Children Exposed to Severe and Homicidal Violence
Professionals Revealing Their Insufficient Societal Status
Violence-exposed children are unintended victims, often an unseen and overlooked victim group in society. It is a societal responsibility that all victims are realized and supported. Through describing the perspective of professionals meeting these children, their status and opportunities in society and legal system can be investigated. To study professionals’ experiences, conceptions, and knowledge about violence-exposed children, a questionnaire was distributed to 63 professionals, representing police, prosecutors, social- and treatment personnel. Qualitative questions about experiences and knowledge were analysed thematically. Additional quantitative statements of held conceptions were analysed with t-tests and regression methods. Findings revealed these children are still overlooked; psychological knowledge about their symptoms, testimonies, and perspective is lacking; professional routines/guidelines are missing; and problems such as children’s legal status as non-victims are hindering effective work to guarantee these children’s care. Results provide information facilitating necessary changes to ensure this group of psychologically abused victims’ recovery and societal rights.

Children exposed to violence are in legal sense witnesses of crime, not victims. Psychological research emphasizes the opposite. To see or hear a parent get beaten, or killed, can be among the worst thing a child can experience, as parents are the source of safety, protection, care, and affection (Georgsson, Almqvist & Broberg, 2011). Subsequent negative symptoms are numerous and severe, and trauma symptoms are common (see Edleson, 1999; Evans, Davies & DiLillo, 2008; Fonagy, Target, Steele & Steele, 1997; Herrenkohl, Sousa, Tajima, Herrenkohl & Moynan, 2008; Jenkins & Bell, 1997; Osofsky, 2000; Øverlien, 2010; Perry, 1997; and Zeanah & Scheeringa, 1997, for reviews). The serious consequences demonstrate that violence exposure is a form of psychological abuse and that these children are victims as well. Yet, they are an overlooked victim group in research, politics, and society – with focus on actual victims (e.g., Osofsky, 1997) – up until recently (e.g., Evans et al., 2008; Øverlien, 2010).

The research field of children exposed to violence is relatively new. The first case study was published in 1975 (Levine, 1975) and the first empirical studies in 1980 (Porter & O’Leary, 1980; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980), (for a description of the early research field see Evans et al., 2008). The majority of research has studied subsequent negative consequences. Although much is known, compared to other areas of family violence, this research is still in an early phase (Evans et al., 2008). It has been suggested that the scarcity relates to an absence of qualitative studies in general, few studies with the children as informants, and interdisciplinary research, including several perspectives – such as the practical work with these children (Øverlien, 2010).
police, prosecutors, social services, and psychiatry represent the practical work, and are therefore professions important to study. Professionals have the practical experience of violence-exposed children. They can provide information about the professional work and its related problems, children’s reactions, behaviours, and what the children’s current societal and legal status really is. In addition, professionals represent the society, responsible for children’s care. It is essential that they have the psychological knowledge required to ensure the child’s best. Studying professionals’ experiences may reveal potential knowledge gaps. The present study takes on the perspective of professionals meeting violence-exposed children – studying their experiences, conceptions and state of knowledge. Aiming to reveal the opportunities these children have in society and the legal system, and suggest necessary interventions.

The unseen and overlooked victims

National and international laws bring both possibilities and difficulties in working with children exposed to violence. According to Swedish law a child who has witnessed violence is not considered a victim of crime in judicial sense and cannot represent the injured party in the legal process (comment to RB 20:8). In these cases, violence is not aimed at the child and the focus in subsequent investigations is the violence between the adults – leaving the child unseen. Only occasionally children are noticed as witnesses in these investigations (Kaldal, Diesen, Beije & Diesen, 2010). Not representing the injured party they are not handled accordingly in the police investigation either, resulting in not being represented in the statistics since authorities do not carry out systematic documentation (Kaldal et al., 2010).

As children are only witnesses they do not have the right to a counsel for an injured party. In contrast, all child victims in Sweden get a counsel, to ensure their rights and what is best for them. In addition, investigations were children have a counsel receive more importance (Kaldal et al., 2010). Not having a counsel also becomes problematic for then parents take all the decisions regarding the child – a parent who in many cases is the perpetrator or/and the victim. In worst case, the defendant might not get convicted because he or she refused to let his or her child, the principal witness, to be heard.

Since 2006, children who have witnessed domestic violence have right to criminal injuries compensation from the Swedish Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority (swe: Brottsoffermyndigheten). An indication that they are somewhat recognized as victims. Yet, they cannot get an indemnity from the perpetrator, as they do not represent the injured party, generally resulting in smaller amounts of compensation compared to regular indemnity. Besides, parents fill out this form.

The terminology used in this study is in line with recommendations by Holden (2003), who stated that exposed should be used instead of witnessed or observed for it includes different types of experiences, not assuming that the child actually saw the violence. He suggested ten different forms of violence exposure to be included – both direct and indirect experiences – ranging from the obvious eyewitness experience, or even actively being involved, to ostensibly being unaware of it.

The prevalence of children being exposed to violence is difficult to identify, due to large amount of hidden statistics. Estimations of ten per cent have been made among Swedish
children (SOU 2001:72), demonstrating that ten per cent have sometime been exposed to violence at home, and five per cent often. Similarly, Annerbäck, Wingren, Svedin, and Gustavsson (2010), proposed that eleven per cent among Swedish children have been exposed to intimate-partner violence. Frisk (2003) made an estimation that this concerns between 100 000 and 200 000 children, just in Sweden.

Consequences of violence exposure
The majority of studies on violence-exposed children have focused on negative effects coexisting such experiences (Øverlien, 2010). Most of them, both reviews and empirical studies, agree that violence exposure have considerable negative impact on children. It is associated with emotional and behavioural problems, cognitive dysfunction, attitudes, and long-term effects continuing into adulthood (see Edleson, 1999; Evans et al., 2008; Fonagy et al., 1997; Herrenkohl et al., 2008; Jenkins & Bell, 1997; Osofsky, 2000; Øverlien, 2010; Perry, 1997; and Zeanah & Scheeringa, 1997, for reviews). It has been suggested that 80 % of children who have witnessed the homicide of a parent meet the criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Pynoos & Eth, 1984).

In a meta-analysis (Evans et al., 2008), examining the relationship between domestic violence exposure in childhood and children’s internalizing and externalizing problems, and trauma symptoms, found moderate effect sizes. Internalizing problems consisted of depressive symptoms, worry and anxiety, whereas externalizing consisted of physical aggression and general behaviour problems, and trauma symptoms of PTSD. The meta-analysis included 60 empirical studies and the mean weighted effect size (d) for internalizing problems was .48, externalizing .47 (both just below medium effect) and trauma symptoms 1.54, indicating a large effect1. Boys displayed more externalizing problems than girls. No other gender, age or interaction effects were found. Another study (Moylan et al., 2010) showed increased risk for internalizing problems among girls, and increased risk for externalizing problems for boys.

The majority of research has focused on domestic violence, yet exposure also occurs in other contexts such as school and community. Although the main focus of this study is domestic violence it should be mentioned that all three contexts have been correlated with later anxiety, depression, delinquency, and aggression (Mrug & Windle, 2010). The school setting was an independent predictor for later anxiety and depression; community independently predicted later delinquency, and exposure in the home environment later anxiety and aggression. It was concluded that exposure in home or school had the worst consequences and community violence rather affected the attitudes about violent behaviour – desensitizing them to violence. Childhood violence exposure and being a victim of abuse often coexists. Apple and Holden (1998) showed an approximately 40 % co-occurrence. In a Swedish sample, a 58 % overlap has been found (Annerbäck et al., 2010). Accordingly, there is a possibility that psychological problems found among exposed children are confounded by physical or sexual abuse. Studies on unique effects of violence exposure show mixed results (see Herrenkohl et al., 2008, for review). When separating children into three groups – child abuse, exposure to domestic violence, dual exposure – there is still

A common interpretation of effect sizes 0.2 is considered to be a small effect, 0.5 as medium, and 0.8 as a large effect (Cohen, 1969; 1988, in Howell, 2013)
significant effects in the exposure group, compared to non-exposed children (Moylan et al., 2010). Their longitudinal study revealed that children exposed to violence reported more depressive symptoms, delinquent behaviours and withdrawal than non-exposed children, after controlling for gender. The same significant relationships were found in the group of abused children. Moreover, dual-exposed children were at greatest risk, including significant results for somatic complaints and higher levels of aggression.

There appears to be some differences, and even contradicting results in the research of consequences, regarding context, age, gender and co-occurrence with other types of abuse or maltreatment. Many differences might be due to methodological differences. Although, a consistent finding among studies with different methodologies and samples, reviewed by Edleson (1999), was that children solely exposed to domestic violence displayed multiple behavioural and emotional problems compared to non-exposed children. In spite of divergences there is no question whether a child exposed to violence suffer negative consequences or not. The serious consequences now known make us realize that these children are also victims, not just witnesses. The symptoms demonstrated also indicate a major need for treatment. To consider children exposed to violence as victims of maltreatment is essential. In terms of domestic violence the child is living in a psychological abusive environment and should therefore be considered maltreated (Holden, 2003). Moreover these children run a greater risk of being physically or sexually abused (Annerbäck et al., 2010; Apple & Holden, 1998). Being exposed to domestic violence is from the child’s perspective especially stressful and harmful. Georgsson et al. (2011) stressed this issue, as both the abused and the abuser are the ones that the child depends on for safety and protection.

**Children’s opportunities to report and testify**

A child exposed to violence might be called as a witness in the legal process. This put great demands on professionals’ knowledge about what children remember and report about such experiences, and consequently their ability to testify. This also stresses the question about guaranteeing legal certainty.

