

Straus, Murray A. 2000. "Family violence." Pp. 981-987 in *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., vol. 2, edited by E. F. Borgatta and M. L. Borgatta. NY: Macmillan Publishing Co.

## FAMILY VIOLENCE

Physical violence of all types, from slaps to murder, probably occurs more frequently in the family than in any other setting or group except the armed services or police in time of war or riot. This article summarizes the prevalence rates and examines reasons for the high rates, with emphasis on the characteristics of the family as a social institution and on social inequality.

Physical violence is defined as an act carried out with the intention or perceived intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person (Gelles and Straus 1979). For certain purposes, the term "assault" is preferable because much intrafamily violence is a statutory crime. However, not all violence is criminal. Hitting a misbehaving child is legal and expected in all but a few countries. Corporal punishment of an "errant wife" was legal under common law in the United States until the 1870s (Calvert 1974).

Child abuse was not regarded as a widespread social problem by sociologists, family therapists, or the public until the 1960s (Nelson 1984; Pfohl 1977), and wife beating not until the women's movement made it a national issue in the mid-1970s. The subsequent emergence of public concern about and research on these and other aspects of family violence reflects major social changes, including the following:

1. The social activism of the 1960s, which sought to aid oppressed groups of all types, was extended to this aspect of the oppression of children and women.
2. The rising homicide and assault rates, violent political and social protest and assassinations, terrorist activity, and the Vietnam War sensitized people to violence.
3. Disenchantment with the family in the 1960s and early 1970s facilitated the

perception of negative features of family life, including violence.

4. The growth of paid employment by married women provided the economic means for them no longer to tolerate the abuse that had long been the lot of women.
5. The reemerged women's movement made battering a central issue in the mid-1970s and gave it wide publicity.
6. The creation by the women's movement of a new social institution—shelters for battered women—did more than provide material assistance. Shelters were ideologically important because they concretized and publicized a phenomenon that had previously been ignored.
7. Changes in theoretical perspectives in sociology put the consensus model of society under attack by conflict theory. The inevitability of conflict in all human groups, including the family, was recognized, along with the possibility of violent conflict.

## PREVALENCE OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

**Homicide.** In the United States, about one-quarter of all murders involve family members (Straus 1986). In other industrialized countries the percentage is much higher, for example, 40 percent in Canada and 67 percent in Denmark (Straus 1987). These high percentages occur because Canada has a low homicide rate and Denmark an even lower one: The few family homicides that occur are a large proportion of the low overall rate. This suggests that when homicide has been almost eliminated in a society, such as in Denmark, the family is the setting in which it is most likely to persist. Homicides of domestic partners have been decreasing in the United States since the mid-1970s (Greenfeld et al. 1998) and in Canada (Fedorowycz 1999).

## OFFICIAL STATISTICS ON CHILD ABUSE AND SPOUSE ABUSE

National statistics on child abuse in the United States have been published since 1976. These statistics vastly underestimate the actual extent of

child abuse. Many times more children are severely beaten each year but do not come to public attention. Officially reported cases grew from about 600,000 in 1976 to about 3 million annually in the mid-1990s. However, rather than being a 400 percent increase, the growth in cases reported to child protective services reflects social changes such as mandatory child abuse reporting laws, hot lines, child abuse education campaigns, an increasingly educated population, and a growth in professionals concerned with aiding and protecting children. These changes led the public and professionals to report cases that previously would have been ignored. This is consistent with historical and survey evidence suggesting that the true incidence of physical child abuse has been slowly decreasing since the late seventeenth century (Radbill 1987; Straus and Gelles 1986).

There are no official statistics for the United States on violence between spouses because the Uniform Crime Reporting System used by almost all police departments does not record the relationship between victim and offender. A new "incident-based reporting system" includes that information and is now being used in twelve states. However, because only about 7 percent of domestic assaults come to the attention of the police (Kaufman Kantor and Straus 1990), the new system will uncover only a small fraction of the cases. A similar problem makes the U.S. National Crime Survey (Gaquin 1977-1978; U.S. Department of Justice 1980) vastly underestimate the incidence of wife beating (Straus 1999). The public tends to consider assault by a spouse as a "family problem" rather than a "crime" and rarely informs the survey interviewer of such events.

