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VIOLENCE EXPOSURE IN SLOVENIA***

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# Characteristics and Scope of Youth Domestic Violence Exposure in Slovenia

Ksenija DOMITER PROTNER<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Our research was intended for finding the characteristics and condition of the scope of exposure of Slovenian secondary school students to domestic violence. The research made on the sample of 1087 secondary school students (the average age was 15.7 years) from all Slovenian regions in 2011 has shown that 40.2 % of secondary school students included in our sample are exposed to domestic violence; among them only 3 % reported domestic violence to the corresponding institution. An important obstacle for seeking help and reporting violence is the ability to recognise violence and the problem of discovering violence outside of the privacy of the family circle. Therefore the connections between different institutions: schools, social work centres, health care, the police, the prosecution and judicature are very important; rising the awareness of the entire public is also very important. An important braking factor which influences the prevention and detection and solving the problem of domestic child and adolescent abuse exposure are definitely stable cultural beliefs and family stereotypes.

*Keywords:* adolescent abuse, domestic violence, secondary school, social work centers Slovenia.

## Introduction

In the scope of domestic violence the most problematic issue is violence towards children because children of all ages are especially vulnerable for domestic violence; this has been proven by numerous research papers (Kitzmann *et al.*, 2003; Finkelhor *et al.*, 2005; Edleson 1999; Holt *et al.*, 2008; United Nations 2006; O'Keefe 1996; Mejia *et al.*, 2006;). Because of the perception which treats adolescents more as adults than children less research is dedicated to them as victims compared to younger children. Comparative studies in the field of domestic violence exposure of adolescents (Aymer 2008; Smith Stover 2005; Stein

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*et al.*, 2006) prove that compared to studies of domestic child abuse relatively few research papers deal with adolescent domestic violence exposure. Stein and co-workers (2006) found, after inspecting different information bases, that in the period between 1997 and 2006 3500 papers were written about child abuse and only 450 of them dealt with abused and neglected adolescents (Stein *et al.*, 2006). The findings of the comparative empirical study of child and adolescent domestic violence exposure in individual countries in Europe which was performed in the scope of the study of the UN and UNICEF are also very important (Rustemier & Newell 2005); it finds that there are very few studies carried out directly on a sample of children and adolescents. The bulk of studies on child and adolescent abuse are, according to this study, based on the memories of adults about their experiences in childhood (Rustemier & Newell 2005: 4).

In Slovenia domestic violence and exposure of children to domestic violence has been relatively poorly researched. The first more extensive empirical study of domestic violence *Violence in Families in Slovenia* (Sedmak *et al.*, 2006); it features the experiences of adults with domestic violence in their childhood and their knowledge of families where domestic violence is present. Experience with domestic violence in childhood is also dealt with in the national research paper on violence in the private sphere and relationships (National Research on Violence in the Private Sphere and Relationships) (Leskošek *et al.*, 2010) which is based on a sample of 752 adult women.

Our research was focused on the population of secondary schools and is trying to fill the gap of research due to the fact that empirical research on a representative sample in this part of Slovenia did not exist until 2011. The purpose of the research was to find the characteristics and condition of the scope of exposure of Slovenian secondary school students to domestic violence. We were particularly interested in the exposure of Slovenian secondary school students towards different forms of psychological violence and exposure to physical violence in the family environment. Our goal was to research the existence of a link between exposure of secondary school students to different types of domestic violence and the socio-economic status of the family of the secondary school student and to evaluate the willingness of secondary school students to report domestic violence exposure.

