

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF ADOLESCENTS AND ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT*¹

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This paper uses data from two studies of nationally representative samples to examine three beliefs about corporal punishment: that parents spank or use other corporal punishment infrequently; that corporal punishment ends by the time children become adolescents; and that, in contrast to "physical abuse," corporal punishment does not interfere with children's psycho-social development.

The data on how many parents use corporal punishment, how often they do it, and the extent to which it occurs in adolescence, will be summarized from previous reports. The new data to be reported is on one aspect of psycho-social development -- educational attainment. The paper reports the results of testing the hypothesis that, even after controlling for the parent's education, ethnic/racial group, age, and whether there was violence between the parents, the more corporal punishment a child experiences, the lower the probability of graduating from college.

PREVALENCE AND CHRONICITY OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

We define corporal punishment as the use of physical force with the intention of causing physical pain, but not injury, for purposes of correction and control. Examples of corporal punishment include slapping, spanking, pinching, and ear twisting. Corporal punishment as just defined is legal in all 50 of the states of the USA.

Age Differences

Toddlers. For toddlers, the current rate of spanking and other legal forms of corporal punishment is over 90%. For some children it is a rare event. For others it occurs several times a day. Among the 3 to 5 year old children in the 1990 wave of the National Longitudinal study of youth, 61% were spanked in the week preceding the interview. The frequency of spanking that week ranged from 33% who were spanked once that week to 11% who were spanked six or more times that week. The mean was 3.1 times. (Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995; Straus, 1994). Thus, although almost all American children have experienced at least some corporal punishment, the frequency varies greatly.

Adolescents. The age at which parents stop using corporal punishment also varies greatly (see Straus, 1994 for age-specific rates). For purposes of this paper, the most important data are on the prevalence and chronicity of corporal punishment of adolescents. This is because the data available to test the hypothesis is only available for corporal punishment as an adolescent (see methods section). We originally believed that having to rely on corporal punishment by adolescents would invalidate the study because it would the study to a small and possibly deviant group of families who continued to use corporal punishment for thirteen or more years. However, we found that almost two out of three of the respondents in the 1975 survey reported one or more incidents of corporal punishment when they were in their teens (Straus, 1994, Chart ??). Among the respondents interviewed a decade later, the prevalence rate had dropped substantially. But even the 1985 figure indicates that more than half of the US population (52%) had experienced corporal punishment as a teenager (Straus and Donnelly, 1994). Moreover, among those who experienced corporal punishment during their teen years, it was not typically a rare

event. The mean was eight times and the median was five times (Straus and Donnelly, 1994).

Trends

Despite the high prevalence and chronicity of corporal punishment, as just indicated, the figures for adolescents actually represent a decrease from even a generation ago. In respect to toddlers, there has been a smaller decrease. Nevertheless, the current rate of about 90% is lower than what can be inferred for the 1950's from the study by Sears, Maccoby & Levin (1957) which found that 99% of parents hit the kindergarten age children in their sample.

Cultural norms concerning corporal punishment have also been changing. As recently as 1968, 94% of the U.S. population agreed that "spanking is sometimes necessary." The degree of normative consensus this indicates can be grasped by trying to think of other child rearing practices (except for providing food, clothing, shelter, and love) on which 94% of the population agree. Six surveys since 1968 have found a steady decrease in approval of corporal punishment so that by 1994 approval had declined to 68% (Straus and Mathur, 1994). We believe that this decrease in endorsement of corporal punishment presages more rapid change in actual behavior by parents. At the same time, it should not obscure the fact that over two thirds of Americans believe that "it is sometimes necessary to give a child a good hard spanking" (Straus and Mathur, 1994).

RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

The culturally presumed necessity of corporal punishment may also apply to most social scientists and human service professionals (Anderson & Anderson, 1976; Straus, 1994, pp and). Among researchers, the effectiveness of spanking seems to have been taken for granted and has rarely been investigated. There are many studies of the relative effectiveness of reward and punishment in animals, but very few of children. Culturally embedded assumptions may also explain why there have been few studies of possible harmful social and psychological side effects, except for physical aggressiveness. If the taken-for-granted nature of corporal punishment is part of the reason why it has received so little attention in research, we might expect that the decline in normative support for spanking from 94% to 68% would result in a growth in research. This seems to be taking place. Much of this research suggests that corporal punishment is associated with an increased probability of several psycho-social problems. The most extensive evidence is on the increased probability of aggression and delinquency (Agnew, 19??; Becker, 1964, Kandel, 1991; McCord, 1988; Strasberg et al (19??); Straus, 1991b; 1994; Sugarman et al, 1994; but see Simmons et al 1994 for an exception).

There is also recent evidence from studies at the Family Research Laboratory that corporal punishment is associated with increased risk of a variety of other problems, including interpersonal problems in childhood; and as an adult, depression (Straus, 1994; Turner and Finkelhor, 1994), assaults on spouses (Straus, 1994; Straus and Yodanis, 1994), problem-level drinking (Straus and Kaufman Kantor 1994), and masochistic sex (Donnelly and Straus,

1994). Finally, a study by Straus and Gimpel (1994) investigated another previously unsuspected side effect -- lowered occupational and economic achievement. The study reported in this paper stimulated by the need to analyze the process which may explain why increasing amounts of corporal punishment are associated with a lower probability of high occupational and economic attainment, and specifically whether a reduced probability of college graduation is one of the intervening processes. To examine this issue, we tested the hypothesis that the more corporal punishment experienced, the lower the probability of college graduation.

METHODS

Sample

The hypothesis just stated was tested using data on two large and nationally representative samples -- the 1975 and 1985 National Family Violence Surveys. Replicating the analysis with data from two independent samples allows for greater confidence in the findings. In addition, each of the two studies has certain advantages and limitations. The 1985 survey has the advantages of a much larger sample and is more current than the 1975 survey. The 1985 survey also included an oversample of respondents from African-American and Hispanic-American families. The 1975 survey, although smaller and without enough minority group members to analyze separately, has the advantage of containing information on the education of the mother and the father of the respondent. Thus, the 1975 data makes it possible to control for confounding of corporal punishment with SES.

Both National Family Violence Surveys are based on probability samples of households containing persons 18 years of age or older who were married or cohabiting with a person of the opposite sex. In a random half of the households we interviewed the female partner and in the other half the male partner. The 1985 survey includes necessary data on 5,268 cases (3,118 women and 2,150 men); the 1975 survey includes data on 1,415 cases (780 women and 635 men). The demographic statistics of these two samples corresponds closely with census data on American households. See Straus and Gelles (1990) for this and other information on the sample and survey methods.

Measures

Corporal Punishment. The extent of corporal punishment was assessed by asking the survey participants "I'd like to ask you about your experiences as a child. Thinking about when you were a teenager, about how often would you say your mother or stepmother used physical punishment like slapping or hitting you? Think about the year in which this happened the most." The response categories were Never, Once, Twice, 3-5 times, 6-10 times, 11-20 times, and More than 20 times. The question was repeated for corporal punishment by fathers. The responses to the two questions were added to obtain a measure of how many times the respondent experienced corporal punishment during the referent year. This variable was then grouped into seven categories ranging from never to 30 or more times. The teen years were chosen because it was believed to be unrealistic to expect adults to recall what happened earlier with any degree of accuracy. More than half of the

respondents reported corporal punishment (see Table 1 for rates in each sample by gender).

(Table 1 about here)

Violence Between Respondents Parents. Witnessing violence between parents has been found to be associated with a number of social and psychological problems (Straus, 1992; Jaffe, Wolfe and Wilson, 1990). Violence between parents is also associated with high use of corporal punishment (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). Thus, without a control for witnessing violence, the findings on corporal punishment could be spurious. To control for this potential confound, respondents were asked "Now thinking about the whole time you were a teenager, were there occasions when your father/stepfather hit your mother/stepmother or threw something at her." If the response was yes, respondents were asked how often that happened and presented with the response same categories as was used for the question on corporal punishment. The same questions were repeated for whether the mother had hit the father. A code of 1 was assigned if either parent was reported as having hit the other and zero if not. Table 1 shows that from 13 to 16 percent of the respondents reported one or more physical assaults between their parents.

