



Children in alcohol and drug abusing families in Finland 1994 and 2004

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Introduction

The focus on adolescent alcohol and drug use is diverting attention from a much bigger problem: the fact that we adults are harming our children by our own drinking. According to the findings of the recent Fragile Childhood study, surprisingly many Finns, one in ten, have grown up in an alcohol family. The new findings strengthen and expand on the results obtained from the study conducted ten years earlier.

The new Fragile Childhood survey was conducted with the help of TNS-Gallup in April and May of 2004. The data represents Finns of the age of 15 and over, excluding the population of the Åland Islands. The sample consisted of 473 men (weighted 485) and 532 women (weighted 520), 1005 respondents in all. The new data is very similar to the data of 1994, which was collected by the Finnish Gallup in August and September of 1994. The 1994 sample consisted of 491 men (weighted 482) and 519 women (weighted 528), 1010 respondents in all. The questions of the new survey were phrased in the same way as in the previous survey, albeit some of the conventional background questions used by Gallup had changed. The new tables, based on the two data sets, have been calculated in a uniform manner, using more decimals for weighted values than in the 1994 reports. This is why some of the rounded values differ by one per cent from the report of 1994 (Peltoniemi 2003b).

Research questions

According to a summary by the ENCARE network (2004), a European project working for children affected by risky environments within the family, the numbers of alcohol families produced by studies in different countries vary greatly, which indicates that the definitions used are different. Some studies assume that heavy parental use of alcohol or drugs will automatically cause problems for the children. In the Finnish Fragile Childhood study of 1994 the definition depended on the respondent's subjective assessment on whether or not the alcohol or drug use in the family was excessive and caused the respondent harm.

The data bank on the Encare website suggests that there are no reliable statistics regarding the number of alcohol families in Europe, partly because studies are not routinely conducted in many countries, and also because the phenomenon is a hidden one, not brought up because of shame and secrecy. The situation is further complicated by the fact that alcohol families are often also affected by domestic violence, mental health problems or other social problems (www.encare.info).

The most important research question of the Fragile Childhood surveys deals with the prevalence of the phenomenon and harms related to it. The question is approached through subjective experiences, that is, the respondent him/herself assesses whether there was a substance abuse problem in their childhood home and whether it caused them harm during childhood and possibly also as an adult (Peltoniemi 2003a,b). Substance abuse problems within the family and the harms related to them are examined later also with the help of certain background variables.

The interview questions regarding these topics were phrased in a way that emphasised the role of alcohol. On

the other hand, as the survey dealt with events that had in many cases taken place decades earlier, it is not very likely that the respondent had lived in a home where drugs had been used, as drug use has been very rare earlier in Finland.

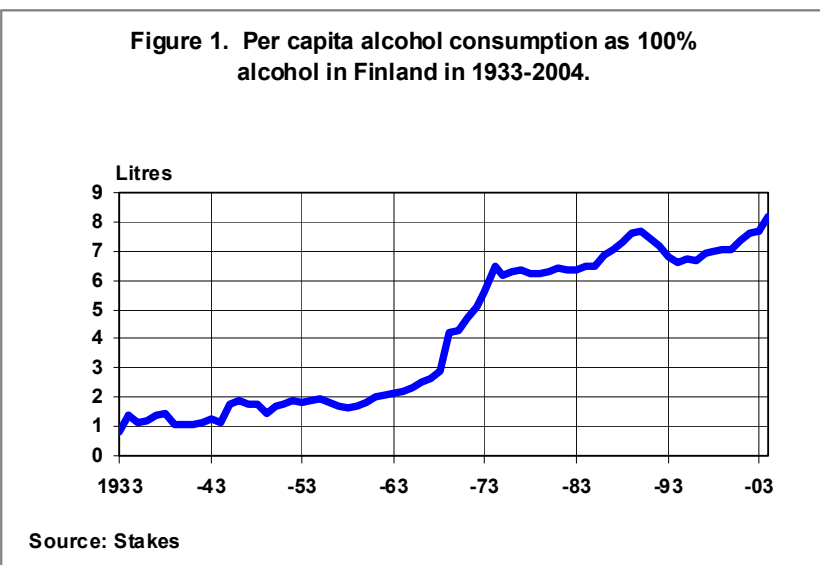
- Did there occur excessive use of alcohol or other drugs in your childhood home?
- Did the excessive use of alcohol or other drugs cause you harms or problems in your childhood home?
- What kinds of harms or problems were there? (Open question)
- Do you personally feel impacts of these childhood problems even now as (nearly) an adult?
- What kind of impacts do you find in yourself even now? (Open question)
- Have you ever sought help for the harms and problems caused by the excessive use of alcohol in your childhood home?