**Children’s memories of violence exposure.** Research on children’s recall for negative emotional events show mixed results due to several methodological differences, failing to include all relevant factors affecting memory (see Marche & Salmon, 2013, for review). The answer to how stress and emotion effect memory is not straightforward but in general, children remember stressful and potentially traumatizing events well. In a review of children’s memories for traumatic events (Cordón, Pipe, Sayfan, Melinder & Goodman, 2004), the conclusion was that traumatic events early in childhood are remembered and can be recalled over considerable time periods, provided that the child has passed the age of infantile amnesia (referring to the inability to have conscious or explicit memories for events happening in infancy and early childhood). When testing children’s earlier memories, the failure to verbally report prior experiences is due to undeveloped language skills at the time of the event rather then a lack of memory itself (Simcock & Hayne, 2002). Children in their study indicated

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2 Using the expression potentially traumatizing is due to the lack of clear definition of what constitutes a trauma. Whether an experience is interpreted as traumatic or not seems to be individual; the child’s previous experiences and knowledge at the time appear to affect how an event is interpreted (Cordón et al., 2004).
memories of the early events through visual recognition and re-enacting behaviour. The barrier of infantile amnesia is valid for traumatic events as well, so there is still a possibility that memory for trauma in infancy shows non-verbal indicators, although verbal recall is absent (Cordón et al., 2004).

Regarding violence exposure more specifically, Pynoos and Eth (1984) stated that a murder of a parent leaves permanent, detailed and highly accurate images in these children, and they do not show any disbelief about the reality in what they have witnessed. In a study (Christianson, Azad, Leander & Selenius, 2013) on memory and reports among children exposed to homicidal violence none of the 96 interviewed children claimed memory loss before or after the homicide. Seven out of 96 reported some memory loss of certain types of details. That they in general provided detailed reports also indicated that exposed children have vivid memories of these events.

Vivid memories of the events also emphasize a need for treatment. Pynoos and Eth (1984) stressed that to facilitate recovery, a child must be given the opportunity to explore their most stressful memories and consequently attain feelings of being able to cope with the distress – otherwise, remembering the event might remain a threat. Vivid memories also have a judicial value because it makes a testimony possible. This leads to the question on how and what they report about these experiences.

**Children’s reports about violence exposure.** As indicated by research, children remember these events well (Azad, Christianson & Selenius, 2014; Christianson et al., 2013; Pynoos & Eth, 1984), however not automatically mean that they share them with others. Common conceptions about child victims are that they have difficulties in talking about their experiences, and even harder if they know the perpetrator. Not necessarily because of immature memory and language functions – obvious in very young children – but due to feelings of shame or guilt, loyalty conflicts against the perpetrator, fear of reprisals, or simply that they do not want to (e.g., Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones & Gordon, 2003; Leander, 2010; Priebe & Svedin, 2008).

However, some of these conceptions appear to be incorrect in terms of children exposed to violence. In a recent study (Christianson et al., 2013) on what children (3-17 years) exposed to homicidal violence remember and report showed them to actually be detailed in their reports during police interviews. Most details reported were details before and after the homicide, about severe assault, their own acts, and the victim’s reactions. Least amount of details was reported about the perpetrator and victim’s emotions, neutral surrounding details, and their own verbalizations. Some age differences were found, but not for gender. Age was positively correlated with more details about the child’s own thoughts, feelings and verbalizations, the offenders verbalizations and emotions, and the victim’s reactions. Furthermore, there was a tendency for children with a close relationship to the perpetrator to withhold (20 %) and deny (10 %) information more often than children without a close relationship (4 % and 0 % respectively). Although, differences in the number of details reported by children in Christianson et al. (2013), showed only one significant difference in disadvantage of those with a relationship with perpetrator, namely: neutral surrounding details. Results also revealed them to actually be giving more details about emotional surrounding details and the victim’s verbalizations. All other twelve reporting categories did not show any differences
between children who knew the perpetrator or not. Children knowing the victim provided more details about emotional surrounding details, and about own acts. All other thirteen categories failed to show any differences. Considering the assumption of emphasized loyalty conflicts or fear of reprisals, they seem not to affect these children reporting details about their exposure to violence.

Research on child victims of sexual abuse reveals that their reports contain little information regarding the central, sexual details (e.g., Leander, 2010). This omission is usually explained with feelings of shame and guilt (e.g., Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Leander, 2010; Pribe & Svedin, 2008). However, this pattern is not as common among violence-exposed children (Christianson et al., 2013). They report forensically relevant information, including critical and severe details. The difference was for example explained by sexual crimes as more socially taboo. Feelings of guilt might be present after all, yet not affecting reporting. Georgsson et al. (2011) suggested that children contemplating their own actions during interviews, is possibly signalling them feeling guilty for not being able to prevent the violence.

Nevertheless, children do express difficulties in reporting about their experiences. One reason for a child to omit information might be understood as an attempt to avoid being overwhelmed by the memories (Georgsson et al., 2011). In line with Pynoos and Eth (1984) this is crucial to overcome in order to recover. Children give explanations such as it is hard to open up and dare to tell anyone, and that their experiences might be to intimidating to that someone (Georgsson et al., 2011; Steeves et al., 2007). This stresses the importance of creating a safe and trustful environment for the child to enable him or her to dare to speak, consequently starting to process their experiences. Despite children experiencing some difficulty, they are pleased by being heard by police. It is relieving to tell understanding adults about ones’ situation and experiences, and good for rehabilitation (Kaldal et al., 2010). Thinking that children do not want to, possibly because they do not initiate it or avoid answering questions about it, is probably misleading. Research implies lacking security and trust as major cause; building rapport is crucial in getting them to talk (Marche & Salmon, 2013; Poole & Dickinson, 2013).

Another important finding by Georgsson et al. (2011) was that children reported more information as the interview proceeded, possibly indicating that a more secure relationship with the interviewer enabled the children to open up more. They also revealed that they remembered more than their initial responses indicated. Children also tell more with several hearings (e.g., Azad et al., 2014; Leander, 2010). Though, in Sweden no more investigative interviews than absolutely necessary should be held with children (FUK 17). There is an ambition to minimize the number of child hearings to spare the child from unnecessary strains, trying to receive all information needed during one hearing (Kaldal et al., 2010). It was discussed that this approach might not be the best for the child because they reported having difficulties in remembering everything at the first interview. It was stressed that several occasions were needed to be able to report the whole story. It was also evident that in cases were children who do not say much during the first hearing are not given any more chances and the investigation is withdrawn. A recent study, investigating the effects of repeated interviews with children exposed to violence, showed that it generates more detailed reports (Azad et al., 2014).
Creating a safe environment, building a trustful relationship between the interviewer and the child, and realizing that children tell more if interviews are repeated, provide supporting tools in creating a narrative, and it can be assumed that children are competent as witnesses as well. It is of great importance to realize the special needs of children, for them to be able to give any information. In addition, a traumatized child need the opportunity to rest and grieve, comforted by a familiar person, and finding a way of handling anxiety (Pynoos & Eth, 1984). They argued that psychological knowledge about children’s subsequent trauma reactions is needed to make it possible for the child to contribute as an effective witness – otherwise mastering of the trauma can be impeded by involvement in the judicial process.

The testifying child. As presented above, there are conceptions not to hear children, that they should be protected from those kinds of situations. However, several aspects contradict this view. First of all, as described above, children are detailed in their reports and they do report forensically relevant information (Christianson et al., 2013), which could be of great value in the crime investigation. Secondly, parents – often the only informants in the preliminary investigation and in the courtroom – tend to underreport what their children may have experienced. For example, where 37 % of parents reported that their child/children had seen or heard psychological aggression at home, 67 % of the children reported the same (Litrownik, Newton, Hunter, English & Everson, 2003). In the same study, regarding seeing physical violence 14 % of parents and 33 % of their children reported such experiences. So, not including children in preliminary investigations may result in never being discovered. A third issue is that it benefits the child. Being called as a witness in the courtroom, and speak on the behalf of a deceased parent, is from the child’s perspective of great importance (Pynoos & Eth, 1984). Furthermore, older children whom have not been asked to witness have feelings of, once more, failing to come to the aid of their loved one. This study also revealed that testifying might actually enhance self-esteem and bring psychological closure. Besides, resolving posttraumatic symptoms is partially about incorporating the events into language representation systems (Brewin & Holmes, 2003).

There are beliefs among legal professionals that children provide less reliable testimonies than adults, especially judges (Granhag, Strömwall & Hartwig, 2005). Research indicates the opposite; children merely report somewhat different (see Klemfuss & Ceci, 2013, for review). For example, children exposed to domestic violence have difficulties in creating a narrative that is coherent and elaborate about the violence (Gerogsson et al., 2011). In their sample only 1 in 14 children between 8-12 years old manage to describe the experiences in context with details and in a logical order. Reporting patterns valid for child witnesses in general (see Klemfuss & Ceci, 2013; Leander & Christianson, 2008, for reviews). This stresses the question on which criteria there should be in validating a child’s testimony, and deciding its value. The interpretation made by Gerogsson et al. (2011) regarding problems in forming a narrative was that the children could not comprehend and mediate their understanding fully. Other explanations provided, except avoiding to get overwhelmed by the memories, was a lack in vocabulary for such events, or that they were uncertain about how to interpret it. This indicates a need for support to elucidate what happened. Knowledge about children’s memories of stressful or traumatizing events, what and
how they report about it, is crucial in evaluating the accuracy in a child’s testimony – ultimately guaranteeing legal certainty.

**The professional work and society’s protection of children exposed to violence**

Children exposed to violence may come in contact with several different instances, such as the police, prosecutors, social services, and health care. In 2006, the cooperating activity *barnahus* (approx. child house) was established in Sweden (Kaldal et al., 2010; Utvärderingsrapporten Barnahus – försöksverksamhet med samverkan under ett gemensamt tak vid misstanke om brott mot barn, RPS, SoS, RMV & ÅM, 2008). Child houses receive children who are suspected to have been victims of crime, aiming for cooperation between all authorities a child victim might come in contact with. However, actions for this particular group are lacking. First, personnel at child houses find this victim group problematic and vulnerable, and it has been stressed that the professional work must be developed, and prioritized, to capture these children (Kaldal et al., 2010). Secondly, in the report, only eight out of twenty-two child houses received children exposed to violence. Finally, it was evident that the Social Services do not always initiate investigation of domestic violence.

A long tradition of studying child victims of physical and sexual abuse stresses the question of how well the more recent knowledge about violence-exposed children is implemented among professionals meeting them. It is of great importance to assure it is, as this unintended group of victims, appears to be unseen and overlooked in society.