Educational Attainment. College graduation was chosen as the measure of educational attainment because the research which prompted the present study (Straus and Gimpel, 1994) found that corporal punishment was associated with a reduced chance of being in the top fifth of the U.S. income distribution primarily among college graduates. This interaction of corporal punishment with college graduation probably occurs because, in a post-industrial economic system, a college degree is almost a prerequisite for being in the top fifth of the earnings distribution (\$?? or more in 19??). If college graduation is virtually a prerequisite, a crucial step in the process of understanding the link between corporal punishment and economic achievement is knowing whether corporal punishment is related to the probability of college graduation. Consequently, the focus of this study is whether the respondent completed a four year college degree. Respondents with a bachelors degrees or higher were coded as 1 and all others as 0. Table 1 gives the percentage of the 1975 and 1985 samples who were college graduates.

Age. Age is correlated with college graduation because older respondents grew up in an era when relatively few attended college. The extent of corporal punishment has also been changing (see above and Straus, 1994; Straus and Mathur, 1994). Age was therefore introduced into the model tested to control for the confounding of age and corporal punishment.

Parent's Education. The socioeconomic status (SES) of parents is highly related to whether their children complete a college degree (??, 19??). SES is also related to the frequency of using corporal punishment, (Giles-Sims et al 1995; Straus, 1994). Consequently, it is important to control for the SES of the family of origin when testing the hypothesis that corporal punishment is associated with a reduced probability of college graduation. It was possible to do this for the analyses of the 1975 survey because that study included information on the education of each parent. (This information was not available in the 1985 survey.) A two item index was computed by adding the number of years of education completed by the father and the mother of the respondent. Table 1 gives the percentage of men and women whose parents had

less than a high school education and the percent whose parents were college graduates.

Ethnic Group. Disadvantaged ethnic groups have substantially lower average education and income than Euro Americans, making it important to control for ethnic group when relating corporal punishment to college graduation. The 1975 study did not include enough minority group respondents for a reliable analysis of ethnic groups. However, the 1985 study oversampled African Americans and Hispanic Americans. This permitted taking ethnic group into account. African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans were coded as 1, and Euro Americans as 0.

Statistical Analysis

Logistic Regression. Logistic regression or logit (Aldrich and Nelson, 1984; Hamilton, 1992) was used to test the hypothesis that corporal punishment is associated with a reduced probability of college graduation. Logit was used because it permits a dichotomous dependent variable and our theoretical focus is on a dichotomy -- whether or not the respondent graduated from college. Each logit model included specifications for age, and whether the respondent had witnessed violence between his or her parents, and educational level of the parents (1975 sample) or whether the parents were an ethnic minority (1985 sample). The analyses of the 1985 sample were weighted to correct for the oversamples of minority groups. All the independent variables were entered simultaneously.

Replication by Gender. Women have only recently achieved parity with men in college enrollment. Women are also the recipients of less corporal punishment (see Table 1). Consequently, it is important to test the hypothesis separately for men and women. We therefore estimated separate logit models for men and women in 1975 and 1985, making a total of four replications of the analysis.

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AND COLLEGE GRADUATION

(insert Figures 1 and 2 about here)

Bivariate Findings

Figure 1 plots the percent graduating from college among each corporal punishment group among the 1975 sample, and Figure 2 plots this relationship for the 1985 sample. The dotted and dashed lines are the observed graduation rates, and the solid line is the OLS regression line for those rates. Both charts show that the more corporal punishment the lower the percent who graduated from college. In 1975 the relationship was stronger for men. By 1985 the slopes for men and women seem to have become more similar.