Prevalence of substance abuse families in Finland in 1994 and 2004

The findings of the 1994 Fragile Childhood survey attracted plenty of attention as the number of alcohol families in Finland turned out to be surprisingly large: approximately one in ten Finns said they had lived their childhood in an alcohol family. (Peltoniemi 2003b) A decade has passed since the previous survey and even though the survey measures lifetime prevalence, there is a whole new generation of 15 to 24-year-old respondents in the

new survey. As the matter had been discussed on a societal level now for 10 years - not least due to the Fragile Childhood activities - the attitudes towards the matter may have changed so that it is easier to talk about.

The Finnish way of life has undergone many changes over the past decade and this applies especially to matters relating to alcohol and other substances. The consumption of alcohol per capita has increased by one litre, from 6,6 litres in 1994 to 7,6

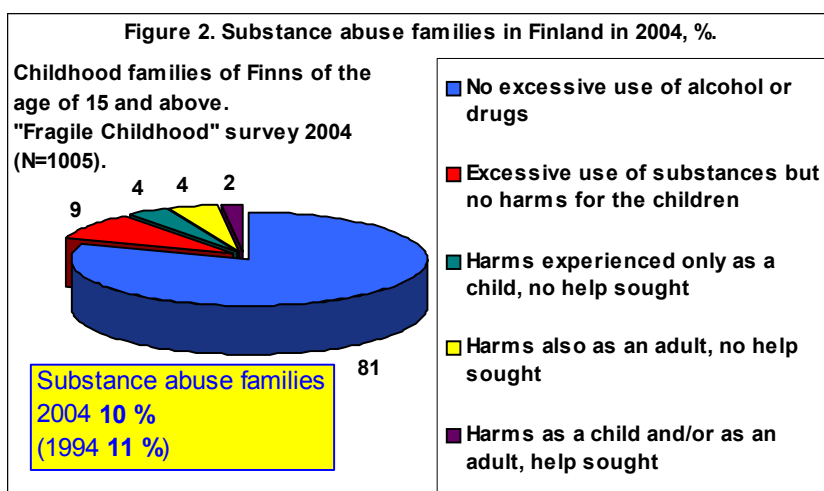


litres in June of 2004. Adding on the alcohol not included in the statistics, the total consumption rises to about ten litres. 77 per cent of the respondents in 1994 and 66 per cent in 2004 were born before the year 1968, after which the consumption has increased to a considerably higher level than before (Figure 1). Also the use of drugs has increased. These factors may have influenced the changes in the prevalence of alcohol families.

The 1994 Fragile Childhood data included an indirect question which indicated that one third (34%) of the respondents knew of families where alcohol or other drugs were used in a harmful way. 61 per cent did not know

any such families and 6 per cent could not say. On average, those who had encountered alcohol families knew 2,8 of them. In 2004 this question was not repeated and instead the survey focused on the personal experiences of the respondents.

Due to the way the survey was conducted as well as the basic assumption regarding the phenomenon of children in alcohol families, it is not expected that the findings will change greatly. As the research question deals with the whole of an individual's life span, it is no surprise that the main finding is that the number of children who grew up in an alcohol family has remained the same: 11 per cent in 1994 and 10 per cent in 2004 (Figures 2-3).