### **Research hypotheses**

A generally known fact proven by numerous studies (World Report on Violence against Children 2006; McGee 1997) is that domestic violence exposure of children and adolescents often stays hidden; we wanted to prove this fact also in the case of adolescents and their exposure to domestic violence in Slovenia. This presented the basis for forming hypothesis

1. Thus H1 supposes that the scope of domestic violence exposure is greater than official data on recorded domestic violence exposure. Different studies and authors (World Report on Violence against Children 2006; McGee, 1997; Black *et al.*, 2007; Lamont 2011) have proven that domestic violence exposure often stays hidden because it is not reported. On the basis of this data and findings regarding the perception of violence in one's own family and the problem of feelings inside the family where violence is present we formed hypothesis

2. H2 supposes that most secondary school students do not seek help and do not report violence experienced in the family. Children and adolescents are exposed to domestic violence in all social strata (World Report on Violence against Children 2006: 5) although many authors (O'Keefe 1996; Finkelhor *et al.*, 2005; Holt *et al.*, 2008; Finkelhor *et al.*, 2009; Sedlak *et al.*, 2010) have found a higher probability of domestic violence exposure in families with a lower socio-economic status. These findings presented the basis for forming hypothesis 3.

Thus, H3 supposes that there is a negative correlation between domestic violence exposure among secondary school students and the socio-economic status of their family.

## **Methodology**

### ***Sample***

The sample made with structural sampling comprises 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year secondary school students of different secondary school programmes from all Slovenian regions (their average age was 15.7). The sample covered 48.4 % of boys and 51.6 % of girls.

### ***Methods of data collection***

We used a written survey where the interviewer present did not influence the completion of the survey. The interviews were carried out with the instructions given in a personal discourse by school counsellors during school. The interviews of secondary school students were being carried out from February to April 2011.

The questions focused on, apart from personal traits (sex, school programme, age, school grades in the previous year) and family characteristics (i.e. monthly family income, the education of the mother and father, an estimate of parent reputation in their environment, number of siblings and the type of family-single or both parents, nuclear or extended family) five compounds of questions. These question groups were related to: (1) domestic violence exposure which includes: exposure to psychological violence in a family; exposure to physical violence;

presence of violence in the family; (2) seeking help up to the present date; (3) evaluation of the family's condition regarding violence; (4) willingness to report violence and (5) being aware of options regarding exposure to violence.

*Exposure to domestic violence* was established with 15 questions. Questions like "Do your parents ever say you aren't going to achieve anything?", "Do you ever feel ashamed at home?", "Does any of your parents hit you (do you get a slap)" were given a 4 degree answering scale ("1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = often, 4 = all the time"). The question "Are you ever afraid at home?" could be answered with: "1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = often, 4 = always". The question "Has a family member ever beaten you?" was given a 3 degree answering scale: "1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = often". This question group also includes the question "Has any of your family members ever sexually abused you (touched you, forced you into intercourse; wanted you to touch them ...)?"; here there were two possible answers: 1 = yes, 2 = no. The question "Do you feel safe (do you like to be at home)?" could be answered with: "1 = yes, always, 2 = yes, seldom, 3 = no".

*Indirect exposure to domestic violence as witness to violence* was established with the question about the existence of violent behaviour at home: Parents arguing, verbal abuse, slaps, threats, beating, sexual violence. We formed a 3 degree answering scale ("1 = this does not happen in my family, 2 = this is rare, 3 = this is frequent").

This compound of questions also featured *punishment* of interviewed secondary school students which was examined by the question "Do your parents often punish you?" (the given answers were: 1 = no, they don't punish me at all, 2 = yes) and a related question "If you answered with yes, can you say how?". Given answers were: "1 = they cut my privileges (i.e. evenings out, the use of computer ...), 2 = I get a slap, 3 = other (Please name the punishment.)"

Two questions were related to the *seeking of help up to now*: "Have you ever slept over at your family's or friends' place because you were scared at home?" (the possible answers were 1 = yes, 2 = no) and "Have you ever looked for help because of what was happening in your family?". Given answers were: "1 = yes, where: \_, 2 = no, I don't know where to find it, 3 = no, this was not necessary".

