainly for adults may in fact prevent children from reaching out and seeking contact themselves.

Children’s encounters with the police during an emergency

All children with first-hand experience of meeting the police were asked to describe the encounter. It was striking how little they had to say about the meetings. Ronny, 20 years old, had lived all his life with violent stepfathers and an alcoholic mother. He described severe neglect throughout his childhood. He recalled the police coming to his house.

[They came to the house] many, many times ... they took mom and brought her to a cell to sleep it off, and I slept without my mother. She was gone ... I slept in my room, my stepfather was at home, sleeping. They came, got mom, and left.

This scenario of the police entering the house, taking Ronny’s mother with them, and leaving him with the violent stepfather repeated itself over and over again. At no time, according to Ronny, did they talk to him, introduce themselves to him or offer him any help.

As mentioned earlier, a number of potential approaches are available to the police when they arrive at the home. They can arrest the perpetrator, mediate between the actors, call in other agencies and/or separate the parties involved, as in the case of Ronny. Another option is to do none of the above. This approach is common, for a number of reasons. During the time it takes the patrol to arrive at the home, things may have calmed down. If there is no commotion, and no one at the scene wishes to file a report, the officers might leave without taking further action. The possibility that the police would not take action was one of the fears described by the children that prevented them from reaching out for help. Sissel was 16 years old. When she was 13, her

mother met a man on the Internet who moved in with them shortly thereafter. After a year of chaos in the home, during which Sissel's mother was severely abused, the man was forced to move out. Sissel had a lot of experience with the police, as relatives or her mother's friends had called the police out of concern for the family. In the evenings, Sissel sat in her bedroom listening to the screams and the sounds of her mother being abused. When asked if she herself ever contemplated calling the police, she answered,

If I called the police, and if they came, everything would have been calm. Because it takes time before they arrive, and each fight does not last that long. So maybe they will be late, and then mom will find out I was the one who called the police. Then Jonny [Sissel's mother's boyfriend] will be pissed and he will take that out on my mother or me. I wouldn't know if that would happen.

Sissel's experience of the police was that they were always 'too late'. Based on this experience, she drew the conclusion that the risk was too high, that the police would leave the scene, and Jonny would retaliate. Like Simon's case, described above, Sissel's case also reminds us of the central role of children in domestic violence cases. The children describe and position themselves as actors with power to alter the progression of events, to protect and to stop the violence (Överlien, 2012). It also underlines how important it is for police officers who arrive after an emergency call to a home that appears calm and quiet to reflect on what will happen after they leave and to find out who made the phone call. If the child called, and if there is a risk of retaliation, the safety of the child needs to be assured. Staying a few minutes extra, asking follow-up questions and observing verbal or physical signals between the family members, might save a child from suffering or even death.

Two children out of the 13 who had experiences with the police could recall the police talking to them about the violence. Both were the primary victim of their fathers/stepfathers. Alexander, age 12, described calling the police for help:

I managed to get hold of the phone, then I managed to call the police right away ... I was really scared and said that he had tried to strangle me and then they came ... They came within 15 minutes I think.

For Alexander, encountering the police was a positive experience, from the phone call itself to the outcome of the intervention. He was taken seriously, the police came quickly, and the help he received was swift and, from his perspective, adequate. The officers were 'nice' to him, and asked him what he wanted. He told them he wanted them to take him and his mother to a safe place, and was taken to a refuge for abused women. When asked what he would recommend other children in his situation to do, he answered that 'the police are the best to call'. He had made his own security plan in case the man came back 'to get him'; the police had a central role in it. His only criticism was that he wished that the officers had informed him about his options and what would happen to his stepfather.

For the rest of the children, the police officers who came to their homes were faceless, nameless and genderless. None of them could remember if the officers had dark or blonde hair, if they seemed nice or unpleasant, or what their names were. Many of them, however, expressed a desire that the police would acknowledge and talk to them – 'because it is not that smart to lie to the police'. This statement, by David, age 16, can be understood as a way of saying that talking to a police officer represents a chance

to be honest and open about what has happened. This view of a police officer as someone you can speak freely to opens up possibilities too valuable not to exploit.