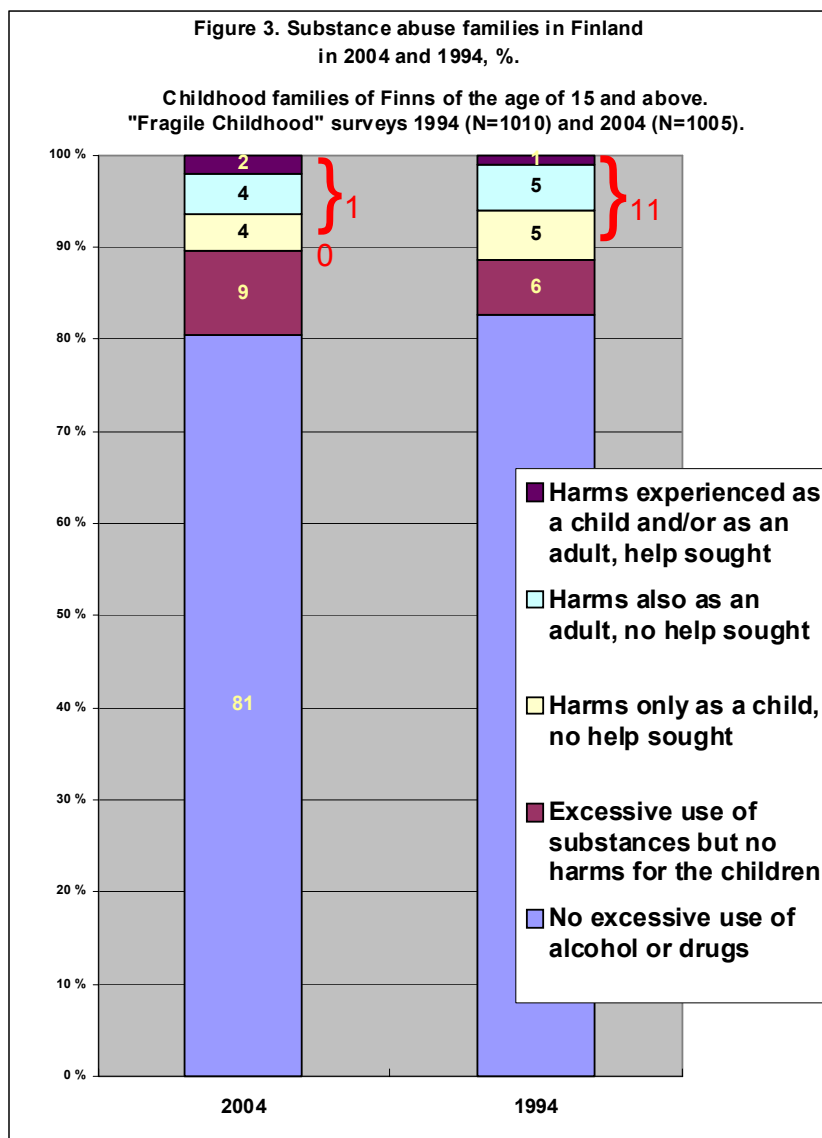


81 per cent of the respondents in the 2004 Fragile Childhood data say that no excessive use of alcohol or other drugs took place in their childhood home. 9 per cent of the respondents say that there was excessive drinking, but it did not cause them any harms. One in ten had experienced harms; 4 per cent of all respondents had experienced harms only as a child, 4 per cent both as a child and as an adult, and

2 per cent had sought help for their problems related to the substance use of their parents.

The main practically unchangeable finding shows that one in ten Finns has grown up in a home where excessive use of alcohol or some other parental abuse problem caused problems or harm (Figure 3). Put in another way, the survey reveals that approximately half a million Finns have as a child been exposed to harms caused by the excessive use of alcohol or other drugs by their father, mother, or both.

In the report compiled by Eurocare and Coface it was estimated that in the 1990's in EU countries and Norway there were in all 4,5 - 7,7 million children under the age of 15 who could be considered children in alcohol families. This would be 7-12 per cent of the children in these countries (Alcohol problems in the family 1998). A Spanish study estimated that 11 per cent of the population were children of alcohol families. In Holland in 1996, 8 per cent of adults reported that at least one of their parents had had problems with alcohol or other drugs. In Germany it was estimated that 3,5 million children had a parent with a substance abuse problem; in Sweden 250 000 children, and in Denmark, 60 000 children (From a summary at the www.encare.info).



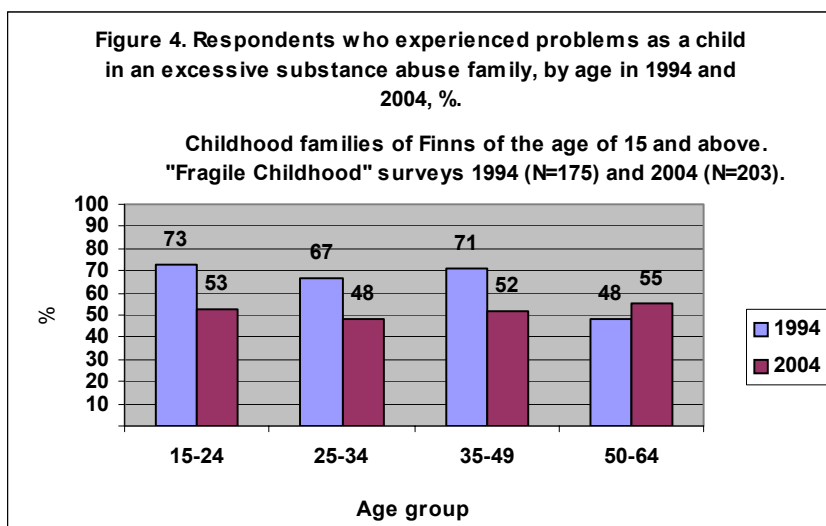
According to another Fragile Childhood survey done among professionals, conducted by Peltoniemi (2003c) in 1995-96, 71 per cent of professionals working with children had met at least one child who grew up in an alcohol or drug abusing family during the previous year. A compilation report by Emshoff and Anyan estimated that in the US, 6,6 million children under the age of 18 live in a home where at least one parent has an alcohol problem. Also the type of the harms experienced appeared similar both in the US and in Finland (Peltoniemi 2003b).