*Willingness to report violence* was established with questions "If you thought there was violence in your family, would you report it?" (the possible answers were: "1 = yes, always, 2 = yes, but only in case of someone's life being threatened, 3 = no"), "Who in your opinion is worthy of your trust in case of violence happening in your family or if you yourself are being threatened?". The interviewees could choose the following answers: "1 = the Police, 2 = the Social Work Centre, 3 = the SOS Line or other confidential lines; 4 = the school counselling, 5 = the class teacher, 6 = other (please name the institution)", "Whom of the mentioned would you trust first and why would you trust them first with the information that there is violence in your family or that you are threatened in your

family?” The interviewees could choose only one possible answer, we also asked them to write the reason for their choice. The given answers were “1 = the Police, 2 = the Social Work Centre, 3 = the SOS Line or other confidential lines; 4 = the school counselling, 5 = the class teacher, 6 = other”.

*Knowing their choices in case of exposure to violence* was measured with dichotomous answers: “Do you know to whom you could report (trust) that there is violence in your family i.e. that you are threatened in your family?”, “Do you know that in case of violence you can sleep at home or you can seek help in a chrysiy centre or safe house?”, “Do you know that since 2008 we have a law against domestic violence?”. Given answers were: 1 = yes, 2 = no.

## Results

### *Secondary students domestic violence exposure*

We wanted to establish the exposure of interviewed secondary school students to different kinds of domestic violence; this is why we formed a new variable “*exposure to domestic violence*”<sup>2</sup>. For this purpose we first dichotomised (1 = not existent, 2 = is present) all variables from the compound “domestic violence exposure” with the method of pre-coding<sup>3</sup>.

The percentage of interviewed secondary school students who suffer different forms of domestic violence is, as the findings show, very high because low to high level of exposure to violence is significant for 40.2 % of interviewed secondary school students; high and very high exposure to violence is characteristic for almost 15 % i.e. 161 of interviewed secondary school students (Figure 1).

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<sup>2</sup> The variable “exposure to domestic violence” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0,730) was formed on the basis of the factor analysis in connection with coded indicators of domestic violence exposure: “verbal abuse in the family”, “slaps in the family”, “threats in the family”, “beating in the family”, “nothing will come of you”, “fear”, “slaps”, and “beating”; these have been coded into a 4 category variable: 0 (absence of violence) to 3 (very high exposure to violence.)

<sup>3</sup> Do parents ever say you are not going to achieve anything? in “nothing will come of you”; Are you ever ashamed at home? in “shame”; Do you ever get hit by a parent (do you ever get a slap)? in “slap”; Are you ever afraid at home? in “fear”; Have you ever got beaten by a family member? in “beating”; Have you ever been sexually abused by a family member (touched, forced into intercourse; wanted you to touch them ...)? in “sexual abuse”; Do you feel safe at home (you like to be at home)? in “safety”; Do your parents argue? in “arguing in the family”; Is there verbal abuse in your family? in “verbal abuse in the family”; Does anybody get slapped in your family in “slaps in the family”; Are there threats present in your family in “threats in the family”; Is there beating in your family? in “beating in the family”; Is there sexual abuse in your family? in “sexual abuse in the family”.