**Aim of the present study**

It is evident that children exposed to violence are unintended victims, and in many ways an unseen and overlooked group of victims in society. It is a societal responsibility that all child victims are realized and given necessary help and support. Because this research field is relatively new one of the three purposes is to describe the professionals’ conceptions and experiences about these children, including their practical work. This is important as professionals’ perspectives are crucial to fully understand this field – they are the ones with the practical experiences. Previous research on these children provide knowledge about subsequent consequences and symptoms, children’s memory, and how and what they report. Therefore the second purpose of this study is to examine how well this psychological knowledge of children exposed to violence is implemented among professionals working with them. Consequently, the study will indicate potential contemporary knowledge gaps to be filled. Both these aims contribute to the third aim of the study; namely an attempt to reveal the status and what opportunities violence-exposed children have in the society and legal system. Several questions are stated: (1) among professionals meeting children exposed to violence what are their *experiences* of interviews (including associated routines), and problems obstructing these cases? (2) What are their *conceptions* about how these children should be treated in a legal sense? Do certain attitudes correspond to results in this research field? (3) What is their *knowledge* about these children’s memory, reporting, and subsequent consequences/symptoms, and what knowledge do they lack? Is their knowledge corresponding to the results in the research field? This question was more strongly related to the second aim.
It is possible that there are differences in conceptions among different professions as they represent different perspectives of the issue. For example, professionals within treatment and social support may have more of an individual perspective for their focus is physical and psychological health, recovery, and support. Representing the Prosecution- or Police Authority, on the other hand, may have more focus on prosecution and conviction, not always corresponding the psychological needs of a child. Accordingly, a fourth question is stated – (4) do conceptions about violence-exposed children differ between professions?

Methods

Participants
The present study is part of a large research project about children exposed to violence in Sweden. The Swedish Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority finance the project. The present sample represented professionals working with child victims, and was mainly recruited from Swedish child houses. In addition, participants also constituted a group of prosecutors participating in a general seminar about forensic psychology, arranged by The Prosecution Authority.

The sample represented three main professions: The Police Authority, The Prosecution Authority, and social investigation- and treatment personnel. Out of 74 answered questionnaires 63 were included in the analyses. Out of the eleven excluded participants, two had no experiences at all concerning children, and nine had no experiences of children exposed to violence. All excluded cases were prosecutors. In the final sample, five police officers, one sergeant, five child investigators, and one leader represented The Police Authority (n = 12, 19 %). Fourteen prosecutors and two public prosecutors constituted The Prosecution Authority (n = 16, 25.4 %). Social investigation- and treatment personnel (n = 35, 55.6 %) included seven counsellors, fifteen trained social workers, fifteen social welfare secretaries, and nine child coordinators. In this group some had two or three working titles, for example trained social worker and social welfare secretary. Due to small sample size, leading to lack of power, police and prosecutors were grouped together (n = 28, 44.4 %) in the quantitative analyses. It was motivated for the main focus of the police is investigating a potential crime, and prosecutors’ is getting a prosecution and conviction. Both a crime investigative focus, compared to the other group’s focus on help, support and treatment.

In the final sample (N = 63), 52 (82.5 %) were women and 9 (14.3 %) were men. Two respondents (3.2 %) did not report gender. Due to uneven groups and small sample size for men, no gender differences were calculated. Mean age was 43 years old (SD = 9.81), ranging from 27 to 67 years old. Mean years in profession were 11.4 (SD = 9.93), ranging from 1 to 40 years.

Material
The questionnaire consisted of three parts: four demographical variables (gender, age, profession, and years in profession), eight qualitative questions, and thirteen quantitative statements. The qualitative part consisted of open-ended questions. Respondents were asked (1) what criterions were used when making the decision to
hear a child or not; (2) what other opportunities children were given to talk about their experiences, apart from the police interrogation; (3) if there were any problematic factors working with these cases; (4) what negative consequences these children displayed; (5) if they had enough knowledge about children exposed to violence, and if not, what type of knowledge they required; (6) how well children reported their experiences; (7) what their personal experiences of hearings were; and finally, (8) what they thought about the cooperation between instances working with these cases. How the answers were interpreted and coded is explained below (Analysis).

The final, quantitative part consisted of thirteen statements, with a five point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questions concerned conceptions about children exposed to violence; their legal status, routines in handling the cases, children’s memory and reports about violence exposure, and subsequent symptoms. All quantitative questions/statements are presented in Table 2 (Results).

**Procedure**

The questionnaire together with an information sheet about the project was sent to potential respondents at 21 child houses around different Swedish counties. Requested to complete it privately to guarantee anonymity. Distributed by e-mail or regular mail, depending on what the potential respondents preferred. Questionnaires were sent back accordingly. The additional group of prosecutors recruited at the forensic psychology seminar, completed the questionnaire individually before the seminar started.

**Qualitative analysis**

The qualitative data was analysed with thematic analysis (TA), following Hayes (2000, in Langemar, 2008). TA is a qualitative method that could generally be described as structuring text from predetermined (deductive TA) or emerging themes out of the data (inductive TA); in practice, often a combination of both (Langemar, 2008; Patton, 2002). It is a qualitative reduction of data, trying to make sense of it, and identifying core meanings (themes) and consistencies (Patton, 2002). The present study was both deductive and inductive. The questions in the survey served as potential themes, although during the coding procedure, the data directed the analysis – making other/new themes evident. Before I started any analysing procedures I reviewed previous research about children exposed to violence, within all areas considered in the present study, for several weeks – until sufficient level understanding of the research field and associated research problems was reached. I had no previous knowledge about this particular victim group per se, apart from knowledge about child development, trauma, memory, and reporting in general, acquired during bachelor and master studies in psychology.

To get an overall apprehension of the data, all surveys were first read as a whole, without any annotations or interpretation. This was made twice. Secondly, during a third reading, aimed to develop potential coding categories, generating twelve topics. This procedure was made once more, now resulting in eight categories. Four of the previous twelve categories were related to some of the other eight topics and were paired with the matching category. The eight coding categories were: criterions for hearing a child; children’s other opportunities to get heard (besides investigative interviews); problems related to working with these children/cases; symptoms the children display; knowledge about children exposed to violence; how the children appears in the interview situation;
own experience of hearing children; and finally, experiences of the cooperating actions. Thereafter the formal coding started, handling one category at a time, where the material was read through once for every topic. Text corresponding to the code in question was picked out and transcribed digitally to facilitate the data reduction for reporting the qualitative findings. After all data being sorted, each theme was read through and sorted by subcategories. Here it was evident that data in the category containing problematic factors related to several other themes. Problems were related to criterions for hearing a child, other opportunities, knowledge, the hearing situation and the cooperation. Data was re-coded accordingly. Remaining data all revolved around problems related to legal proceedings. Therefore, this category was renamed accordingly, and constituted an own theme. The theme regarding actual experience of interviewing a child was not analysed further because answers were given as amount of time or similarly, and was considered of no interest for the purpose of this study. Parts of the cooperation category was also re-coded to other themes as it displayed attitudes of how the children/cases should be handled, that corresponded to some other topic in the coding scheme. When all material was coded, each theme was summarized, reduced, and rewritten as a cohesive text. In total, data revolved around seven major themes.

Quantitative data was analysed statistically with t-tests and regression methods. All statistical procedures were conducted with IBM SPSS Statistics (2013) 22.0.

Results

Qualitative thematic analyses

Descriptions of the experiences and conceptions among the professionals meeting children exposed to violence are presented under each theme (heading) below. Subheadings represent subcategories within each theme. An overview of the thematic analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of thematic analysis.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Criterions for investigative interviews</td>
<td>Child’s developmental level</td>
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<td>Child’s protection and safety</td>
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<td>Juridical aspects</td>
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<td>Child’s opportunities to be heard</td>
<td>Within health care</td>
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<td>Within the legal system</td>
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<td>Reactions to violence-exposure</td>
<td>Psychological symptoms</td>
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<td>Physical symptoms</td>
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<td>Social problems</td>
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Table 1 (continued). Overview of thematic analysis.

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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tr>
<td>The child in the interview</td>
<td>Reporting performance depends on several factors</td>
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<td>Children’s memory</td>
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<td>Reports well given the right circumstances</td>
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<td>Factors impeding reporting</td>
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<td>Problems in legal proceedings</td>
<td>In court</td>
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<td>Related to children’s legal status</td>
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<td>Professionals’ state of knowledge</td>
<td>Requires knowledge about the professional work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Requires knowledge about the children</td>
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<tr>
<td>The professional cooperation</td>
<td>Specific critique towards certain professions</td>
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Criteria for children to participate in investigative interviews
If a child is to be heard requires consideration of many different aspects. An overall observation was that criterions reported were vague, with a great scope of interpretation, and clear guidelines were missing. Statements such as “if it is appropriate” indicated this, or that it depends on who makes the decision – some prosecutors are more prone to hear children, and others believe that they should be “spared” as far as possible from witnessing. This was experienced as unfortunate, that it is a question of “competent and committed police officers, proficient prosecutors and stubborn social workers”. In addition, there was some confusion about who makes the decision: prosecutors, police officers and investigators were stated. Decisions were also taken during consultations on the child house and the social services. Moreover, it was evident that in some regions the police never hear a child only exposed to violence – they must be actual victims of the violence. Others had the routine of hearing the child if there was any suspicion of violence exposure, or that all children are heard at the child house if there is a police report. In contrast, opinions that all children should be interviewed, was expressed.

Information in the investigation or in the initial police report and the severity of violence sometimes affected the decision, in what way was not specified. Moreover, the child’s willingness to talk could be considered. More specific criterions reported could be divided into three subcategories: developmental level, safety and protection, and juridical aspects. On the question about what the criterions are, five answered that they did not know, one was unsure, and two were blank.