Police officers' communication with children

Divergent guidelines

The authorities regulating the Norwegian police provide them with various, sometimes conflicting guidelines for communicating with children in emergency situations. The Police Directorate's guidance from 2009 encouraged patrols to ask 'the children open-ended questions to clarify the situation', and to 'be aware that this may be the only opportunity the child has to say that he or she is not doing so well' (Politidirektoratet, 2008, p. 28). A Public Prosecutions circular (No. 3/2008), however, makes the following recommendation:

If it is necessary to question a child about possible violence between the parents, the gentlest method may be questioning by a judge, so that the child does not have to explain himself more than once.

The Norwegian Criminal Procedure Act § 239 refers to the investigative interviewing of children under the age of 16 by specially trained police investigators. A key issue is how much the law allows for questioning children in the acute phase.

The police internal disciplinary portal online gives an example of how police patrols can conduct interviews of children in emergency situations, where children above a certain age are made aware of their criminal procedural rights as witnesses. It is expressed as follows:

The police have been notified that your father may have done something to you and your mother that is not allowed. There is a rule that says that children over 12 do not need to tell the police about illegal things that your mother or your father may have done (what do you think about it ...?). But if you think it's okay to tell me what you know, you should know that I want to hear. And then it's important that everything you tell me is true. (Politiets fagportal, 2012)

Reflecting the divergent views from the police authorities, police officers themselves held very different views on the issue of conversations with children. Officer 1 said that police officers generally feel uncertain when speaking with children. The main source of uncertainty is what officers may talk to children about, and the interview material divides roughly in half when it comes to the following question: to what extent should officers talk to children about violence they have experienced? Officer 2 referred to the possibility of a subsequent investigation (a judge hearing) when she said: 'I do not ask what happened. The child can still say – that Dad hit Mom – you have to help my mom – but we try to turn the conversation away from violence ... a bit because we have the criminal procedure'. Officer 3 expressed a common attitude among investigators that conversations with children in domestic violence cases is in their domain, not that of the patrol officers. Officer 4 recalled that there was a period during which front-line officers who talked to children about criminal activity came under heavy criticism by professional experts on judicial examination. The rationale was that such communication could damage the subsequent investigation. She adds, however, that this attitude has changed in recent years.

Officer 5 pointed to a Norwegian Supreme Court ruling which held that Penal Code § 219 also applied to a child's experience of the abuse of one parent by another.¹ The child then has the status of a victim, she says, adding on behalf of specialist police officers: 'I think that the victim has a right to be heard – then I think it would be dereliction of duty not to talk to the child'. Several specialist police officers claimed that patrol conversations with children are an advantage rather than a disadvantage for the judge hearing. The judge hearing can proceed from the conversation that took place with the patrol officers. Patrol disclosure of children's experiences can also create a condition for the judge hearing, when the child gives the patrol information for further investigation.

Officer 6 did not worry about compromising a subsequent investigation, as long as children are asked open, non-leading questions. Leading questions, on the other hand, may weaken the evidentiary value of the answer. If you ask, for example, 'Did your dad beat your mom?' she explained, you have put words in the mouth of the child. Questions that invite a freer narrative from the child might include: 'What happened? – How did it happen? – Who did this to you? – When did it happen? – Who was with you? – How was it for you?' (Politiets fagportal, 2012).

The textbook for the Norwegian police on investigation methods recommends recording the questioning of children on the scene in order to document what the child has said. This is important for the subsequent investigation (Bjerknes & Hoff Johansen, 2009, p. 97). A new problem appears in this connection: formalized questioning may negatively impact children in an extreme crisis. Officer 8 recognized specific issues involved interrogating children in emergency situations:

Very difficult – it has a bit to do with age – how old are the children – think it's very important – if you meet a 16 or 17-year-old, you can obviously ask some more specific questions. If there are minor children – who probably are scared and upset – sit down there with a completely stranger – it is not certain that's so wise right away. It all depends on the situation – to sit and chat with the kids while the abuser is next – it is unacceptable to do ... it's very ok that they're with one of the parties – If you suspect that it is the father who is the perpetrator so it is natural that she is with her mother – so we do not split them up even more – but it all depends on the time and place and age of the children.