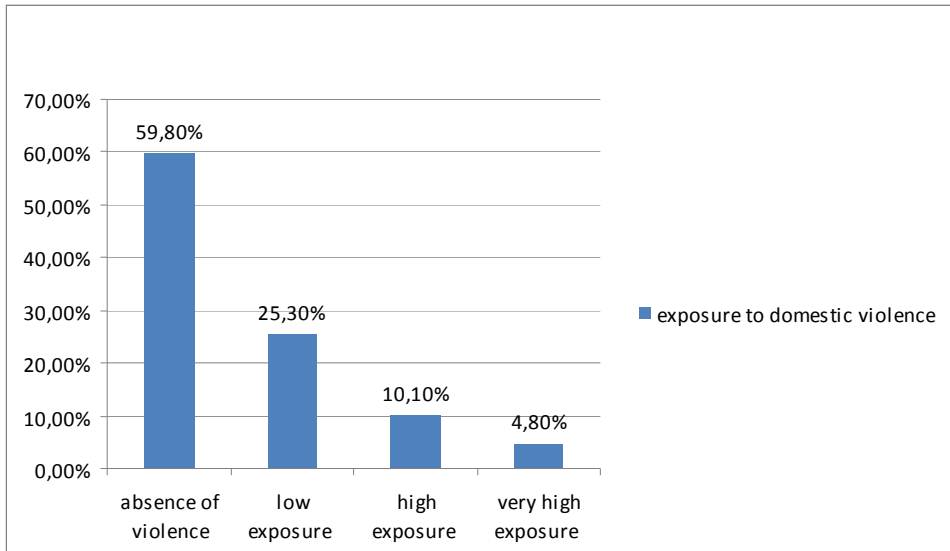


Figure 1: *Exposure to domestic violence*

The hypothesis H1 with which we assumed that the level of domestic violence exposure of secondary school students is higher than shown by the data of recorded exposure can be confirmed. In 2010 there were 40,655 secondary school students in the first and second year (Department for Statistics of Slovenia); thus 15 % presents 6098 students. Social Work Centres in Slovenia only had 196 cases of adolescents at the age from 14 to 18 being subject to domestic violence in 2010 (Murgel, 2011: 165–170).

The comparison between exposure of interviewed secondary school students to physical and psychological violence

We formed composite variables to establish exposure to different forms of domestic violence. In order to establish exposure to psychological violence we formed the composite variable “*exposure to psychological domestic violence*”<sup>4</sup>; for establishing exposure to physical violence we formed the composite variable “*exposure to physical domestic violence*”<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> The variable “exposure to psychological domestic violence” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.705) was formed on the basis of the factor analysis in connection with coded indicators “verbal abuse in the family”, “slaps in the family”, “threats in the family”, “beating in the family”, “nothing will come of you”, “fear”, and “safety”; these were coded into a 4 category variable: 0 (absence of violence) to 3 (very high exposure to violence.)

<sup>5</sup> The variable “exposure to physical domestic violence” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.627) was formed on the basis of the factor analysis in connection with coded indicators “slaps in the family”, “beating in the family”, “slaps”, and “beating”; these have been coded into a 4 category variable: 0 (absence of violence) to 3 (very high exposure to violence.)

The interviewees who experience low to very high level exposure to psychological violence present 34.8 %. High and very high exposure to psychological violence is, according to our findings, characteristic for 10.8 % of interviewed secondary school students.

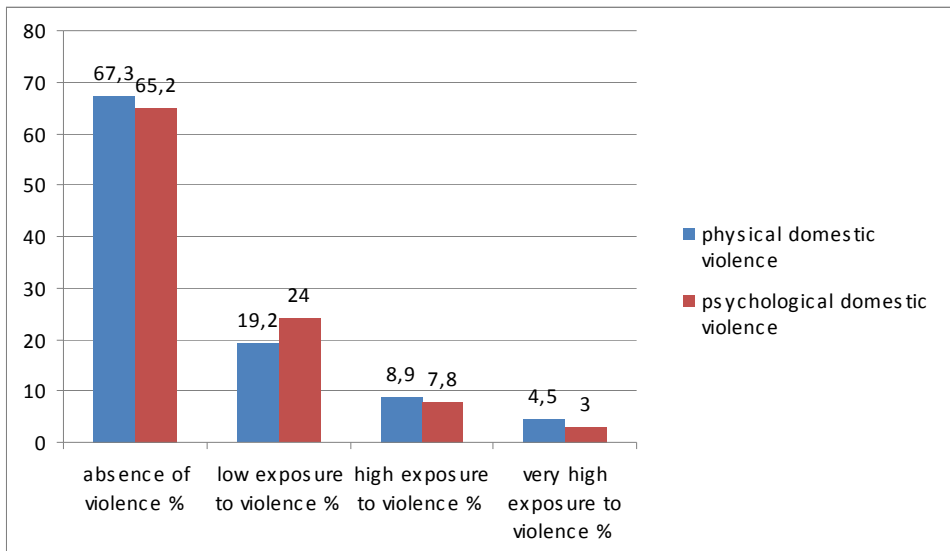


Figure 2. *Exposed to different forms of domestic violence*

32.7 % of interviewed secondary school students are exposed to different forms of physical violence. High to very high exposure to this kind of domestic violence is present in 13.4 % of interviewees.