The child’s developmental level. Developmental level was widely stated and included age, language, and maturity. General maturity level was described in the context of a child being mature or old “enough” to be heard about what they have witnessed. More specifically, considering age it was described that a conversation is not possible if the child is to young; one felt that it was difficult if they were below the age of four. More specifically, age was described as effecting memory – if they were old enough to have visual memories – and the ability to verbally describe their experiences. If a very young child, unable to verbally convey their experiences, a hearing is meaningless. Finally, possible disabilities must also be considered.
The child must be protected and safe. The child’s safety and protection was stated having great importance – participating must be “safe”. Psychological and physical condition, and that the child can manage, was considered. Additionally, it depends on how effected the child was by the exposure, for example signs of shock and trauma. It was proposed that if a child was traumatized, a hearing might be inappropriate. Who make these judgments was not specified. Moreover, if the child needs support or protection after a potential interview these must first be met. This was exemplified by investigating the current situation in the home environment, if it is safe and if the child is protected there from any subsequent harm. It was also described that if a hearing could “relieve the child”, to get help and support, a hearing might take place. It was pointed out that this relieving aspect should serve as an indicator if a child would be heard or not. Professionals do not want to cause unnecessary pressure or suffering that might be current when engaging in investigations. Finally, it was stated that the child perspective should determine when to hear a child.

Juridical aspects. Three major juridical aspects were reported: relation to the victim/offender, evidential value, and parental consent. If a child is related to the suspect or/and the victim special consideration must be taken. First of all, according to Swedish law one is not obligated to witness against a closely related (RB 36:3). Whether or not a child should witness these cases, when they are not representing the injured party, was an issue experienced as problematic among professionals. It is an ethical question and one explained this by contrasting possible reactions in the child:

“On one hand it might feel difficult for the child to understand afterwards why he/she was not allowed to tell the police. On the other hand closely related are protected by law so that one does not have to testify [,] which would be an assault itself to hold hearings with a child that does not understand the meaning of a testimony against a closely related.”

A child might be to young to determine the consequences of their testimony being used in court. Yet, the parent (if suspect) is the one protected by law. Another related aspect was explained as not wanting to make children report one of their parents, or put them in the position of being forced to take sides between them – a child should not be required to be for or against any parent. In relation, guidelines in what approach they as professionals should have about having child as witnesses was requested. There was also a concern of children being objective witnesses when related to victim or suspect.

The evidential value refers to whether or not the child’s testimony is of great importance for the investigation and juridical process. First of all if the child is a witness, meaning that the child has information that is valuable in the legal process. This was exemplified with where the child was in relation to the crime scene. Here, a contradictory result was found since one stated that all children who had been at the place at the time of the violence, even claimed to be “asleep”, was heard. Secondly, they have to consider its usefulness; if the testimony is important, necessary or crucial for the investigation, and if it moves the investigation forward. They took present evidence in to account; what other evidence is existent, if that is enough and if that can replace the child’s participation. This also includes other witnesses who can replace the child. They also take the juridical process into account, if the testimony is needed for a conviction.
It was described that professionals always have to weigh the proportions in cases when the child is related to the suspect/victim; how much the investigation may strain the child in relation to the evidential value of their participation.

Professionals also need permission from both parents (in some cases other guardian or family member) to hear a child. In cases where the child has a counsel for an injured party, only the case if the child is a victim as well, the counsel is the one to give the consent. The issue of a hearing depending on the parents or guardians is experienced as troublesome. Often, the offender is a parent, and a child is dependent on their care. In these cases, parents do not always know or have the child’s best in focus. This was also considered to indicate the parents or guardians willingness to support the child.

Other contexts were children are given the opportunity to share their experiences

If the police do not hear a child there are still other opportunities for them to tell their story. It was evident that there were many different contexts in which these children are heard, mainly within the social services and the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Yet, it was also revealed that routines lacked and that the opportunities seldom were enough to support the child. Other supporting actions were also missing. Due to lacking routines children’s need to talk about their experiences is often missed out, as professionals might think somebody else offered the child support. Professionals might also forget to give these children information about what happened and will happen. Some respondents stated that children exposed to violence most often are not given any other chance to talk. This was found problematic since police interviews are not therapeutic. Besides, more violent events tend to emerge during treatment, experiences needing to be processed. In relation, several pointed out the importance of giving them other opportunities to be heard, seen and listened to – emphasizing talking as a good thing and a part of the healing process. This was expressed with an additional concern about what you are going to tell a child when he/she grows up; that nobody wanted to listen? The child might be the only witness, yet never asked about it. It was stressed that all children should be offered individual support and get their psychological status checked. Finally, almost a fifth were unsure or did not know, and some of these guessed or “hoped” that the children were given needed support or that their voices were heard in some way in the legal process. Instances and opportunities children are given to share their story could be divided into health care, social support, and legal system.

Health care. The Child and Adolescent Psychiatry was widely stated. Although, it was not given that they were called in. Here, the children could talk to a psychologist or a social welfare officer (swe: kurator). Sometimes the Child Medical Services were involved, if the child was hurt in some way they might see a doctor or a counsellor. Sometimes these children were discovered because they came in contact with the medical services with somatic symptoms and/or suicidal thoughts and/or behaviours.

Social support. A vast majority stated the Social Services, and once again it could not be assumed that they were involved and that they knew about the child. Yet, one social welfare secretary stated: if they knew about them they always talked to them. A child could be given the opportunity to talk about their experiences in several ways. For example in a possible social investigation concerning the child’s need for protection, other needs, or foster home placement. A social welfare secretary described that they
tried to talk to all children and if the child did not want to talk they always informed the child what they were doing and how they were going to protect them. However, another experience was that too much focus was on the family’s protection, so individual support for the child got overlooked. The Social Services could also offer counselling for support and the immediate crisis – individually and in groups. Some children might participate in a supporting activity called Trappan (eng: the stairs), which is a model for crisis counselling for children who have been exposed to violence in the home environment (Arnell & Ekbom, 1999, revised 2007; 2010). It was explained that the major work here was about relieving the child from responsibility and guilt. In some districts all children were offered Trappan but it requires parental consent. An issue experienced as problematic since all parents do not approve support or treatment. Despite an amendment of the law in 2012 (FB 6:13a), making it possible to give a child support with the consent from only one parent, it was still perceived as problematic.

Additional support activities were: coordinator on The Family Violence Group (swe: Familjeförlagsgruppen), trauma focused therapy individually or in group, and counselling at The Support Centre for Young Crime Victims (swe: Stödcentrum för unga brottsöver paging). Finally, within social support, school and family were also mentioned. E.g. family members or other relatives, or members of a possible foster home. The school welfare officer or the school nurse might have knowledge about this particular child.

Legal system. If the child comes in contact with a child house they can be offered counselling (with parental consent) and hearings are also held here. Yet, it was pointed out that in some districts, children only exposed to violence are not received at the child house. The counsel for the injured party was mentioned. Again, this is only possible if the child is also a victim. During a possible indemnity application, the child is given the opportunity to share their story. Even though the police might not officially hear a child, sometimes the police talk to the child at the crime scene at the time of the police action – an unofficial hearing. Sometimes these reports and the police’s observations concerning the child are written down, and sometimes not; memos might used in subsequent legal processes. Other adults that have talked to the child (other witnesses that were close to the child at the time of the event, parents, professionals from the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, etcetera) might also convey the child’s experience, reactions and needs to other authorities.

Symptoms and reactions among these children
It was clear that the symptoms shown by these children had great amplitude. Some of the symptoms reported could be described as both long- and short term; it was stated that some children are affected even after a long period of time, or that symptoms can reappear in future, stress-inducing events. It was evident that symptoms are manifested on a psychological, behavioural, physical and social level. They are many in numbers, severe in character, individual and varying – depending on other risk- and protective factors, individual characteristics, support, crime characteristics, previous experiences, and so on. Correspondingly, subsequent support needs might also be different. It was thought that if the victim were a parent, symptoms would be worse. Violence exposure is also impeding general child development on several levels. Some even described the symptoms as the same as for victims. One answered “do not know”, four answered blank and two were unsure about children’s symptoms.
Psychological symptoms. On a psychological level many symptoms were presented. First of all, the child might lose both parents (if one gets killed and the other one goes to prison or get incarcerated), immensely stressful itself. Subsequent custody battles among relatives might worsen it. Regarding symptoms children showed different types of crisis reactions and some even came in the state of shock. Numerous stated trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), for instance exemplified with intrusive memories. One even stated that these children could be traumatized for life.

Considering more specific psychological symptoms, many mentioned that children show general insecurity and felt insecurity at home; horror and fear, of loud sounds for example but also fear of revenge; anxiety and worry, worry about what is going to happen to them in particular. Many also stated sleeping difficulties including nightmares. Difficulties in concentrating were also present, affecting learning and therefore school achievement. They also suffer from feelings of guilt or/and shame. Some blame their selves or feel ashamed, sometimes because they have disclosed it to someone or have witnessed against a parent, or about their own actions at the time of the assault, reflecting upon their own possible guilt, maybe for not intervening or preventing the assault. Fewer reported apathy, depression, suicidal thoughts, grief, nervousness and stress, also as a constant state of stress. They might also suffer from identity problems, concerning their (now negative) self-image, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Finally, individual experiences were that some children repress their experiences and that dissociative symptoms might be present.

Behavioural symptoms. Behavioural symptoms described were externalizing behaviour problems, regression and destructive behaviours. Many mentioned externalizing behaviours, represented by anger, over activity similar to ADHD-symptoms (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), acting out aggressively, being violent against others, and antisocial behaviours. These children’s values and norms might be affected negatively, including a normalization of violence, and they can display norm-breaking behaviours or even imitate the actions they have witnessed, becoming perpetrators themselves. Many also brought up destructive behaviours, represented by self-injury, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsion symptoms, need for control, stretching limits and put oneself at risk, and victimization. A few mentioned the defence mechanism regression, meaning to regress to an earlier developmental stage.

Physical symptoms. Only a few physical symptoms were mentioned. They were somatic symptoms such as stomachache, headache and bed-wetting.

Social problems. Finally, experiences of violence-exposure also affected the children socially. A few stated that they could get shy and withdraw, and even isolate themselves. They could get social problems overall but also at school, including decreased attendance. Several mentioned trusting issues with others, adults particularly, and that it could harm their attachment, causing more interpersonal problems.