**The National Family Violence Surveys.** National surveys of U.S. families were conducted in 1975 (Straus et al. 1980) and 1985 (Gelles and Straus 1988), and national surveys focused on specific aspects of family violence were conducted in 1992 (Kaufman Kantor et al. 1994) and 1995 (Straus et al. 1998). These studies provide a better estimate of the prevalence of family violence than is possible from police statistics or crime studies. They were made possible by the development of the "Conflict Tactics Scales" to measure family violence (Straus 1990; Straus et al. 1996). The resulting rates, which are based on the 6,002 households surveyed in 1985, are many times greater

than rates based on cases known to child welfare professionals, the police, shelters, or the National Crime Survey, but they are still believed to be lower-bound estimates.

Sixteen percent of the couples surveyed reported one or more incidents involving physical violence during the previous twelve months. Attacks by husbands on wives that were serious enough to warrant the term "wife beating" (because they involved punching, biting, kicking, choking, etc.) were reported for 3.2 percent of wives, resulting in a lower-bound estimate of 1.7 million beaten women. The National Family Violence Surveys, and all other studies of marital violence that do not use samples selected from the clientele of shelters and similar agencies, find that women assault their husbands at about the same rate as men assault their wives (Straus 1999); however, women are injured at seven times the rate of injury to men (Stets and Straus 1990; Straus 1990).

The most violent role within the family is that of parent, because almost all parents use corporal punishment (Straus and Stewart 1999). More than a third of the parents of infants in the 1995 survey reported hitting their child that year. Ninety-four percent of parents of three- to five-year-old children used corporal punishment. The percentage decreased steadily from age five on, but one-third of parents of children in their early teens reported hitting the child that year.

*Child abuse* is more difficult to operationalize than *corporal punishment* because the line differentiating *abuse* from *physical punishment* is to a considerable extent a matter of social norms. If one includes hitting a child with an object such a belt, paddle, or hairbrush, the 1995 national survey data found a rate of 4.9 percent (Straus et al. 1998), which is twelve times higher than the rate of cases reported to protective service agencies in 1995.

Intrafamily relationships between children are also extremely violent. But, like the violence of parents, it is not perceived as such because there is an implicit normative tolerance. Almost all young children hit a sibling, and more than a third hit a parent. Even in their late teens (age fifteen to seventeen), the rate of violence between siblings is enormous: More than two-thirds of that age group hit a sibling during the year of the survey.

### EXPLANATIONS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

Numerous family characteristics affect the level of family violence, several of which are discussed below.

**High Level of Family Conflict.** One characteristic of the family that helps account for the high rate of violence is its inherently high level of conflict. One reason for high conflict is that, as in other primary groups, family members are concerned with "the whole person." Consequently, there are more issues over which conflict can occur than in nonprimary relationships. Moreover, when conflict does occur, the deep commitment makes arguments emotionally charged. A disagreement about music with colleagues at work is unlikely to have the same emotional intensity as when children favor rock and parents favor Bach. The likelihood of conflicts is further multiplied because families usually consist of both males and females and parents and children, thus juxtaposing differences in the orientations and interests of different genders and generations. The family is the prime locus of the "battle of the sexes" and the "generation gap."

**Norms Tolerating or Requiring Violence.** Although conflict is endemic in families, it is not the only group or institution with a high level of conflict. Conflict is also high in academic departments and congressional committees, yet physical violence is practically nonexistent in those groups. Additional factors are needed to explain why violence is so much more frequent in the family than in other groups. One of these is the existence of cultural norms that tolerate or require violence. The clearest example is the right of parents to use corporal punishment to correct and control a child. At least two-thirds of Americans believe that "it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good hard spanking" (Straus and Mathur 1996). These norms contrast with those prevailing within other institutions. Even prison authorities are no longer permitted to use corporal punishment.

Similar norms apply to husband-wife relations. However, they are implicit and taken for granted, and therefore largely unrecognized. Just as parenthood gives the right to hit, so the marriage license is also an implicit hitting license (Gelles and Straus 1988; Greenblat 1983). As with other licenses, rules limit its use. Slapping a spouse,

for example, is tolerable if the spouse is perceived to be persisting in a serious wrong and "won't listen to reason." Many of the men and women interviewed by Gelles (1974) expressed this normative principle with such phrases as "I asked for it" or "She needed to be brought to her senses" (p. 58).