Logistic Regression Analysis

The bivariate relationships shown in Figures 1 and 2 might be spurious in the sense that they could reflect confounding of corporal punishment with other variables. We therefore used logistic regression to test the significance of the relationships shown in Figures 1 and 2 while also controlling for three potential confounds: violence between the parents, respondents age, and parents education (1975 sample) or ethnic minority verses Euro-American (1985 sample). Table 2 gives the results of testing logit models for men and women in 1975 and 1985.

(insert Table 2 about here)

Men. The significant odds ratio of .89 in the first row of part A of Table 2 shows that for men in the 1975 sample, each increase of one of the seven corporal punishment categories in Figure 1 is associated with an 11% decrease in the odds of graduating from college. The odds ratio of .92 in part B of Table 2 is smaller, but also significant. It indicates that each increase of one unit in corporal punishment is associated with an eight percent decrease in the odds of college graduation.

Women. The results of the analysis of women in the 1975 sample in part C of Table 2 shows the same odds ratio as for men in the 1985 sample (.92), but it is not statistically significant. This could reflect the much smaller N (780 versus 2,150). That explanation is especially likely in view of the findings in part D of Table 2 for women in the 1985 sample. The odds ratio is again .92, but this time, with an N of 3,118, it is highly significant. Thus, among the women in the 1985 survey, each increase of one category in corporal punishment was associated with a 7.9% decrease in the odds of having graduated from college.

OTHER VARIABLES RELATED TO COLLEGE GRADUATION

Our theoretically based focus on the relation of corporal punishment to college graduation, does not imply that other variables are unimportant. We have already seen that gender affects the relationship of corporal punishment to college graduation. The other independent variables, although they were included in the analysis as controls, are also interesting in their own right. Consequently, their relationships to college graduation are briefly described in this section.

Education of Parents

The greater educational attainment of children from high SES families has been established by many studies (??; Sewell, Haller, & Straus, 19??; ???). The odds ratios in Table 2 are consistent with the previous research in showing that the educational level of parents is highly associated with the probability of college graduation. This applies to both men (part A of Table 2) and women (part C of Table 2). In the context of this study, however, the important point is that despite this strong association, corporal punishment was found to have a net effect after controlling for the parental education.

Disadvantaged Minorities

The average educational level and income of African American, Hispanic American, and Native American families is substantially lower than that of Euro Americans. Thus, it is also to be expected that Table 2 shows that minority men and women had a substantially lower probability of college graduation. The odds ratio for the minority men in the 1975 survey was .46 (part B of Table 2). The odds ratio for minority women of .63 shown in part D of Table 2 is considerably higher, but still far below the 1.00 that would indicate the same college graduation rate as Euro Americans.

Violence Between Parents

Violence between the parents of the respondent was included in the logit model because it is known to be associated with corporal punishment (Straus, 1994), and because we believed it is also likely to have a depressing effect on educational attainment. Therefore, unless violence between the parents is controlled, the relationships plotted in Figures 1 and 2 could be spurious. To our surprise, after controlling for the other variables, we found no significant relationship between parental violence and college graduation in any of the four replications.

Age

Age was included in the model because of the increasing proportion of the population who graduated from college in each of the post World War II decades. We therefore expected age to find age to be associated with odds ratios below 1.00. However, Table 2 shows only weak and inconsistent relationships between age and college graduation. All the odds ratios are small, and two are not statistically significant.

CONCLUSIONS

Four replications of logit models found a statistically significant tendency for corporal punishment to be associated with a lower probability of college graduation. Each model included specification of variables which could produce a spurious association between corporal punishment and college graduation: educational level or ethnic group of the family in which the respondent grew up, physical violence between the respondent's parents, and the age of the respondent. Although the findings show a net effect for corporal punishment after controlling for these three variables, future research needs to control for still other variables before concluding that there is a non-spurious relationship between corporal punishment and college graduation.