The child in the interview situation
The experiences and apprehensions of how and what children report were somewhat mixed but the major point of view was that children, even the young ones tell – not in a cohesive “adult” way necessarily, but they do tell. There was a conception that they also
have a need to talk, but not always right away. An individual statement was that it is like hearing a child victim. There were conceptions that children want to tell; they want to be seen, tell their story, be listened to, acknowledged, taken seriously, and even participate as witnesses in the legal process. It was thought it is good for the child, that telling has a relieving effect. Some children display great relief afterwards, and it feels good for a child to know that someone can help them. A child investigator’s experience that most children want to keep in contact, confirmed this willingness. It was stated that children are often good witnesses and there is a good opportunity for investigation. Although, it was stressed that children do not always focus on details that are relevant to the investigation or legal process. They do not always tell the professionals what they want to hear at first. Exemplified by that children are concerned about their parents, both when victim and suspect: how the suspect feels and is treated – if (he) gets food etcetera – and what the deceased body looks like. They have questions about the future, and one had the experience of a girl with a biggest concern about what was going to happen to her cats. One child coordinator thought children’s reports are extenuated; parents’ reports made it clear how bad the situation really was. Resulting in subsequent support. A prosecutor with no experiences of hearing a child thought that children often avoid the traumatic details and prefers to talk about other “funnier” things. Nine respondents did not provide any information regarding children’s behaviours etcetera in interview situations.

Children’s memory of violence exposure. It was reported that children remember these events well and can have vivid memories. How well was assumed by two to depend on level of shock or trauma. However, it was not apparent how it affected memory. If violence was repeated, a child may have difficulties in separating the events. Children may have difficulties in remembering the amount of violence and over what time periods. A trained social worker had noticed that those parts most frightening to a child, was the most vivid part of the memory.

How well they report depends. A common conception about how well children can express experiences of violence exposure was that it is individual and depends on many factors within and around the child. A majority stated that it depends on age, but even within the same age group there are differences. Individual statements were that even very young children, three to four years old, are able to report in some way, and from the age of ten they report well. Siblings also differ. Language and vocabulary was mentioned too, and the overall ability to express oneself. The situation, in which the child was at the moment, and possible support, was assumed to influence. Finally, maturity level, potential defence mechanisms, self-esteem, personality, relationship to the victim and/or suspect, and of course how much they had actually seen or heard, were stated. A single assumption was that it should be easier to talk if the violence is obvious and serious, such as the victim ending up in hospital. Individual experiences was that children sometimes tell spontaneously, that they can describe sounds in great detail, and feelings of fear, grief, anger, horror and powerlessness.

Only one respondent stated that children could hardly express themselves at all, due to lack of understanding what they have experienced and ability to verbally describe it – also stating that victims had it easier to talk. Related to children’s understanding, one had met a four year old who said that the parents were making a film.
Given the right circumstances. Moreover, many respondents described, given the right circumstances, these children could express themselves well, even very well, vividly, surprisingly detailed, and even more than one would expect. The “right” circumstances were several. First of all, children would express themselves well only by given the opportunity to tell their story and being listened to. Great demands were put on the individual interviewer, not only to ask the right questions and in the right way, but also to create the right context. It was pointed out that a competent interrogator was important, partly because the legislation about hearing children is different. In addition, special knowledge about hearing children was required to have a satisfying hearing and to guarantee legal certainty. The child’s feelings of security and trust were widely stated. Felt security did not only refer to the actual hearing situation, but also the overall situation around the child at the moment, for example if they knew what was going to happen to them. The interviewer has to create a trustworthy relationship with the child first; found to be the most important condition for a child to disclose. It was thought that the interviewer should be specially trained; to accomplish a god interview and creating a sufficiently trustworthy relationship is a difficult task. Related to this was the aspect of time. It takes time to build a trustful relationship. When the child trust the adult they dare to remember and open up, therefore several hearings are needed. For the quiet ones, even more time should be given. Sadly, lack of time and resources are not enough to hear them several times. One had actually a hard time answering the question about how well children can mediate their experiences, since it is almost always only one hearing. In contrast, one prosecutor found the need for several, and videotaped hearings, as problematic since the investigation consequently takes longer. Finally, children could also be helped by alternative ways of telling, by drawing, sand play and showing with dolls. This was found very helpful when their vocabulary is poorly developed; they can show their experiences instead.

Factors impeding reporting. Most often children want to tell but there were experiences of them not wanting to, or being hindered in some way. Only individual conceptions regarded the child simply not wanting to: it is easy to “see” if a child do not want to talk and then nothing would be said; and that youths are more defensive, have more of an attitude, or does not tell anything.

There were some issues that were experienced as problematic when hearing a child. For some reasons a child may have difficulties to tell. One stated that interviewing a young child, close to the event, is difficult due to fear and incomprehensibility. Yet it becomes easier after building relationship. Some stated children exposed to violence experiencing loyalty conflicts, some that it impedes reporting. In the case of mother as the victim and father as the offender, a child is afraid of the father and wants him to stop hitting the mother, but does not want the father to go to prison. This loyalty conflict might affect their motivation to speak. This could be found among victims of violence as well. Contradicting results were evident. A few said that children did not display feelings of loyalty, whether or not they spoke was rather because of lacking safety.

Individual experiences was that a trauma, and its subsequent intense feelings, might hinder reporting, or that some children do not want to be remembered about the event and therefore do not speak. Occasionally parents, and even investigators and social workers, minimize and/or extenuate the violence, or the victim might not even admit the
assault. The minimizing may be due to the adults’ anxious feelings in meeting these children and hear about their experiences. It was found difficult that children tell, and parents silence them. Sometimes a child even has made a promise not to tell anyone. Worry and fear of reprisals also makes it difficult to open up. In relation, it was pointed out that it is of great importance to offer the child support afterwards since they might be apprehended as the “scapegoat”.

Using an interpreter was also experienced as difficult, since it created an uncertainty about whether the words are the child’s own, or if the interpreter “helped”. Finally, individual statements were that if to much time had passed since the assault, the child retire into oneself; and if children are subject to foster care placement, or similarly, and to young to fully understand why they are separated from there parents, they might refuse to talk.

Problems related to legal proceedings
Besides the problems discussed above there was additional problems related to legal proceedings. Problems related to both these children as witnesses in the courtroom, and national laws concerning violence-exposed children.

In the courtroom. It was stated that in general it is difficult to have a child as a witness in court, and even more when it concerns violence between closely related (as discussed above). In court, children’s testimonies are often questioned, especially if the child is the only witness and very young. It is questioned by the defence counsel, yet sometimes even by judges. An experience was that it was very hard to get a conviction when a child’s testimony is the main evidence. Prosecutors find it hard to handle and argument for the value of the evidence in a child’s statement for the judges. On a general level, it was described as difficult to determine children’s authenticity and reliability, and to verify their statements with other evidence. One also found it problematic that children are obligated to remember the date of the incident.

In Sweden, if someone is under the age of 15, the court determines, in accordance with the circumstances, whether the child may be heard as witness (RB 36:4). To spare the child, testimonies might be recorded. This was found problematic since it has lower value compared to present witnesses.

Not the legal status of a victim. Further on, as children exposed to violence are not considered victims of crime in a judicial sense, and cannot represent the injured party, has consequences. Since not actual victims, the police do not hear them very often – “They often get “lost” by the police and by the social services”. It was stated that the police and prosecutors are not involved because the crime is not directly against the child. However, it was stressed that we have to realize them as victims as well. In some districts, violence-exposed children are not welcomed at the child house, with the argument that they are not representing the injured party – making them almost invisible.

Not representing the injured party, the witnessing child cannot lead their own action for damages; they need to file an application at the Swedish Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority, which again requires parental consent. One prosecutor said that
although she thought these children should be considered victims in a legal sense, she knows that the Supreme Court does not see this as molestation or abuse.

_The professional’s knowledge about children exposed to violence_

It was stated, “there is to much prejudices and ignorance in all professions 2013 than what is acceptable”. Correspondingly, the vast majority among the professionals considered themselves deficient in their knowledge about children exposed to violence. Almost 60% of the representatives of The Police Authority stated a lack of knowledge and a request for more. Nearly 90% of The Prosecution Authority, and approximately 50% among the social investigation- and treatment personnel reported the same. In total, 63% of the respondents experienced deficient knowledge about these children. In addition, one prosecutor stated it was scarce in the Supreme Court as well. Two respondents answered blank and one was unsure. General expressions such as “never enough” and “one can always learn more” were common. The self-perceived knowledge level varied from almost none at all to sufficient. However, many of those who thought it was sufficient emphasized the importance of always staying updated, and to have continuous guidance and debriefing from their employer. They also stated that their knowledge was enough to carry out _their_ professional duties. A few respondents had sufficient knowledge about violence, but not homicidal violence. A trained social worker stated that she was unsure whether or not she had to have knowledge about these children. Experience was pointed out as important as well, since every case and every child is unique, one becomes more competent with experience, not only knowledge. A description that the scarcity was due to few cases, indicated deficient knowledge could also be due to lacking experiences. Ultimately, it was described that one of the major problems with cases concerning violence-exposed children is the lacking knowledge itself. The wish for more knowledge concerned several different areas. Mainly about their own professional work and several aspects of the children.

_The professional work._ First of all, routines and guiding principles for handling these cases and meeting the children was demanded. Some confusion was evident about what procedures that should actually be used, and what to prioritize. Routines regarding when and where to do the interview, and who is responsible for the crime scene (home) and to get the child’s things out of there. More specifically, further knowledge about interviewing methods was requested – how to hear them, what questions to ask, how to make it easier for the child to talk about their experiences or make them start talking at all. Besides, there was one wish to learn what questions to ask parents.