Characteristics and scope of seeking help and reporting exposure to domestic violence and the attitude of secondary school students towards reporting domestic violence exposure

We have found that hypothesis H2 which stated that most secondary school students do not seek help and do not report domestic violence has been proven. The majority (90 %) of interviewed secondary school students which are due to empirical data subject to domestic violence exposure have not sought help. Only 3 % of interviewed secondary school students who are, based on our inquiry, exposed to domestic violence have reported domestic violence exposure to the relevant institution (the Police, Social Work Centre or school).

3.7 % of interviewed secondary school students exposed to domestic violence stated that they have not sought help because they did not know where they could find it. Thus, we were also interested how well the interviewees were informed and aware about the possibilities of help and solving the problems of domestic violence.



Almost a fifth of all interviewees (18.6 %) do not know to whom they could report or inform about domestic violence exposure. An even bigger percentage (33.3 %) of interviewees do not know the possibilities of crisis centres and safe houses and almost a half of them (42.2 %) do not know that there is a domestic violence prevention law in force in Slovenia. On the grounds of this empirical data we find that a relevant percentage of interviewed secondary school students are badly informed about the possibilities of solving the problem of domestic violence.

When researching the reports of domestic violence we assumed that they are also influenced by the attitude of secondary school students towards reporting violence in their family. It turned out that the relation between exposure to domestic violence and willingness to report domestic violence<sup>6</sup> is negative but statistically relevant ( $r = -0.136$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). It was proven that the higher the level of exposure to domestic violence the lower the willingness of interviewees to report violence.

### ***The exposure of secondary school students to domestic violence and the socio-economical status of the family***

We formed the variable “*socio-economic status*” for the purpose of finding relations between interviewees being exposed to domestic violence and the social and economic status of the family. The variable “*socio-economic status*” was formed on the grounds of a factorial analysis by combining three indicators of socio-economic status of the family: the estimate of income, the mother’s and father’s education with the satisfactory degree of inner connectedness (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.690$ ).

The connection between the socio-economic status of the interviewee’s family and their exposure to domestic violence has been proven to be negative and statistically characteristic ( $r = -0.072$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). A lower socio-economic status of a family thus represents a factor of risk for domestic violence of the interviewees. Thus on the grounds of empirical data we can conclude that the hypothesis H3, which supposes that there is a negative correlation between domestic violence exposure among secondary school students and the socio-economic status of the family can be confirmed.

In assessing the influence of the socio-economic status of the family on individual forms of exposure of interviewees to domestic violence the relation between the socio-economic status of the family with exposure of the interviewees to psychological domestic violence is also negative and statistically important ( $r$

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<sup>6</sup> The variable “If you thought that violence is present in your family, would you report it?” was coded for the purpose of the build-up of both variables (1 = 3, 2 = 2, 3 = 1).

= -0,068;  $p < 0.05$ ); the same is true for exposure to physical violence ( $r = -0.074$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Among individual indicators of socio-economic status of a family in connection with exposure to domestic violence *the family income stands out*; the correlation is negative and statistically characteristic ( $r = -0.101$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). The amount of income of a family of interviewees is negative and statistically relevant for establishing relations with individual forms of secondary school students' exposure to domestic violence in connection with exposure to psychological violence ( $r = -0.080$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). We can conclude that a bad material status i.e. low income surely represents a risk factor for all types of domestic violence.