Changes in prevalence of substance abuse families in Finland in 1994 and 2004

In Figure 3 the occurrences of 1994 and 2004 are examined further. The changes are small, but it is noteworthy that while in 2004, 9 per cent of the respondents say that there was excessive drinking in their family but it did not cause them any harms, the figure in 1994 was 6 per cent. The difference is not statistically significant, but if it is an indication of a changing trend, it might suggest that parents are nowadays more considerate of their children, and their drinking would thus not harm the children as much.

Prevalence of substance abuse families according to background variables

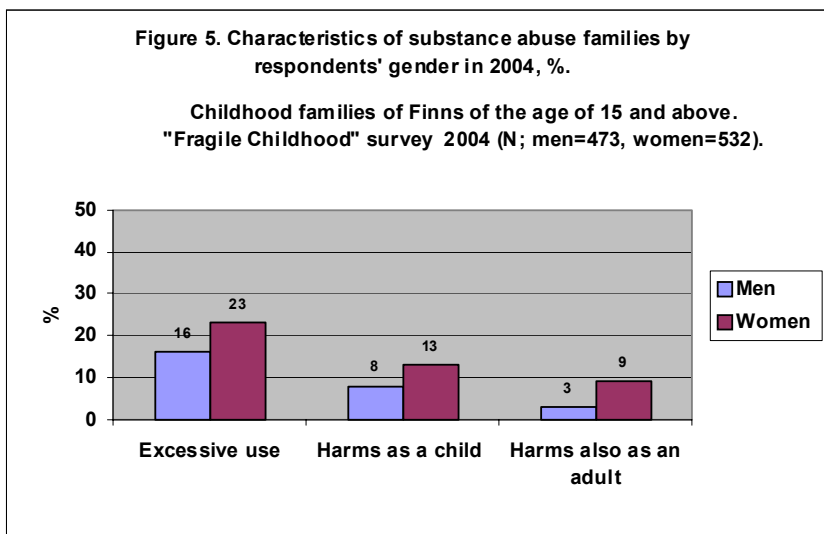
When the majority of the respondents were children, the consumption level of alcohol in Finland was relatively low compared to what it is now (Figure 1). The prevalence should therefore be examined by age group. The difference between the numbers of alcohol families of younger and older respondents in 1994 was clear (21 % vs. 6 %), and also, looking at the other age groups, it appeared that the instances of excessive drinking increased systematically the younger the respondent was (Peltoniemi 2003b). In 2004, the differences had levelled out so that there was no significant difference between the younger and older respondents with regard to the reported excessive drinking by parents (17 % vs. 16%).



There was also no significant difference in the number of experienced harms (Figure 4) in 2004, nor in findings regarding the harms caused to the respondent by excessive drinking, with the exception of the oldest age group.

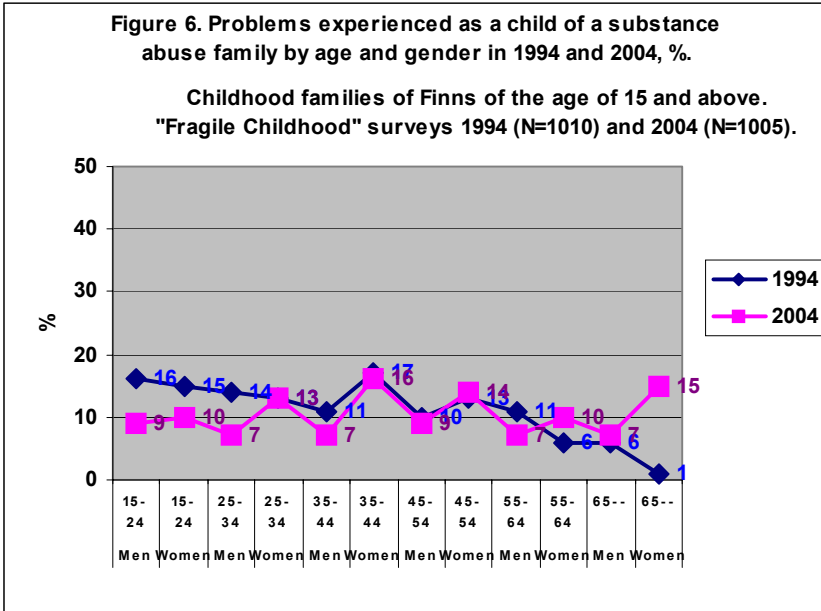
In addition to changes brought about by age and the possible differences in how alcohol and other drugs were used, it is possible that the

somewhat inconsistent differences between the age groups are influenced by differences in how men and women experience harms and report on them.