Differences in the perceptions of proper police behaviour towards children can be rooted in several factors. The police authorities have not decided the best police practice since the issue scarcely has been placed on the police disciplinary agenda. Furthermore, practical police work is, as mentioned earlier, to a great extent led by discretionary reviews, and questions about police practices will result in quite different responses in a sample of police officers. There are also a wide variety of texts that are supposed to govern the police work. The texts can be divided into laws, regulations, instructions and circulars, and they are highly discretionary. They must be interpreted and adapted to a large variety of situations and cases. The rules are interpreted not only by the individual police officer, but also locally at larger police units and in various police cultures (Ekman, 1999). Berg explains this as follows: 'the use of discretion is not an option for police officers; it is a necessary, unavoidable part of the job' (Berg, 1999, p. 254).

The loyalty conflict

The next obstacle police face in discussing the reason for their visit with children has to do with the problem of conflicting loyalties. Officer 9 did not ask about the violence

that a child has been exposed to, because he found it too difficult for the child to have to ‘tell on’ someone that they love. He perceived this as placing an extra burden on the shoulders of abused children. In this connection, Officer 10 described an incident in which she and her colleague responded to an emergency call about domestic violence. It transpired that the child’s mother and father had different versions of events, and for that reason, the officer decided to speak with the son, age 7, who also was present. The boy confirmed his mother’s version and said that his father had pushed his mother down the stairs. The father was arrested on the basis of the boy’s explanation. Later, Officer 10 was criticized by her partner, who believed that she had acted unethically in leading the boy to reveal his father’s violence.

This example expresses the conflicting dual role of the police: the potential discord between their support function on the one hand, and their policing function on the other. The police are responsible not only for helping and supporting victims of violence, but also for controlling criminal behaviour. When a child discloses information about domestic violence, the disclosure may have direct negative consequences for a parent, in the form of detention, review, prosecution and judgement. In speaking to the police, the child may be put at risk; therefore, it is important that patrol officers are able to secure the safety of children who report criminal offences committed by their parents. One method that may allow children to speak while honouring their loyalty to their parents might be to inform the parents that the police are obligated to talk with the child to identify what he or she has experienced. In this way, responsibility is rotated from the child towards the police. The potential danger posed to children by communicating with the police is a key issue of concern for which protocols and training should address.

Several of the officers interviewed, however, argued that it is necessary to obtain information from the children, not only for the purposes of criminal policing, but also so that the police can find necessary solutions at the scene. The testimony of children is an important basis for the patrol’s immediate decisions: whether it is justifiable to allow the child to remain at home, for example, or whether the child needs to be moved into the custody of other caregivers immediately. In addition, the patrol needs a basis for deciding whether it is necessary to call in child welfare or health care services.

The police in a caring role

Patrol conversations with children about abuse may also be motivated by caring. Officer 11 reflected on that connection in this way:

I think that we must have the courage to talk to children about what has happened – because if we do not – the child can almost perceive it as taboo – it is possible that there has been a dramatic event for the children – and then the police come – who is supposed to stand for right – and so we do not take up what has happened – I think that ... the police know, but will not talk about it with me – and it could be a bit weird.

If police officers (or any other professional actors) are not willing to engage directly with children about their experiences, or to talk openly about violence, it may send the unfortunate signal that violence is something one should not talk about. Silence may strengthen a child’s belief that violence is taboo – something we would rather not hear about. The result is to reaffirm the traditional confinement of violence and abuse to the private sphere.