The education of the father has proved to be relevant and negative in relation to exposure to psychological violence ( $r = -0.062$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), and statistically not significant in connection with exposure to physical violence ( $r = -0.034$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). There is a correlation between "general" exposure to domestic violence and the education of the father which is also negative and statistically not significant ( $r = -0.050$ ;  $p > 0.01$ ). A low education of the father represents a risk factor mostly for exposure of secondary school students to psychological domestic violence. The same is true for the education of the mother which is also negative but is not statistically significant ( $r = -0.043$ ;  $p > 0.01$ ).

## Discussion

The amount of exposure of secondary school students to domestic violence is significantly higher than shown by the official data on detected exposure. The mere share of secondary school students from our sample who experience high or very high exposure represents such a high number of youths as there were all individuals aged between 14 and 18 treated in centres for social work in Slovenia in connection with domestic violence in 2010. Given that the law against domestic violence (ZPND 2008) prescribes a commitment of the centres for social work to report all detected cases of domestic violence to the police (and vice versa; the police also has to report the cases of domestic violence to the centres for social work), we conclude that the given examples of addressed domestic violence are present in the databases of both institutions.

Along with poor sensitivity of appropriate institutions the problem of keeping the violence hidden also exists due to the high tolerance of secondary school students as well as the professional and the entire society toward different forms of psychological violence, which are especially hidden. After examining individual markers of direct exposure to different forms of being psychologically and physically threatened and feelings associated with them we find that the highest number of secondary school students interviewed (35.3 %) are faced with the problem of arousing the feeling of worthlessness by their parents (with the statement: "Nothing good will ever become of you."). There is also significance

in the confirmation of the statistically significant positive connection of the feeling of fear in interviewed secondary school students in their home environment with all forms of indirect domestic violence (secondary school students as witness to violence): quarrels among parents ( $r = 0.150$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), verbal abuse in the family ( $r = 0.295$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), slapping in the family ( $r = 0.293$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), threatening in the family ( $r = 0.317$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), beating in the family ( $r = 0.330$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), sexual violence in the family ( $r = 0.180$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

The majority of the interviewed who were subject to violence (89.8 %) had not sought help and only 3 % had registered exposure to domestic violence to the appropriate institution (police, centre for social work or school). We estimate that it is possible to seek reasons for this state in the experience the individuals subject to domestic violence have with the violence itself as well as the problem of trusting others about the situation in their family and the fear of stigma. These findings and a very small share of interviewees who really seek help in the case of exposure to domestic violence (and even among these more than 40 % seek help inside the circle of relatives and friends) can also be connected to the problem of not recognising the exposure to psychological violence. The further problem which can be seen is the fact that secondary school students are inadequately informed about their possibilities to get help. Almost a fifth of interviewed secondary school students do not know who to contact to register or to tell about the exposure to domestic violence, a third (33.3 %) of the interviewed do not know the options of crisis centres and safe houses and almost a half (42.2 %) do not know that there is a law against domestic violence in force in Slovenia. We can argue that this also points to the problem of bad and insufficient response of the whole Slovene society and relevant institutions (i.e. schools, police, centres for social work) in the field of prevention and informing.

The exposure of secondary school students to different forms of domestic violence is present in families of all socio-economic categories which, along with the identified extent and characteristics of this problem, represents a further demand for action and solving of this problem on a larger social scale and not only individually.

## Conclusions

The research has shown that 40.2 % of secondary school students from our sample were exposed to domestic violence and does not depend on the sex of the victim. Only 3 % of them reported exposure to domestic violence to the relevant institution (the Police, the Social Work Centre or school).

