

Growing number of family tragedies in Germany

Michael Regens
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In August this year, there was an extraordinary outbreak of family tragedies in Germany. The bitter consequence was 19 dead, including 13 children.

The events were mostly triggered by the financial problems, poverty and depressive illnesses of those affected. But the tragedies are not due merely to the unique circumstances of certain individuals; their accumulation also has social causes. More and more families find themselves in a precarious position, are at risk or losing their place in society, and consider their situation hopeless. They are thus confronted with mounting social and psychological pressures.

The latest tragedy happened in Berlin on August 21. A 69-year-old father poisoned and strangled his young wife and two small sons in the city's western district of Gatow. The man then took his own life. He admits in his suicide note that he acted "with full responsibility, with a perfectly clear mind" and out of "deep love and despair".

It has since been revealed that the family was deeply in debt. "My wife said several times that if it weren't for the children, she would have jumped out the window a long time ago...", the father said in his letter.

The man had put the couple's 11-month-old daughter in the "baby hatch" of the Waldkrankenhaus Hospital in Spandau: "I wanted her to have the chance of living with loving foster parents and maybe escaping a tormented future", he wrote. The father attempted to justify his desperate deed with the words: "Our society reserves only 'room under the bridge' for its losers".

The family drama in Berlin is one of a chain of six other cases in North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) and Bavaria.

On August 20, a 26-year-old mother was shot dead, together with her 4-year-old son and her 8-year-old daughter, in Neuss (NRW). The suspected murderer is

the husband and father, who is said to have worked in the low-paying baking industry.

On August 18, a mother suffocated her two sons and then hanged herself in Emmering near Munich. Her husband discovered the bodies. According to reports in Munich's *Abendzeitung* evening newspaper, the couple was caught up in a financial crisis. The woman is said to have worked in her small village as a nursery-school teacher.

On August 12, a 44-year-old workman in Bavaria also strangled his two boys and then hanged himself in an unattended excavating machine. Investigators attributed the motive for the killings to a "difficult family situation".

A mother, 41, stabbed her 7-year-old daughter to death in Essen on August 11. The woman then cut her own throat and bled to death in her child's bed. The single mother suffered from severe depression and was receiving medical treatment. Press reports revealed that, for undisclosed reasons, the skilled goldsmith and graphic designer had been unable to pursue her profession. Neighbours reported that the mother had normally "taken loving care of her young daughter".

On August 9, a 27-year-old man stabbed the 8-year-old son of his female cohabitant in Oberhausen. The man is said to have worked in a betting shop and suffered from depression.

Emergency relief forces found the bodies of two children, aged 4 and 12, in a burned-out house in Dortmund on August 3. A 10-year-old boy died in hospital shortly afterwards. It transpired that all three children were victims of an act of violence. Investigators assume the tragedy arose from a family conflict. The chief suspect is the father's girlfriend. She was arrested, but denies any guilt. The children's mother had died three years ago, when she fell from a

window while attempting to save another of her children.

A striking feature of the cases in August is that all the victims came from poor backgrounds or were burdened with heavy debts. Some also had to contend with precarious conditions of employment or unemployment, and felt that society considered them “failures”, as the suicide note of the father from Berlin testifies.

Numerous comments in the media have tried to distract public attention from the economic background of these tragedies. The *Stern* magazine thus claims that, although the proliferation of fatal family dramas should “not be overlooked”, criminologists and psychiatrists regard them as “just a statistical anomaly”.

However, despite all efforts to conceal the connection between the escalating number of family tragedies and the global economic crisis, the facts speak for themselves. The offenders live neither in a vacuum nor exclusively in their families, but in an environment that draws them into an existential crisis and then leaves them to cope with their problems alone.

Even families doing relatively well can be thrown into turmoil overnight through the loss of a job. Within a year at the most, they will receive only the subsistence level of social support, if they are unable to find new employment. Self-employed people at risk of insolvency, like the hopelessly indebted Berlin father, can be plunged into havoc even faster.

Nearly one in four people in Germany now work in the low-wage sector. Overall, there are currently in Germany 800,000 full-time workers who earn less than €1,000 gross per month. Rent, additional accommodation expenses and the costs of electricity and water are all increasing, and the number of foreclosures continues to grow. Last year alone, the water supply to 600,000 households nationwide was disconnected.

All these stresses come to bear on families that are rarely able to obtain any advice or support. This is so either because counseling services for people in debt and families in distress have been scrapped due to rigorous municipal saving measures, or they are gained only after months-long waiting periods.

The fact that social decline drives people to acts of desperation is also shown by the increase in suicides throughout Europe. The suicide rate in Greece has risen

by 40 percent since the first European Union austerity measures were implemented in the country in 2010.

A study published by the British Medical Journal (BMJ) in August 2012 revealed that the suicide rate in England has also greatly increased since the financial crisis erupted in 2008. According to scientists, the main causes were the unemployment and financial hardship of the people who took their lives. A similar conclusion was reached by another BMJ study that examined the mental health of unemployed migrant workers in China since the outbreak of the global economic crisis.



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