It will be particularly important to control for parental warmth and supportiveness, and use of reasoning and explanation when disciplining a child, because corporal punishment is widely believed to be merely a surface manifestation of "harsh parenting" (???, 19??; ??, 19??). We do not agree with that view because, although harsh parenting and corporal punishment are correlated, there are many warm and loving parents who frequently use corporal punishment. Probably most parents believe they do it out of love and concern

for the child. The weakness of the link between corporal punishment and harsh parenting is shown by ?? cite factor loadings which show this). Our hypothesis is that specification of positive parental behaviors such as explaining when disciplining and warmth and supportiveness will reduce the size of the link between corporal punishment and educational attainment, but not eliminate that link. There is already some empirical evidence along these lines from studies which did control for variables indicating harsh parenting and found that corporal punishment remained significantly related to aggression (Larzelere, 19??), masochistic sex (Donnelly and Straus, 1994), delinquency (Straus and Lauer, 19??) and anti-social behavior (Sugarman, Straus, and Giles-Sims, 1984).

Of course, even with additional controls for possible confounding variables, causal inferences based on cross sectional research are weak. A longitudinal study can provide a stronger basis for a causal inference, provided the study obtains data on both corporal punishment and the child's level of behavior problems and academic achievement at Time 1. This data is available for large samples of children in the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (Baker, et al, 1993). Analysis of that data found that use of corporal punishment to correct the child's misbehavior at Time 1 was associated with an increased rate of misbehavior at Time 2 even though the study controlled for both parental warmth and cognitive stimulation.

Research is also needed to identify the processes by which corporal punishment could result in low educational attainment. Our previous research has identified several correlates of corporal punishment that could interfere with college graduation, including alienation (Straus & Gimpel, 1994), depression (Straus, 1994, 1995), and physical aggressiveness (Straus, 1994, Chapter ??). In addition, we believe that college graduation requires a self-directed commitment to learn, but corporal punishment probably teaches obedience more than self-direction.

If future research, which controls for positive parent behaviors and for child's behavior at Time 1, shows that corporal punishment is associated with a decreased probability of college graduation, it will have important theoretical and practical implications. One theoretical implication is based on studies which show that low SES parents tend to use corporal punishment more often than middle class parents (Giles-Sims et al, 1995; Sclar & ?? 19?? in Pediatrics; Straus, 1994, Chart ??). Although parents use corporal punishment to bring up children who will follow rules and who will do well in school, it is ironic that our findings suggest that this may be a mode of discipline which makes it particularly difficult for the children of the poor to attain a level of education that will enable them surmount the structural barriers to upward social mobility.