_Knowledge about children._ Knowledge about children on several levels was widely requested. Symptoms and reactions appeared important. Requesting information about what the symptoms and reactions are, for example trauma symptoms, behaviours, psychological factors, and how the child’s development is affected. Furthermore, individual differences and what affect the outcome, and finally, how to discover, receive, interpret and respond to the symptoms/reactions. In relation, information about treatment and proper support was also wished for: how to make judgements about what is accurate, and how to perform the treatment themselves (e.g. trauma treatment). One stated that it was difficult to determine what assistance to offer the parents.
A perceived problem with cases of violence-exposed children relates to lacking knowledge about memory and reporting: “In many respects knowledge is missing about what children are able to remember and mediate”. Knowledge about children’s memory was asked for: their ability to observe and understand; if symptoms and reactions affect their power of observation (and testimony); and their time perspective. Required knowledge about reporting included: how memory affects their potential testimonies; how children mediate traumatic memories; their ability to express themselves; what information or details they tell; how age affect testimonies; and how to interpret their narratives. Furthermore, knowledge about children’s reliability as witnesses and development in general was asked for.

There was some concern about how a child is affected by an investigation or legal process. Questions about what the effects are if the child is included or excluded: if it is worse to tell, or not to tell; if the statement that an investigation can be harmful is true or false; and if investigations can worsen the trauma. There was a concern about whether the child’s psychological wellbeing was negatively affected and if they can manage a hearing. A trained social worker described these contradicting opinions well:

“I think there are many different apprehensions about how children should be met, about their reliability as witnesses etc. The approach of children abused or exposed to violence is debated. My experience is that there are some who think children shall always be heard and that it is important for their processing of the event [...] to talk about it and make their voice heard. There is also another phalange were one want to wait until the children themselves shall take the initiative to talk or tell. That the child itself shows when “it’s time” and that it is not good to try the child to talk before.”

Related to this, a wish for greater knowledge about the child perspective was asked for – how the children want to be treated by the judicial system. Knowledge about potential risks in the child’s environment was asked for. It was not specified but a possible explanation is that adults might affect a report, or that the child is not taken cared of. A final wish was made about violence related to notions of honour. Where knowledge about the culture and its traditions is needed.

Cooperation for the children
How the professionals experienced the cooperation between professions varied. Those who thought the collaboration was good, or good in most cases were twenty-seven per cent, with individual comments such as that the child’s best was in focus; short time between report and interrogation; and that it was a continuous exchange between professions. Stating it was good but needs improvement was thirteen per cent. Individual comments of incompatible laws and deficient information flow between professions underscored needed improvements. Sixteen per cent stated only needed improvement, regarding children’s protection for example. One pointed out that there is a risk that the focus in these cases is the violence between the adults. Ten per cent thought it was bad, with individual comments such as that the children are often neglected by both the police and the social services. Cases are sometimes perceived as shattered and one linking person was requested. Eleven per cent stated neither good or bad but that it was important and/or necessary. Cooperation is important to meet the child’s needs and keeping the process short. Competencies are also developed and keeping a dialogue is crucial. In addition, although very important, it is seldom enough.
Ten per cent stated it *depends on whom you are working with*, fourteen per cent answered blank or that they did not know. Finally, three prosecutors had little own experience. Moreover, several mentioned child houses. The majority had a positive attitude, thinking that the quality of cooperation has increased since the foundation and that understanding each other’s professions are enhanced. Yet it was evident that in some districts these children are or not received at child houses.

Specific critique aimed at different professions. Specific critique and suggested improvements were aimed at the police, prosecutors, social services, and counsels for the injured party; both from within and between professions. Criticism concerning the police was that they could improve their documentation at the crime scene (home), since this information is important for the social services making the social investigation and support the child. A related issue was to document children exposed to violence, even if they are not heard – these children are often forgotten. More child hearings were also asked for – yet it was stressed that it should be determined individually – and that they do not wait to long. The quality of the interrogator varied. Social services required updating information from the on-going police investigation. Finally, there is a risk of the adults being the focus in the investigations: “Cases are investigated by police handling relational violence [between] adult[s] and not child investigators. Making the child perspective not always in focus.”

Critique aimed at prosecutors was that they most often choose not to hear children. They were also perceived as hard to work with, due to different perspectives and hard to get in contact with. Prosecutors have the right to classify the investigation, consequently affecting the social investigation, because then social services do not receive all information about the child and the event, not being able to make elaborate decisions about the child’s future.

Social services received criticism regarding placement decisions, such as putting children back home, in the environment were the assault occurred. It was perceived that social services too often tried to keep the family together. Yet, they were also criticized for separating siblings; if the mother gets killed, the father goes to jail, these children loose all family members. The social services were criticized for not always initiating an investigation or trying to get additional information from the police investigation.

Additional criticism concerned counsels for the injured party, time and resources, and indemnity. All who mentioned counsels for the injured party had positive experiences, except one who sometimes thought it was hard to get in contact. Professionals thought these counsels were professional and knowledgeable and should get prescribed to work with exposed children as well. Time and resources was found problematic. The cooperating process tend to be drawn out, affecting evidence, it might take long time before children get to child house, if at all. Workload and lacking resources at different instances affects the cooperating efforts negatively. An example was that the social services might be forced to stop their investigation, due to investigations at the police or child psychiatry, hindering the protection of the child. Finally, since children exposed to violence does not get indemnity automatically there was some confusion about how helps the child to apply for it, since they do not have a counsel. One stated that almost none of the children this counsellor knew of had ever got an indemnity. Ultimately,
respondents stressing how the cooperation should work overall, stated that the child’s protection is of great importance, and opinions that the child perspective should be guiding all investigations were evident.

*Quantitative analyses*

In addition to the main purposes of *describing* the professionals’ experiences and conceptions of children exposed to violence, some statistical analyses were conducted to get an overview of how widespread the attitudes and opinions about certain questions about these children were. Additionally, analyses were conducted in order to see if amount of years working with this had any effect on the outcome, and if there were any differences in conceptions between professions. Due to small sample sizes, the Police (n = 12) and Prosecution (n = 16) Authority were grouped as one – *Crime investigation* – to increase power. The alpha level for all subsequent significance tests was 5 %.

On an overall level, eight statements received strong support (≥ 4). Additionally, two statements received some support (≥ 3.5). Three statements received means close to the middle. All means and standard deviations are presented in table 2.

To examine whether the profession groups (independent variable) differed in any attitudes, two-tailed independent samples t-tests were conducted for each question mean (dependent variable). First, the assumption of homoscedasticity was tested. Levene’s Test of Homogeneity of Variances showed significance for two of the thirteen questions, indicating heterogeneous variance accordingly. For question three, if the children should have right to criminal injuries compensation (F = 14.02, p = .000), the crime investigative group had larger variance (.550) that social investigation- and treatment personnel (.163). Indicating that police and prosecutors have a larger degree of disagreement about whether children should have right to the compensation. For question thirteen, if professionals should have special knowledge concerning children’s testimonies (F = 12.46, p = .001), the variance was .410 and .029 respectively. Indicating a larger disagreement among police and prosecutors. The t-test for this question did not reach significance and was not considered further.

The independent samples t-tests showed two significant results, question three (right to criminal injuries compensation) and twelve (whether or not these children display similar symptoms as abused ones). Since question three did not meet the assumption of equal variances the t-value from a t-test with a Satterthwaite approximation for the degrees of freedom was used (the option provided in SPSS Statistics 22, also recommended by Howell, 2013). This question reached just below the level for significance (t = -2.02, p = .051), and was not considered further. Question twelve received a t-value of -2.64 (p = .011). Crime investigation personnel had lower level of agreement to the statement than the social investigation- and treatment personnel, with the mean difference of -1.525 units. They were .69 (Cohen’s d) standard deviations below the social investigation- and treatment personnel. Indicating a medium (≥ .50) effect size (Cohen, 1969; 1988, in Howell, 2013). The 95% confidence interval on the difference in means was - .922 ≤ µ1 – µ2 ≥ - .128.
Table 2. Means and (standard deviations), sorted by profession group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Crime investigation (n = 28)</th>
<th>Social investigation-and treatment (n = 35)</th>
<th>Total (N = 63)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. [Children exposed to homicidal/severe violence] should be heard by the police.</td>
<td>4.32 (.72)</td>
<td>4.09 (.78)</td>
<td>4.19 (.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. […] should be considered as an injured party.</td>
<td>4.15 (.82)</td>
<td>4.51 (.78)</td>
<td>4.35 (.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. […] should have right to criminal injuries compensation.</td>
<td>4.57 (.74)⊕</td>
<td>4.89 (.40)⊕</td>
<td>4.75 (.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. […] should be offered counselling.</td>
<td>4.86 (.45)</td>
<td>4.89 (.32)</td>
<td>4.87 (.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. […] should be heard by the police more than once.</td>
<td>4.39 (.83)</td>
<td>4.06 (.92)</td>
<td>4.21 (.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. […] remember these events well.</td>
<td>3.71 (1.01)</td>
<td>4.14 (.73)</td>
<td>3.95 (.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. […] are reliable as witnesses.</td>
<td>3.70 (.54)</td>
<td>3.71 (.91)</td>
<td>3.71 (.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. […] report spontaneously about their experiences.</td>
<td>2.89 (.93)</td>
<td>2.82 (.83)</td>
<td>2.85 (.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. […] have a need to talk about their experiences.</td>
<td>4.11 (.93)</td>
<td>4.20 (.83)</td>
<td>4.16 (.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Due to feelings of loyalty […] do not want to report about their experiences.</td>
<td>3.37 (.49)</td>
<td>3.20 (.72)</td>
<td>3.27 (.63)⊕</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. […] want to be heard by the police.</td>
<td>3.27 (.53)</td>
<td>2.97 (.76)</td>
<td>3.10 (.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. […] display similar symptoms as abused children.</td>
<td>3.77 (.76)⊕</td>
<td>4.29 (.76)⊕</td>
<td>4.07 (.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. […] Police, prosecutors, social workers, layers, judges, and lay judges working with, and judging cases where children are suspected to be exposed to homicidal/severe violence, should have special knowledge concerning children’s testimonies.</td>
<td>4.77 (.64)⊕</td>
<td>4.97 (.17)⊕</td>
<td>4.88 (.45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ⊕ significant heterogeneous variance. ⊗ significant t-test. ⊕⊕ significant regression.