Among the forms of violence the interviewees were subject to in their families we have confirmed that the majority is in form of psychological violence. The conclusion is in accordance with the research (Kitzmann, 2005; Filipic, 2000)

that younger children are more often subject to physical violence than older ones; numerous researches have been done which emphasize the problem of increase of psychological violence of parents in contemporary postmodern society where we perceive a lowering of tolerance towards physical violence and punishment. Vissing & Straus and co-workers (1991) for instance did research on whether the extent of psychological violence (mainly verbal and emotional aggression) of parents is due to their belief that they are better if they use “only their voice and not their hand”. Exposure of secondary school students to physical violence is, as other authors show (Filipic, 2000; Kitzmann, 2005), lesser in extent compared with physical violence but nevertheless, a high percentage of 32.7 % of interviewees are also subject to physical violence.

The results of our research have confirmed our research hypothesis as well as the findings of others (i.e. World Report on Violence against Children 2006; McGee 1997; Black *et al.*, 2007; Lamont 2011) that most cases of domestic violence stay unreported and remain undiscovered and that children and youths are rarely the ones to report violence.

The general idea of the interviewed secondary school students regarding the reporting of domestic violence leans towards reporting it but close attention has to be put to the fact that the higher the exposure to violence, the lower the incline towards reporting it. The interviewees exposed to domestic violence show a lesser willingness to report violence than those who do not have this kind of experience and eventually do not report it. This finding can also be explained with the fear of the consequences the report might bring, fear of stigmatisation, feeling of guilt, and distrust in solving the problem with the help of state institutions. UN Research (2006) also finds that the reasons for not reporting violence are fear of the offender and fear of stigmatisation among peers. A prominent role is also played by the deservedness and privacy of the family environment because, as Wattam observes (McGee 1997), children and youths from families where violence often takes place quickly learn not to speak of the violence with anyone “outside the family”. The latter has also been proven by the data gained in our survey about seeking help; it turned out that the majority of interviewees seek help inside their family circle.

An important obstacle with secondary school students exposed to domestic violence seeking help and reporting violence is the aforementioned ability to recognise domestic violence and problems connected with discovering violence outside the privacy of the family circle. It has been shown that the interviewees are also badly informed about the possibilities of seeking help and reporting violence which is surprising due to the presence of information in public media.

The present research has dealt with the questions mentioned and opened many other questions and problems. Inter-institutional cooperation is needed. If there is a mother or any other family member treated for domestic violence in a Social

Work Centre or medical centre, the child or youth should also be treated in cooperation with the school and/or other institutions. We do not possess data on the question whether these relations exist and what is characteristic for them, this is why further investigation would be wise.

Factor of risk for all forms of exposure to domestic violence for interviewees are bad material status. The identified risk factors coincide with the findings of other research. (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2009; Sedlak *et al.*, 2010; Venet *et al.*, 2007). Finding all characteristic risk and prevention factors for the Slovenian cultural and social environment needs further research; it could present an important groundwork for preventive activities. In Slovenia we are still at the beginning with informing the broader public, despite a decade of recognising the problem of domestic violence in the professional sphere and legislation. The public opinion shows that Slovenes treasure the family above all (Toš, 2007). But our research and the feedback on the Family Bill in 2012<sup>7</sup> show a high level of stereotypes about the concept of family. We have found that Slovenes have different ideas on what a family is or who their members are as well as how it (the family) is being valued. The mentioned family values often do not include different possibilities of formation, structure and functioning of the family as well as domestic violence as a “safe community”. In Slovenia a broader problem of unjustified reporting is not yet characteristic, but nevertheless, attention should be given to planning and execution of education and notifying as well as informing about various signs of violence for recognising violence on all levels.

Despite the low sensibility of the public towards domestic violence Slovenia has made many important steps to ensure solving problems in preventing domestic violence. The judicial groundwork which is already in force or being prepared is very important as well as programmes for helping victims of violence already in place, prepared programmes and the research on the problem of the extent and characteristics of domestic violence. The findings of the present research could also help with shedding light on the problem of exposure of youths to domestic violence and provide ideas for further research and solving this problem.

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<sup>7</sup> There was a referendum in Slovenia in February 2012 about passing the prepared family act.

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