Officer 12 related that she has been on emergency call-outs where none of her colleagues talked with the children. She expressed indignation at their behaviour: ‘What strikes me is that we often seem so damn scared to talk to children’.

She reminds us that children are human beings with the same rights as adults, and she said further: ‘Imagine – cops coming – and they don’t ask the child – how are you? How is it to be like Henrik? – I think that it is a bit disrespectful’. She concluded that talking to children should be as much a part of police work as stopping cars in traffic.

It may be inappropriate, however, to lead a child to reveal information and then leave immediately for new assignments. This may also signal to the child that the police do not really care. A possible solution could be to provide older children a business card for police officers and other professionals that child may contact. Furthermore, the child should be protected from the abuser after the police intervention² – either through child welfare services or with the assistance of the child’s private network.

Discussion

For many years, children who experienced domestic violence were not acknowledged as victims. As more and more research has investigated the consequences of being a child and experiencing violence, and has demonstrated grave negative effects both short- and long-term, it has become more common to acknowledge the status of children as victims and rights holders. Research recognizing the potential harm that may result from growing up with domestic violence has made an important contribution, placing the issue on the agenda of politicians, practitioners and policy-makers. Today, the experience of domestic violence is defined in Norway as a form of psychological violence, both in the law and among professionals and researchers. As the complexity of the issue has increased and expanded, more professionals are both expected and obligated to act in ways that change these children’s lives for the better. Children have a right to a childhood without violence and abuse, and if their parents cannot keep them safe, it is the obligation of professionals to intervene. This message has been conveyed over and over again through legislation and policy documents.

Police officers responding to emergency calls are a group of professionals that have received limited attention in connection to children experiencing domestic violence. While models have been developed to train specialist police officers used for questioning child victims of violence and abuse (see Cederborg, Alm, Da Silva Nises, & Lamb, 2013), few guidelines exist for officers on emergency calls. This is problematic, since police officers most often meet children experiencing domestic violence, and vice versa, on emergency calls, not in the questioning room. Also, the most difficult part of the police encounter with children experiencing domestic violence may be related to what the patrol can talk to these children about. In this context, we should note that the question of how the patrol communicates with children is as important as if they do it. On the question of if, different and sometimes conflicting views exist, at the level of both the government and the individual patrol. Also, there may be a potential conflict between getting the ideal information for the investigation vs. what is in the child’s interest to disclose in terms of the impact this might have on their relationships with significant adults in their lives.

In the guidelines for operational police, the police patrols are encouraged to write a review for further investigation. The investigation department is supposed to handle the matter further at a later date. This is in line with the findings of this article that shows that the police want dialogue with children first and foremost to help them determine

their further course of action, and to support subsequent investigations. Such dialogue might be necessary in order to stop any immediate danger. Information about the children must also be included in an officers' report. One reason for this is to ensure that the children are eligible for victim compensation from the state.³ Furthermore, in Norway, it is mandatory to report to child welfare services when a child is in danger of violence and abuse. However, the dialogue with a child can fulfil many purposes beyond simply providing a foundation for future action. Police officers can observe the child's right to information, in accordance with the United Nations Convention On the Rights of the Child, by talking to the child about why they are there, how long they will stay, what will happen when they leave, perhaps what will happen to the parent they bring with them and who they can contact for help if needed. This should be done in a 'child friendly way'; i.e. the officers can sit down so as to be on the same level as the child, establish eye contact, adjust their tone of voice, use age-appropriate language, and tell the child their names and perhaps something else about themselves. A few comforting words and a pat on the shoulder can make a difference for a child in need. It may also build the trust needed for the child to reach out for help the next time. Police do not need to take on the role of 'social workers', but they do need the knowledge and skills necessary to be sensitive to the issues involved and the complexities of the phenomena. Police officers responding to emergency calls need to be competent to refer the matter onwards as necessary, and knowledgeable about what they are expected and obligated to do. That way, they can present themselves as an authority for persons of all ages, making their support function visible to children, as well as their policing function. Hence, the authorities regulating the police force need to provide clear and unambiguous guidance on issues related to families and children experiencing domestic violence.