To see if there was a relationship between years in profession and how the participants answered the questions a simple regression was conducted for each question. With years in profession as the predictor variable, and score on question as the criterion variable, one significant regression line was found for question ten: that feelings of loyalty makes children not wanting to report about their experiences ($r = 0.364, p = .004$, $r^2 = .132$, adjusted $r^2 = .117$). The obtained regression line was $\hat{Y} = 3.55 - .023X$. Both intercept and slope was significant ($p = .000$ and $p = .004$, respectively), meaning that the longer time a professional have worked with these children, the conception about loyalty conflicts as hindering tend to decrease. About twelve per cent of the variance in attitude is due to years in profession.

The significant results should be interpreted with caution. Since several significance tests have been conducted, the familywise error rate$^3$ must be held in mind. The probability that these conclusions contain at least one type I error is around 74%.$^4$

$^3$ Also known as the experimentwise error rate (Howell, 2013).

$^4$ The calculation of alpha is: $\alpha = 1 - (1 - \alpha')^c$, where $\alpha'$ is the error rate for any comparison and $c$ is number of significance tests (Howell, 2013). With 26 significance test (13 t-tests and 13 regression analyses) gave an actual risk for type I error of 73.65% (1 - (1 - .05)$^{26} = 1 - .2635 = .7365$).
Discussion

The present study had three purposes; to describe professionals’ experiences and conceptions about children exposed to violence, including the practical work, and to examine how well psychological knowledge about these children is implemented among them. Both aims contribute to the attempt to reveal the status and opportunities these children have in society and the legal system. Experiences and conceptions among the professionals meeting violence-exposed children were in many ways similar, both within and between professions, indicated by high means on several quantitative statements. Results were also somewhat varying, demonstrated by the width of the qualitative data. Sometimes results were contradicting, for instance the effect of loyalty conflicts, or whether or not children should be included in investigations or not.

The main results indicate several problems and knowledge gaps, hindering effective work and support for the children, regardless of profession. Overall, lacking knowledge in this area – including symptoms, testimonies, the child perspective, etcetera – is a problem itself. Two thirds of professionals describe their knowledge as scarce. Routines and guidelines are lacking, affecting the quality of support these children need negatively, for example number of hearings and supporting actions. Moreover, only a third is pleased with the cooperation for the children. It is found problematic that these children do not have the status to represent the injured party. For example, they do not have the right to a counsel for an injured party, so parents (often the perpetrator or/and victim) are responsible for all decisions regarding the child; including consent to interviews, support/treatment, and application for indemnity – sometimes benefitting the adult, not the child. Professionals do want to change the children’s legal status. Furthermore, conceptions that children remember and tell are widely held, although circumstances/conditions enabling sufficient reports are seldom met. A lot of professional’s experiences, conceptions and knowledge are in line with previous research, yet some contradictions are present. All discussed individually below. The majority of descriptions in the thematic analysis suggests that children exposed to violence are still an unseen and overlooked group of victims.

Regarding if children shall participate in investigative interviews numerous criterions are considered, including child’s developmental level, safety, protection, and juridical aspects. Many criterions can be inferred as vague and interpretable, and clear guidelines about who, where and how to make these decisions seem lacking. Decisions also depend on individuals; some professionals are more prone to hold hearings and some want to spare them. Some districts never hear these children, others only need a suspicion about exposure to hold interviews. Several professionals cannot answer this question, possibly indicating that when to hear a violence-exposed child is not straightforward.

When the child is related to the suspect or/and victim, professionals weigh the proportions of the evidential value of the child’s testimony and possible negative effects of participating in the legal process. If children should witness against a parent or related is perceived as one of the major problems working with these cases. According to Swedish law one is not obligated (RB 36:3) and a child should not be forced to take sides. There is no certainty that the child understands the full meaning of participating. In contrast, it is possible that they would feel bad or angry later on for not being asked
Clearer guidelines for how to handle these questions are asked for. Previous research has found participating to be positive for children (Pynoos & Eth, 1984), and they do provide forensically relevant information (Christianson et al., 2013). Striving to spare the child from testifying, through replacing them with other informants, might also be problematic since parents (often the only informants in the preliminary investigation) tend to underreport the exposure (Litrownik et al., 2003). So, there are several arguments to hear children. More research with children as respondents, studying the child perspective, could bring clarity on how to relate to this issue with less ambiguity.

The criterion of parental consent is also found troublesome. Exposed children do not have right to a counsel for the injured party to ensure their best, so parents make all decisions, sometimes hindering the investigation and benefits the parents, not the child. In practice, the offending parent can protect oneself from conviction, since they have the right to deny one of the key witnesses to be interviewed – often the only witness.

An investigative interview is not the only opportunity get heard. Results showed that children are given the opportunity to talk about their experiences within health care (e.g. Child and Adolescent Psychiatry), the community (e.g. Social Services), and the legal system (e.g. child houses). Although many different opportunities routines seem to lack, indicated by descriptions that these children sometimes are not even known to other authorities, and if they are still often get missed out since professionals might think somebody else offered the child support. Notable, in 2010 only eight out of twenty two child houses received this group (Kaldal et al., 2010). Other opportunities are regarded to seldom be enough, sometimes not given at all. That many professionals cannot answer the question might serve as an indication itself – almost a fifth do not even know where and when children exposed to violence get to speak. Although, it is considered a good and important thing to be seen and listened to, and for children’s’ healing process. The importance of talking about traumatic experiences receives support in previous research as well (Brewin & Holmes, 2003; Pynoos & Eth, 1984).

Two major problems are related to this issue: support or treatment actions require parental consent – whom do not always know what is best for their child. Despite the amendment of the law (FB 6:13a), that consent from only one parent is needed, it is still problematic and hindering effective work. Secondly, regarding domestic violence, the focus of the investigation is often the violence between adults, leaving the child unseen and overlooked. These descriptions confirm Kaldal et al. (2010), stating that due to the adult focus violence-exposed children are scarcely documented by authorities.

Symptoms shown by these children are described as: long- and short term; severe; numerous; individual; and manifested on a psychological-, behavioural-, physical-, and social level. Respondents even described symptoms as the same as victims. Symptoms most frequently stated are PTSD and trauma. This has also received the strongest relationship in research; the effect size \( (d) \) is 1.54 for trauma symptoms (consisting of PTSD symptoms) (Evans et al., 2008). On the other hand, a proportion of respondents do not answer this question, possibly indicating a knowledge gap need to be filled.

The serious consequences known in research (see Edleson, 1999; Evans et al., 2008; Fonagy et al., 1997; Herrenkohl et al., 2008; Jenkins & Bell, 1997; Osofsky, 2000;
Overlien, 2010; Perry, 1997; and Zeanah & Scheeringa, 1997, for reviews) are confirmed by the professionals constituting this sample. This demonstrates these children are victims too, not just witnesses, also indicating a major need for treatment. Although, a tenth cannot answer the question about what symptoms children have, indicating a knowledge gap itself. No one mention gender differences. They have been shown in previous research (Evans et al., 2008; Moylan et al., 2010). It was not asked for directly, so if professionals do experience gender differences cannot be rejected.

Concerning the child in the interview situation the general experience among professionals is that children remember and tell – sometimes only by given opportunity. Children need to talk and it has relieving effects. They also want to talk, even participate in legal processes. Previous research has indicated that from the child’s perspective, testifying on the behalf of a deceased parent is of great importance; it enhances self-esteem and brings psychological closure (Pynoos & Eth, 1984). Furthermore, professionals’ experiences that children do not report like adults are in line with previous research (e.g., Gerogsson et al., 2011). This knowledge is also important, since it has significance when evaluating children’s reports (discussed further below). Several respondents do not provide any information regarding the child in the interview, perhaps representing a knowledge gap itself, or lack of experience.

How well children report is individual and depends on several factors within (e.g. age, language) and around (e.g. support, relationship to victim/suspect) the child. However, given the right circumstances, children express themselves well, vividly, and detailed. Felt security, trustful relationship with the interviewer – possibly the most important factor – sufficient time, (including several hearings), verbal support (drawings, sand play, dolls), and question quality, all effects the outcome. Accordingly, great demands are put on the interviewer for a successful hearing, also crucial to guarantee legal certainty. Both the importance of a trustful relationship, to dare to open up, and that more information is revealed as the interview proceeds and with several interviews is supported in research (e.g., Georgsson et al., 2011). Although professionals seem to have adequate knowledge about important factors enabling successful interviews (compare Azad et al., 2014; Georgsson, 2011; Kaldal et al., 2010; Leander, 2010), these are seldom met. Several hearings are rare due to lack of time and resources, and competent interviewers are still requested. Accordingly, child interviews held today are probably not contributing the evidential value it could.

Despite that children generally tell some factors may impede their reporting. First a child might not want to. The attitude that if a child has decided not to say anything, nothing will be said, may be inhibiting since it can influence the interviewers attempt to get the child to open up. Other obstacles are worry of reprisals; trauma; fear and incomprehensibility; if adults minimize/extenuate the violence; promised not to tell; using interpreters; and if too much time has passed. Ultimately, some think loyalty conflicts impede reporting. Here, contradicting apprehensions are evident, stating that it rather is due to lack of trustful relationship with the interviewer. Previous research indicates that children with a relationship with the offender report as much information as children with no relationship (Christianson et al., 2013). An interviewer holding the conception of loyalty as hindering might not try as hard to obtain information, since not expecting to get anything out of the child. Finally, regarding shame and guilt, they are
stated as symptoms but never as impeding reports. Common among sexually abused victims (e.g., Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Leander, 2010; Priebe & Svedin, 2008). Since never asked directly it cannot be concluded not to impede. It has been suggested that shame and guilt are not as evident as in sexually abused children, since sexual assault is more of a taboo than violence (Azad et al., 2014; Christianson et al., 2013). Whether this conception is valid among professionals is a question for future research.