There were no differences in the numbers of alcohol families reported by men and women in 1994 (Figure 5). However, in 2004 there appears to be a tendency for women to say that they have lived in an alcohol family more often than men (23% vs. 16 %). A same kind of difference also appears in reports regarding harms experienced as a child (women 13%, men 7%) and harms

experiences as an adult (women 9%, men 3%). Some of these differences are near or outside the limits of the confidence interval, so the findings should be treated only as suggestive.

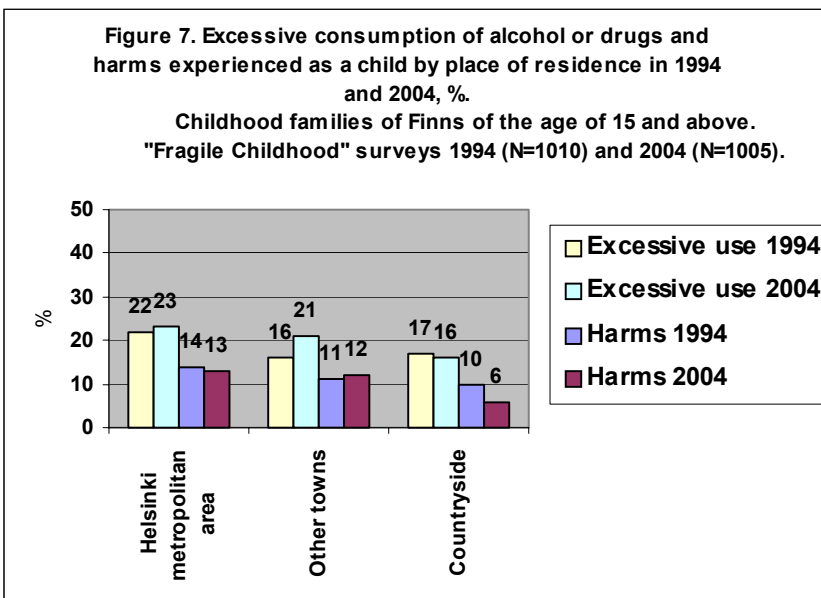


The differences are, however, very interesting and may suggest that women have started to experience the alcohol family stronger than men, in other words, have a more sensitive criteria for excessive substance abuse and living in an alcohol family. Even though the differences are small, the matter should be investigated further with new data. One should note that the use of alcohol and drugs has increased notably in Finland and so has the attention to and attitudes regarding the substance use of

women. (Holmila)

The phenomenon is further examined by dividing the age groups by gender (Figure 6). The general trend indicates that women have reported more problems related to alcohol families than men. The youngest respondents - both men and women - have reported slightly more instances of childhood in an alcohol family than the older respondents (especially in 1994), even though the findings are not as consistent. The largest deviation between the two survey years is the group of elderly (those of 65 and older) women, who reported the

least amount of occurrences in 1994 and almost the highest in 2004. This deviation is difficult to explain, and it is probably a mere statistical coincidence.



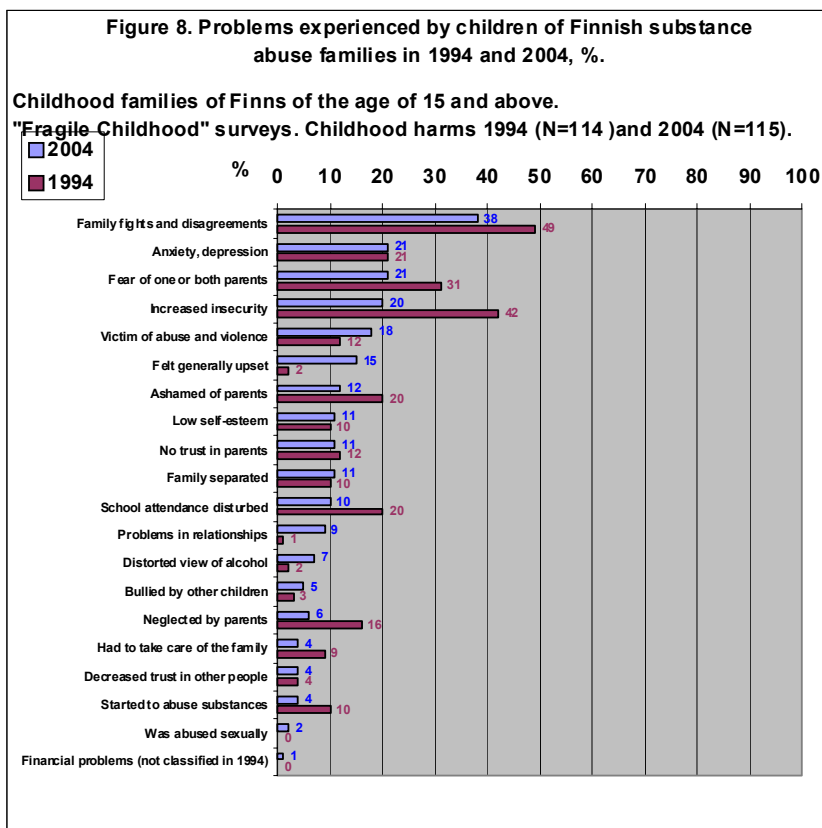
When the data is examined by place of residence, the differences are small (Figure 7). On both years the countryside shows smaller numbers with regard to both excessive drinking