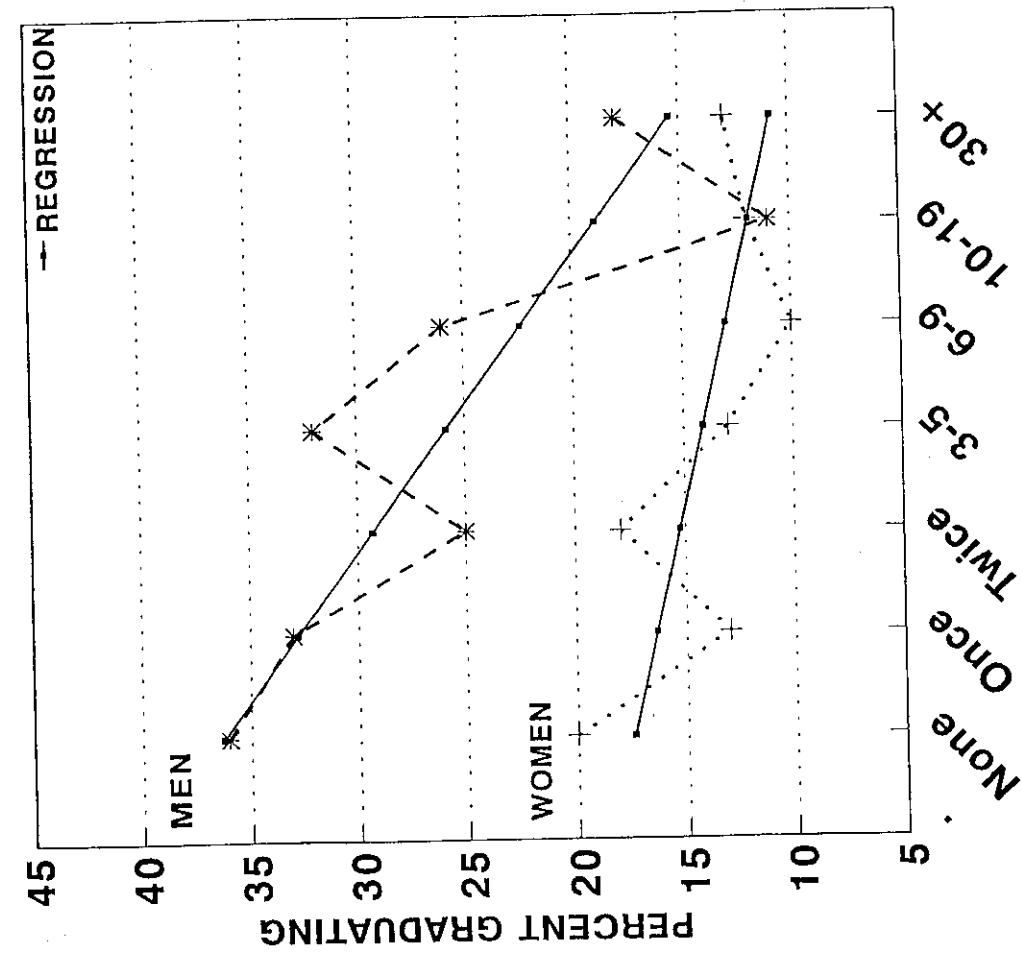
As for practical implications, if our findings are confirmed by future research, it would call for educational campaigns and other programs to help parents replace corporal punishment by other modes of discipline. Even without that type of campaign, there are grounds for optimism because, as we have seen, corporal punishment is becoming less prevalent and less chronic. If less corporal punishment increases the probability of college graduation (as suggested by this research), and less corporal punishment reduces the chances of harmful side effects such as alienation, depression, and physical violence (as suggested by the research cited in the introduction), it suggests that less use of corporal punishment would contribute to reducing mental health

problems, facilitating higher education, and reducing the level of violence in American society. Mental health problems, inadequate education, and violence have multiple origins, so they would not disappear even if corporal punishment were totally eliminated. But the same can be said for other causes of these problems. Moreover, even a modest reduction would be an important national accomplishment because these problems affect millions of people.