We find it fruitful to see this argument in the light of the Bittner's (2005) theoretical understanding of police roles. The task of the police, according to Bittner, is to handle 'something-that-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-someone-had-better-do-something-now!' (Bittner, 2005, p. 161). However, the police do not respond to all types of conflicts and human problems, but rather to emergencies – 'in which force may have to be used' (Bittner, 2005, p. 167). It is only the police who have 'the capacity to use force', and it is precisely here that the police authority rests (Waddington, 1999, p. 30). Because of its general right to use physical force, the police will come across many different social problems. As the police have to deal with many different tasks, the police role becomes multifaceted and includes of a number of sub-roles (such as the role of a 'social worker' or a 'psychologist'). This is precisely what it means to be a police officer – to play many different roles. The sub-roles will however always proceed from one and the same role, and always be linked to the special authority that the police are equipped with.

Limitations

A larger sample size and repeated interviews could have provided more variation and, consequently provided a more nuanced picture of the encounters between the police and the children. Also, the data we draw on in this article are from two different studies. Conducting them during the same timeframe, and including questions in the interview guides that were interconnected, could have made it possible to compare and contrast the answers in a more systematic way. However, the subjective experiences of children who experience domestic violence and their encounters with and understandings of the

police has been little investigated. An analysis of their experiences and understandings, in the light of the officers themselves and their views on communication with this group of children, is, to our knowledge, the first of its kind.

Conclusions

Police operations in the private sphere are often unpredictable and as such challenging. Nevertheless, some important conclusions for policy and practise can be outlined: first and foremost, it is important for the patrol to receive any available information from the operation centre about the address – whether children are present, if the police have been there before, if those involved are intoxicated, information about possible weapons at the address and so on. Upon arrival, the duties of the patrol officers include tasks to keep or establish order, and investigative tasks. In the first case, the overall task is to control the scene, identify the persons involved and ensure their safety. Events that escalate to the use of physical force are especially demanding. They can obviously be very intimidating, especially to children. At the same time, the patrol must focus on investigation by obtaining evidence of possible criminal offences. The police also assume a gatekeeper function on-site, as they decide which other agencies they will involve in the event. Government actors frequently contacted by patrols include ambulance and emergency services, child welfare services and refuges for abused women (Aas, 2009). When it comes to contact with child welfare services, in Norway, the patrol is obligated to follow up with a written report when they suspect violence or other forms of neglect (Politidirektoratet, 2008). This report requires the patrol to focus explicitly on the child, describing the child's behaviour and reactions to the event. Beyond that there are few clear guidelines for patrol management of children in these operations.

The police have only recently begun to include and acknowledge children who experience domestic violence, and research makes it increasingly clear that their engagement needs to extend even further. The police need to recognize that children occupy a central position in families experiencing domestic violence, rather than as seeing them as passive observers only peripherally involved in the criminal incidents. Raising awareness of the preventive role the police can play is crucial. Officers need to learn what they can do beyond what might be thought of as 'traditional police work' and how they can use resources in the community to support their work after their intervention is over.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. In August 2010, the Supreme Court heard an appeal from a man convicted in multiple cases of domestic violence (Lovdata Database, 2012). The primary basis for appeal was the application of the law in his conviction for abusing his daughter, as she had witnessed his abuse of her mother in various ways. The question was whether this could also be affected by the new design of Penal Code § 219, which is intended to better capture the complexity and totality of domestic violence. The judges agreed that violence against the mother in fact also constituted a criminal act against the child, and the appeal was therefore dismissed.

2. Such a procedure is laid down in the Police Act § 13 of ‘intervention to children’. This provision states that the police can take care of children who are in situations which clearly involves a serious risk to their health or development.
3. In Sweden and Norway, children who experience domestic violence are recognized by law as victims of a crime, by being granted the right to crime victim compensation from the state.

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