and experienced harms. The numbers are highest in the metropolitan area. Most of the differences in excessive drinking are beyond the limits of the confidence interval. The differences seem to be related to the countryside in particular, which merits more thorough further research.

Excessive use and alcohol families were also tabulated using the other background factors, but they did not produce clear differences, or else the two sets of data gave very conflicting results. Apparently the study of the possible differences would require more detailed data and probably also more background information related to the dynamics of substance abuse in families.

Harms experienced in an alcohol family as a child

The possible harms experienced in an alcohol family were charted with two open questions that separated harms experienced as a child from those that were still felt in adulthood.



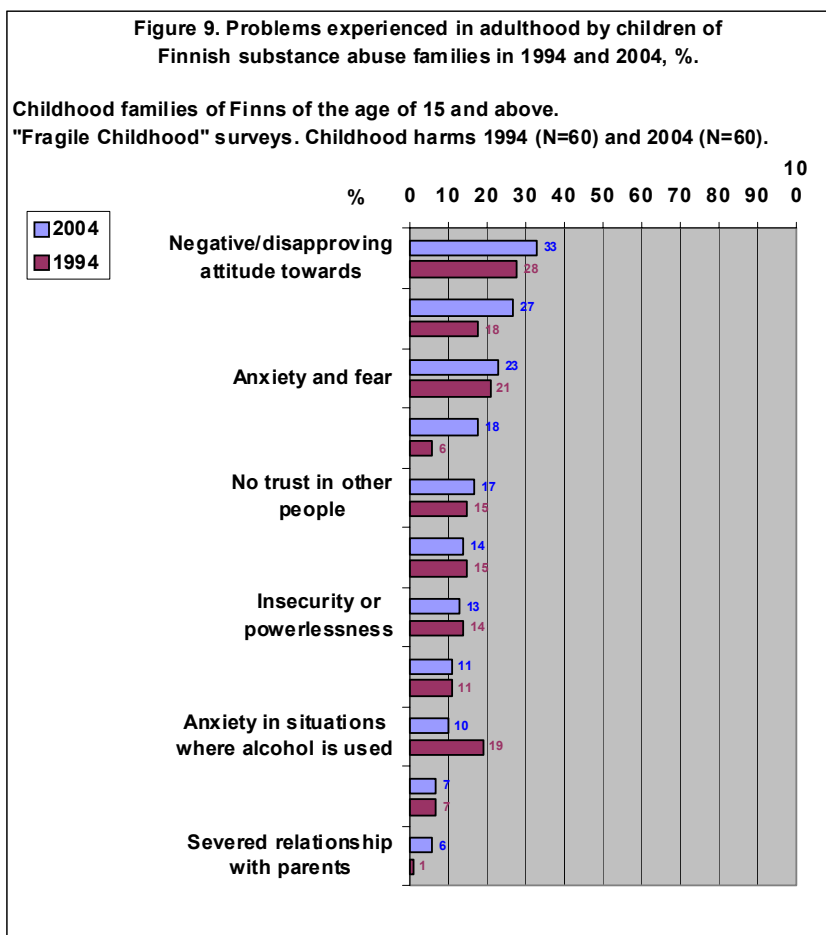
Even though there were differences between the findings of the two surveys, the basic message of the problems experienced as a child remained the same (Figure 8). Having to witness family fights and disagreements were the most common harms during the childhood of Finns who lived in an alcohol or drug abusing family. They were mentioned by one in two in 1994 and one in three in 2004. Decreased feelings of security were also common, especially in 2004 (42%). Other strong themes included fear of one's parents as well as feelings of anxiety and depression.