The common law right of a husband to use corporal punishment on an "errant wife" was recognized by U.S. courts until the late nineteenth century (Calvert 1974). Informally, it lived on in the behavior of the public, the police, and the courts, and it continues to do so. Under pressure from the women's movement, this is changing, but slowly. There have been major reforms of police and legal procedures, but the general public and many police officers continue to believe that "it's their own business" if spouses are violent to each other, provided the blow is not severe enough to cause an injury that requires medical treatment, whereas they would not tolerate a similar pattern of assault in an office, factory, or church. Only a very small percent of men believe that a legal sanction would be likely if they assaulted their wife (Carmody and Williams 1987). In one study, of the more than 600 women who were assaulted by their husbands, the police were involved in only 6.7 percent of the incidents and an arrest was made in only five cases (Kaufman Kantor and Straus 1990). The probability of legal sanction for assaulting a wife is even less than the .008 indicated by those five cases, because two-thirds of the 600 women were assaulted more than once during the year of the survey.

**Family Socialization in Violence.** In a certain sense it begs the question to attribute the high rate of family violence to norms that tolerate, permit, or require violence because it does not explain why the norms for families are different from those for other social groups or institutions. There are a number of reasons, but one of the most fundamental is that the family is the setting in which physical violence is first experienced and in which the normative legitimacy of violence is learned. As noted above, corporal punishment is experienced by at least 94 percent of American children (Straus and Stewart 1999). Corporal punishment is used to teach that certain types of behavior are not condoned, but simultaneously,

social learning processes teach the legitimacy of and behavioral script for violence.

The example of corporal punishment also links love with violence. Since corporal punishment begins in infancy, parents are the first, and usually the only, ones to hit an infant. From the earliest level of psychosocial development, children learn that those to whom they are most closely bonded are also those who hit. Second, since corporal punishment is used to train the child in morally correct behavior or to teach about danger to be avoided, it establishes the normative legitimacy of hitting other family members. Third, corporal punishment teaches the cultural script for use of violence. For example, parents often refrain from hitting until their anger or frustration reaches a certain point. The child therefore learns that anger and frustration justify the use of physical force.

As a result of these social learning processes, use of violence becomes internalized and generalized to other social relationships, especially such intimate relationships as husband and wife and parent and child. The National Family Violence Surveys found that the more corporal punishment experienced as a child, the higher the probability of hitting a spouse (Straus et al. 1980; Straus and Yodanis 1996). Many children do not even need to extrapolate from corporal punishment of children to other relationships because they directly observe role models of physical violence between their parents.

**Gender Inequality.** Despite egalitarian rhetoric and the trend toward a more egalitarian family structure, male dominance in the family and in other spheres remains an important cause of family violence (Straus 1976). Most Americans continue to think of the husband as the "head of the family," and many believe that status gives him the right to have the final say. This sets the stage for violence, because force is ultimately necessary to back up the right to have the final say (Goode 1974).

Numerous structural patterns sustain the system of male dominance: The income of women employed full time is about a third lower than the income of men, and money is a source of power. Men tend to marry women who are younger, shorter, and less well educated; and age, physical

size, and education form a basis for exercising power. Thus, the typical marriage begins with an advantage to the man. If the initial advantage changes or is challenged, many men feel morally justified in using their greater size and strength to maintain the right to have the final say, which they perceive to have been agreed on at the time of the marriage (LaRossa 1980). As a result, male-dominant marriages have been found to have the highest rate of wife beating (Coleman and Straus 1986; Straus et al. 1980), and societies in which male-dominant marriages prevail have higher rates of marital violence than more egalitarian societies (Levinson 1989; Straus 1994).

The privileged economic position of men also helps to explain why beaten wives so often stay with an assaulting husband (Kalmuss and Straus 1983). Women with full-time jobs earn only about 65 percent of what men earn (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992). When marriages end, children stay with the mother in about 90 percent of the cases. Child support payments are typically inadequate and often defaulted on after a year or two. No-fault divorce has worked to the economic disadvantage of women (Weitzmen 1986). Consequently, many women stay in violent marriages because the alternative is bringing up their children in poverty.

**Other Factors.** Many other factors contribute to the high rate of intrafamily violence in the United States, even though they do not explain why the family is, on the average, more violent than other groups. Space permits only some of these to be identified briefly.