Related to legal proceedings some problems make it hard to work with these cases; problems indicating that prevalent laws do not work very well in practice. In court the defence and judges often question children’s testimonies. They are prescribed with low value, and it is hard to get a conviction with them. It is found difficult to determine authenticity and reliability, and to verify children’s statements with other evidence. Beliefs that children provide less reliable testimonies have previously been found among legal professionals (Granhang et al., 2005). Research proposes the opposite, but children report differently from adults (Georgsson et al., 2011; Klemfuss & Ceci, 2013; Leander & Christianson, 2008). Consequently this becomes a question of legal certainty. The descriptions of how children’s testimonies are treated in court indicate that knowledge how to evaluate them is not implemented among legal professionals.

Moreover, national law does not give these children the status to represent the injured party. Consequences are that they seldom are heard by the police, not welcome at child house, and cannot lead their own action for damages; they need to apply at the Swedish Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority – which again needs parental consent. This is found to be one of the major problems and is discussed further below.

Regarding the knowledge level among professionals working with children exposed to violence, it is evident that one of the major problems with these cases is the lacking knowledge itself. In addition, professionals failing to answer some questions may also indicate a knowledge gap. A high proportion of the respondents hold their knowledge as deficient. Sometimes the scarcity is due to lack of experience of meeting exposed children. This serves as an indication that they are not represented in a great extent at the authorities, since approximately between 100 000 and 200 000 children are affected each year (Frisk, 2003). The approach that professionals might not have to have knowledge about these children implies that knowledge about this particular group is not valued, and all children are not given the same opportunities within the authorities. If knowledge on victims is prioritized these children will consequently be overlooked. One respondent, possibly not shared with many professionals, stated this.

Professionals request knowledge within two major areas. First, their professional work, including routines, guidelines and interviewing methods. Secondly, different aspects about the children including: reactions/symptoms; treatment; children’s reporting, memory and testimonies, including evaluation; effects of participating in investigations/legal process; and the child perspective. Through improved knowledge about the child perspective and effects of participating in investigations, the concern about whether children should be heard or not can be sorted out. There are two separate lines among professionals; one stating they should always be heard, that it is important in the healing process; the other that one should wait until the child initiate reporting. The latter view might be problematic since it is wrong to put the responsibility on a
child. They might not even understand how much they are, or will be affected. If they are very young they might need help to put words on their experiences. Some child perspective studies have shown that many children wonder why anybody did not ask them or tried to talk to them (Georgsson et al., 2011; Steeves et al., 2007).

About the cooperating actions among professionals, a third is satisfied with the collaboration. It is possible that the variation in satisfaction indicates differences between counties or districts. Yet, that question is beyond the aim for the present study and the psychological framework. Since child victims of all kinds come in contact with several instances it is essential that the cooperation is good, both to guarantee legal certainty and to ensure that they are made visible and taken care of. It is evident that time and resources affect cooperation negatively. There are positive attitudes about child houses, because it enhances cooperation. All professions receive critique, but the counsels for injured party receive only positive experiences, and the present sample want them to have more mandate, to include violence-exposed children. This is also indicated by the stated problems related to parental consent.

The quantitative results suggest that many conceptions are widely held among professionals, indicated by high means, and other conceptions seem to include contradictions, uncertainties or knowledge gaps, indicated by means close to the middle value. Professionals think that in general, the police should interview violence-exposed children, and several times. Possibly indicating a realization that including children in investigations has benefits, and that several hearings are needed to accomplish satisfying interviews. In relation, whether children tell spontaneously, cannot be considered supported in this sample, as the majority answers in the middle of the scale. Moreover, whether loyalty conflicts impede reporting is contradicting. Further analyses revealed the longer time one have worked with these children this conception tends to decrease. The result should be interpreted with caution since the effect is small. The statement that children want to be heard by the police cannot be interpreted as supported either, due to a mean close to the middle. Here it should be stressed that there is a difference in not wanting to, and having a hard time to tell. Research on the child perspective is needed, to elucidate how children want to be received, and how much they want to participate. However, a child’s need to talk is widely conceived among professionals. Although, a fifth rates the middle on the quantitative statement, possibly representing that they do not know or that it varies between children. If the former case it contradicts previous research, strongly suggesting talking for recovery (Pynoos & Eth, 1984). In relation, professionals think that children should be offered counselling. This finding could also be indicating recognition of children’s need for treatment – thus acknowledging the seriousness of such as experiences.

Professionals believe that children remember these events well. This conception is in line with previous research (Christianson et al., 2013; Pynoos & Eth, 1984). Although, regarding whether children are reliable as witnesses is not straightforward. A third of the sample rates the middle value or below, possibly indicating that they are doubtful or do not know whether children are reliable. This can be considered an area insufficient in knowledge. From the child’s perspective it is insulting not to be believed. From a legal perspective, important testimonies, that could facilitate a conviction, are not attached any value. Improved knowledge about children’s testimonies would improve the
professional’s interpretations of the reports, consequently making better judgements about children’s reliability. In relation, there is a widespread opinion that professionals working with, and judging in these cases should be specially educated in children’s testimonies. This analysis reached significance for heterogeneous variances, were police and prosecutors had more variance than social investigation- and treatment personnel. Possibly implying that they are more contradictions within this profession. Variation is still quite small in both groups, and with a larger sample size this issue can be resolved.

Professionals emphasizes that violence-exposed children should have the legal status to represent the injured party and right to criminal injuries compensation. The latter analysis reached significance for heterogeneous variances, were police and prosecutors have more variance than social investigation- and treatment personnel. Possibly implying that they are more contradictions within this profession. Again, variation is still quite small, and with a larger sample size this issue can be solved. Finally, one statistically significant difference between professions was found. Whether symptoms are the same as for victims, social investigation- and treatment personnel had higher mean compared to crime investigation personnel. It is possible that the former group spend more time with children in supporting or treatment activities, therefore given the opportunity to “see” more symptoms. Additionally, the latter group has their focus on the legal proceedings and might therefore not perceive all symptoms.

In relation to the qualitative results, the two methods used indicate high level of consistency. Frequent qualitative descriptions correspond to high means on quantitative statements. Means close to the middle, possibly indicating contradictions or knowledge gaps, are verified through contradicting descriptions in the qualitative results.

Methodological considerations
The aim of the present study was to study the experiences, conceptions and knowledge among professionals meeting violence-exposed children. A qualitative questionnaire is a standardized written interview suited for questions regarding people’s experiences, thought, feelings, reflections, opinions, etcetera (Langemar, 2008). Reasons for not choosing verbal interviews are several. First, considering time and resources interviews take longer time to carry out, and the following transcription into written text. Child houses all around Sweden was included to get a representative sample, and the logistics would be greatly demanding. Consequently more respondents could be included in the sample, also needed for the quantitative analyses. Moreover, sensitive questions are less prone to social desirability if asked anonymously. Respondents can answer questions in their own pace. Finally, characteristics of an interviewer (such as age/gender) cannot affect answers. There are some disadvantages with this method as well. Answers cannot be as extensive and thorough, since no supplementary questions can be asked to receive a deeper understanding or explanations for unclear answers. In the present study it was evident that the research question is not thoroughly answered. Some previous research findings, such as gender differences in symptoms, were not salient in this study. Possibly there is more to know about professionals working with these children.

The sample represented several professions, with varying age and years in profession, providing a nuanced result. Although, few males it is possibly that their experiences described here are not extensive and thorough. Some descriptions might be more
representing for individual professions due to different perspectives and professional goals. For example, the child’s protection as important and an overlooked issue might be more recognized among social workers, since they perform the social investigations, including the child’s protection need. In contrast, prosecutors might identify themselves easier with the problems related to children’s testimonies, since the legal proceedings are their main focus. The analysis can be considered valid since the descriptions of the results are close to the data, and no far-reaching interpretations have been made. When uncertainty of how to interpret a statement it was discussed with the tutor for this paper. It has been pointed out when individual statements are made, to avoid giving them a larger proportion of importance that they actually have. Although, many individual statements did receive support in the total sample through the quantitative questions, and was discussed further. The method triangulation used in the present study partially provides information about how widely held some experiences and conceptions are in the qualitative analysis. It also indicates, sometimes verifies, where contradictions can be found. On the other hand, the qualitative descriptions bring understanding to what the means on the quantitative statements actually implies. With method triangulation, different sorts of data offer cross-data consistency checks, and contribute to credibility through strengthening confidence in conclusions that are drawn (Patton, 2002).

The results are both meaningful and useful, improving the validity further. It brings new knowledge to the research field of children exposed to violence, revealing their insufficient status in society, and provides information about knowledge gaps and problematic aspects that could be used to improve the professional work and ensuring these children are taken cared of. Additionally, results can also be used to develop more extensive and inclusive quantitative surveys, to get an overall estimation of the width – and potential differences among professions/districts/years in profession etcetera – of the emerged issues in the present study. Finally, the majority of the results are in line with previous research, which serves as an additional indicator of a valid study.

A general conclusion suggested through the present study is that children exposed to violence are still an unseen and overlooked group of victims – indicating an insufficient societal and legal status. The four research questions asked revolved around professionals’ experiences of interviews and problematic factors working with these children; conceptions about how the children should be treated; the professionals’ state of knowledge about violence-exposed children; and potential differences between professions. In sum, experiences of interviews are that, given the right circumstances, children report well. Several problems are experienced as impeding to work effectively in these cases and consequently ensuring what is best for the children. Mainly, problems revolve around an overall lacking knowledge, lacking guidelines and routines, and the child’s legal status, not representing the injured party. Associated requests for change are evident through several conceptions about the children’s legal status and how it should be. Psychological knowledge about this particular victim group is scarce on many levels. Though, when sufficient knowledge is indicated, it is not given it is implemented in the practical work since lack of time and resources do not allow for it. Improved psychological knowledge, clearer routines and guidelines, and a change of violence-exposed children legal status are needed to fulfil the societal responsibility of taking care of all child victims. It is now evident that there is a need to change this overlooked group of children, into a group equally prioritized as other child victims.
References


FB 6:13a (Föräldrabalken 1949:381), 6 kap., 13a §. [Children and Parents Code 1949:381, 6 ch., 13a §].


RB 20:8 (Rättegångsbalken 1942:740), 20 kap., 8 §, fjärde stycket. [Code of Judicial Procedure 1942:740, 20 ch. 8 §, para. 4].