The problems can be divided into four groups: 1) insecurity and fear, 2) general negative feelings about oneself, 3) harms experienced outside of the family, such as doing poorly at school, and 4) harms related directly to substance abuse, which are relatively rare with children. Living in an alcohol family is depicted as a time of insecurity, fear and loneliness.

It has not been widely understood how much parental substance abuse influences the children's

emotions, life choices and later substance use, both during childhood and later in life

Many of the harms experienced as a child have followed those who lived in alcohol families on to adulthood (Figure 9). There are some differences in details between the two sets of data, but the emerging general view is the same.



The relationship with substances has naturally been more problematic in adulthood than as a child. More than half of the respondents in both surveys mentioned that they had had problems related to alcohol or other substances. One in three said that they had a very negative and disapproving attitude towards alcohol. 10 per cent of the respondents reported that they felt anxiety in situations where alcohol was used and 14 per cent were concerned about their occasional substance use. Other adulthood problems had to do with one's own personality and relationships with others. Common problems included low self-esteem, fearfulness, tension, aggression, difficulties in trusting others, feelings of insecurity

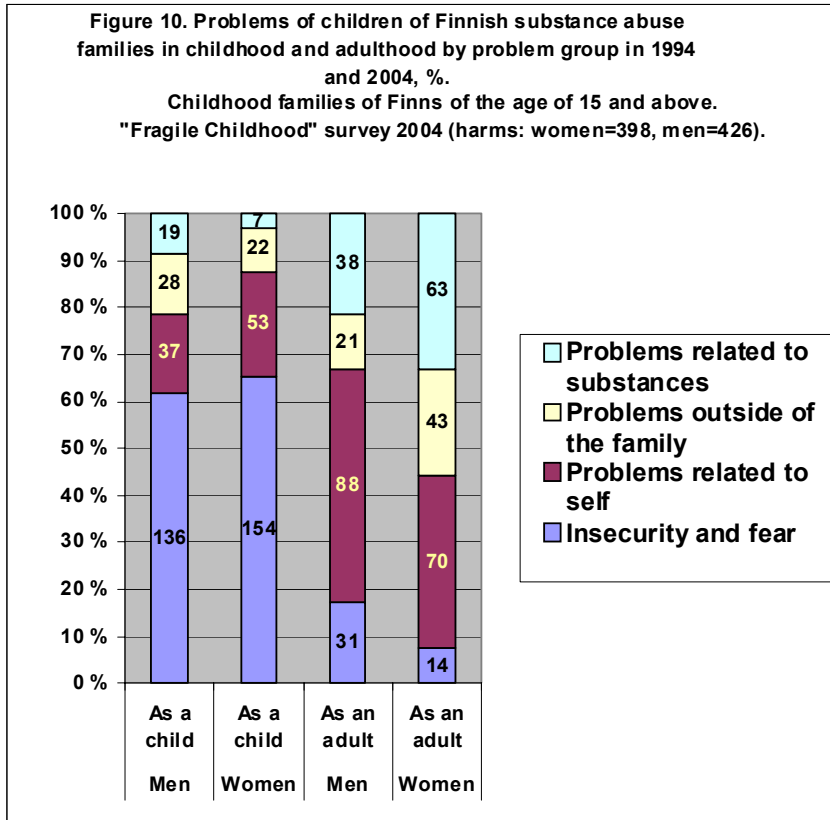
and powerlessness, and problems in marriage and other relationships.

Gender and harms experienced in an alcohol family

The phenomenon can be further clarified by dividing the age groups by gender (Figure 10). The data comes from the 2004 survey. Here the data is divided by the four groups of problems typologized above. Problems related to one's self during childhood are slightly more common with women than with men; problems outside of the family and harms related to substance abuse are slightly more common with men than women. The differences are not great, however.

The greatest difference is that of those who lived in a family with excessive alcohol use, 65 per cent of women, but only 41 per cent of men state that they have experienced harms related to living in an alcohol family even as

an adult. On the other hand, 7 per cent of men (as opposed to only 1 per cent of women) are uncertain as to whether they have experienced harms as an adult.