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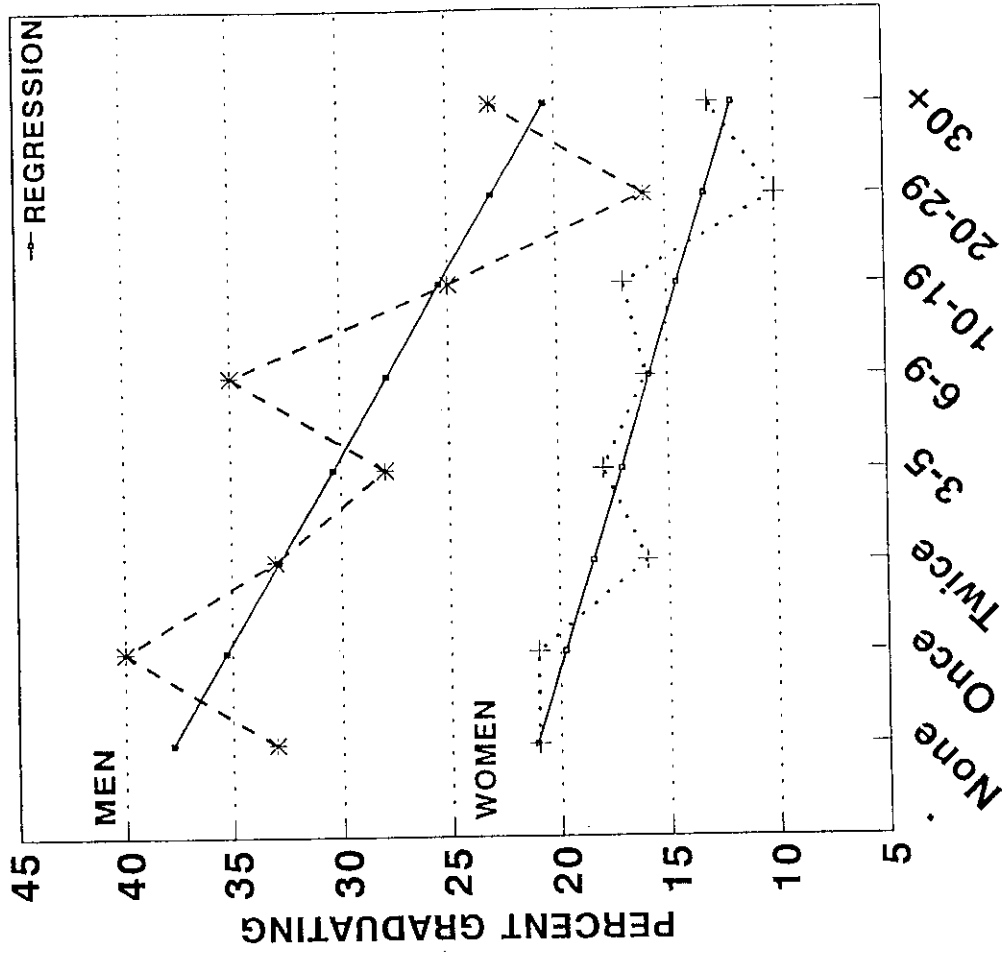
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**Fig. 1. COLLEGE GRADUATION
BY CORPORAL PUNISHMENT
DURING TEEN YEARS, 1975 SURVEY**



CP29VA1

**Fig. 2 COLLEGE GRADUATION
BY CORPORAL PUNISHMENT
DURING TEEN YEARS, 1985 SURVEY**



CP29VB1

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Measure	1975 Survey		1985 Survey	
		Men	Women	Men	Women
Number of Cases used	N	635	780	2,150	3,118
Corp. punishment as teen Number of Times	%	71.0	56.2	58.1	44.0
	Mean	11.2	9.0	8.9	7.3
	Median	6.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
College graduate	%	28.2	16.3	31.5	19.5
Age of respondent	Mean	40.3	37.9	41.9	40.7
Violence between parents	%	16.4	15.6	12.9	13.2
Minority (African Amer, Hispanic Amer., Native Amer.)	%	*	*	16.1	18.0
Father's Education	% <12 Yrs	52.9	47.1	*	*
	% College Grad	6.4	7.6		
Mother's Education	% <12 Yrs	44.8	41.5	*	*
	% College Grad	5.7	4.1		

Table 2. Logistic Regression of College Graduation

Independent Variable	B	S.E.	Odds Ratio
A. 1975 Survey, Men (N= 635)			
Corporal Punishment	-.116	.049	.89**
Age	.019	.008	1.02*
Parental Violence	-.458	.294	.63
Parent's Education	.818	.086	2.27***
B. 1985 Survey, Men (N = 2,150)			
Corporal Punishment	-.082	.023	.92***
Age	.419	.053	.99
Parental Violence	-.109	.150	.90
Minority Status	-.774	.146	.46***
C. 1975 Survey, Women (N = 780)			
Corporal Punishment	-.082	.058	.92
Age	-.001	.009	1.00
Parental Violence	-.062	.314	.94
Parent's Education	.749	.098	2.11***
D. 1985 Survey, Women (N=3,118)			
Corporal Punishment	-.083	.028	.92**
Age	-.009	.003	.99*
Parental Violence	-.245	.155	.78
Minority Status	-.470	.133	.63***

* = p <.05; ** = p <.01; *** = p <.001