The empirical evidence shows that the greater the number of stressful events experienced by a family, the higher the rate of marital violence and child abuse (Makepeace 1983; Straus 1980; Straus and Kaufman Kantor 1987). In addition to specific stressful events that impinge on families, chronic stresses, such as marital conflict and poverty, are also strongly associated with child abuse and spouse abuse.

Almost all studies find a strong association between drinking and family violence (Coleman and Straus 1983; Kaufman Kantor and Straus 1987). However, even though heavy drinkers have two to three times the violence rate of abstainers, most heavy drinkers do *not* engage in spouse abuse or child abuse (Kaufman Kantor and Straus 1987).

The higher the level of nonfamily violence in a society, the higher the rate of child abuse and spouse abuse (Levinson 1989; Straus 1977). The nonfamily violence can be in the form of violent crime or socially legitimate violence such as warfare. The carryover of violent behavior from one sphere of life to another may be strongest when the societal violence is "legitimate violence," rather than "criminal violence," because most individual acts of violence are carried out to correct some perceived wrong. Archer and Gartner (1984) and Huggins and Straus (1980) (1980) found that war is associated with an increase in interpersonal violence. Straus constructed an index to measure differences between the states of the United States in the extent to which violence was used or supported for socially legitimate purposes, such as corporal punishment in the schools or expenditure per capita on the National Guard (Baron and Straus 1989). The higher the score of a state on this Legitimate Violence Index, the higher the rate of *criminal* violence such as homicide (Baron and Straus 1988) and rape (Baron and Straus 1989).

Family violence occurs at all social levels, but it is more prevalent at the lowest socioeconomic level and among disadvantaged minorities. Socioeconomic group differences in corporal punishment of children or slapping of spouses are relatively small, but the more severe the violence, the greater the socioeconomic difference. Thus, punching, biting, choking, attacking with weapons, and killing of family members occur much more often among the most disadvantaged sectors of society (Linsky et al. 1995; Straus et al. 1980).

**The Overall Pattern.** No single factor, such as male dominance or growing up in a violent family, has been shown to account for more than a small percentage of the incidence of child abuse or spouse abuse. However, a study of the potential effect of twenty-five such "risk factors" found that in families where only one or two of the factors existed, there were no incidents of wife beating during the year studied. On the other hand, wife beating occurred in 70 percent of the families with twelve or more of the twenty-five factors (Straus et al. 1980). Similar results were found for child abuse. Thus, the key to unraveling the paradox of family violence appears to lie in understanding the interplay of numerous causal factors.

## THE FUTURE

During the period 1965 to 1985, the age-old phenomena of child abuse and wife beating underwent an evolution from "private trouble" to "social problem" and, in the case of wife beating, to a statutory crime. Every state in the United States now employs large numbers of "child protective service" workers, and there are national and local voluntary groups devoted to prevention and treatment of child abuse. There are more than 1,000 shelters for battered women, whereas none existed in 1973. There are growing numbers of treatment programs for batterers and of family dispute mediation programs. Criminal prosecution of violent husbands, although still the exception, has become frequent, often with mandated participation in a treatment program as an alternative to fines or incarceration (Sherman et al. 1992). After lagging behind the states for more than a decade, in 1994 Congress passed the Violence Against Women act, which provides funds for services, education, and research. In the 1990s there was also an exponential growth of family therapy by psychologists and social workers, and psychology replaced sociology as the discipline most active in research on family violence.

Comparison of the 1975, 1985, and 1992 National Family Violence Surveys found a substantial reduction in the rates of child abuse and wife beating (Straus 1995; Straus and Gelles 1986; Straus et al. 1997). However, domestic assaults *by* women remained about the same, perhaps because there has been no national effort to confront this aspect of family violence and perhaps because it is a perverse aspect of the movement toward gender equality. These decreases in family violence are an acceleration of a centuries-long trend. The acceleration probably results from a combination of the educational programs, services, and legal changes discussed in this article; as well as from changes in characteristics of the family and the society that lie at the root of family violence. These include increases in the educational level of the population, later marriages, and fewer children, all of which reduce family stress; parent education programs and media, which help parents manage children without corporal punishment or more severe violence; greater equality between men and women, which reduces some of the power struggles that lead to violence; and wives in paid jobs and a greater acceptability of divorce, which (along with

shelters for battered women) enables more women to escape from violent marriages. Although child abuse and spouse abuse rates have declined, they are still extremely high. American society still has a long way to go before a typical citizen is as safe in his or her own home as on the streets or in the workplace.

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