As an adult, the most prominent problems for women had to do with attitudes toward substances and their abuse, in other words, the situation is reversed when compared to childhood experiences. The same difference can be seen with the problems outside of the family. These problems are more prominent with adult women than with adult men. Insecurity and fear as well as problems related to oneself are less frequent than with men. Also the findings seem to indicate that gender does play an important part in problems related to alcohol families. This theme should be investigated further in separate

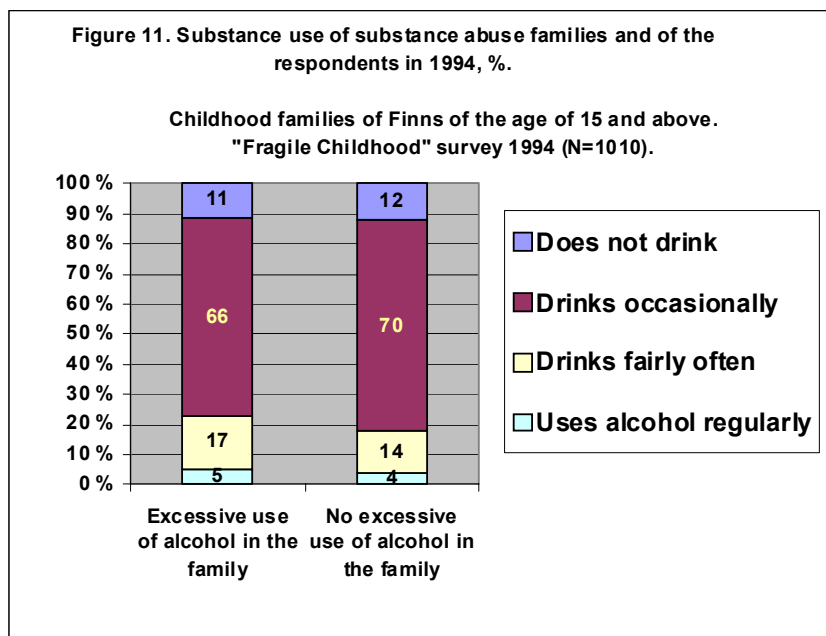
studies.

The "social heredity" of alcohol use

It is commonly thought that the alcohol use of children and their parents correlates and that alcohol families produce substance abusers, i.e. that substance abuse is "socially inherited" (e.g. Ackerman 1992, Pulkkinen & Pitkänen 2002).

On the other hand, many children of alcohol families emphasise that they wish to put an end to excessive drinking in their own lives (e.g. as described at the writing competition articles in Utoslahti & Peltoniemi 2003). As the figures presented above showed, alcohol was not a very significant matter during childhood, but as the respondents grew older, use of and attitudes towards alcohol and other substances became more problematic for many of them.

Respondents' own use of alcohol was not covered in the 2004 survey, but the 1994 data shows the following. The majority (59 %) of those who lived in alcohol families stated that they drank "occasionally". Only 4 % used alcohol regularly, and 12 % reported they drank fairly often. 11 % abstained completely, a figure very similar to the 14 % reported by a general Finnish consumption survey in 1992 (Mustonen ym. 2005).



The relationship between the respondents' own alcohol consumption and living in an alcohol family is analysed in Figure 11. It reveals the expected connection, albeit the differences are not large. Children of alcohol families use more alcohol than children who grew up in families where alcohol was moderately consumed. Descriptions of alcohol use would, however, require more extensive data and analyses.

Conclusion: Substance abuse families are a national health problem.

The substance abuse family is a very common, yet an underestimated problem. It has not been widely understood how much parental substance abuse influences the children's emotions, life choices and later substance use, both during childhood and later in life.

One in ten Finns has lived in an alcohol family. When compared to the overall increase of alcohol consumption, it may seem that the situation has improved slightly, but in practice the continuing prevalence of alcohol families is worrying.

In spite of the publicity the matter has received over the past years (e.g. Itäpuisto 2001, Holmila & Kantola 2003, the Alcohol Programme 2004–2007) and e.g. the Fragile Childhood activities that have continued for almost two decades, it still has not been understood how wide-ranging the phenomenon is. In Finland, there are about 1,1 million children (Government report 2002). Not all children in alcohol families automatically suffer from parental alcohol or drug use, but alcohol families have already produced a group of over one hundred thousand children who have been or will be harmed because of parental substance abuse. In addition, over 400 000 adults carry same kind of memories with them, and many also experience harms. This is a question of social and public health problem.

Over the last few years, many actions have been taken to tackle in Finland the problem of domestic violence. Now we should mobilise a similar programme to help alcohol families. The children's best interest should be grounds enough. In addition to the prevalence of the phenomenon, the survey revealed another important finding, namely that growing up in an alcohol family produces insecurity and many other harms, both in childhood and as an adult. This can be seen in all fields of psychosocial care work as a concrete need for help and treatment.

The background work has luckily been completed in Finland. The Fragile Childhood project has trained over 15,000 professionals and they are very willing to help. Plenty of materials and know-how for different target groups have been developed. The theme of the alcohol family has been brought up also in the National Alcohol Programme. The time for a wide-spread, concrete help programme is now in Finland.

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