

# Trends in Cultural Norms and Rates of Partner Violence: An Update to 1992



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It is risky to come to conclusions about social trends based on only two time points, such as 1975 and 1985. The seeming trends might be just an accident of those two years, or a genuine trend can reverse. The homicide rate in the U.S., for example, climbed steadily from 7.9 in 1970 to 10.2 in 1980, which is a 29% increase. Almost everyone thinks that trend has continued. In fact, from 1980 to 1985, the homicide rate *decreased* at a faster rate than it had increased in the previous decade. Since 1986 the rate for adults has continued to go down. However, there has been a tremendous increase in murders of youth. This is not because youth have become more violent. It is almost entirely because so many youth now have guns. What used to be a fight, is often now a murder.

Returning to the question the 28% decrease in assaults on wives by husbands 1975 to 1985 reported in the previous chapter, this huge decrease might have been an accident of those two years. Or it could have been a valid trend. However, as we have seen even long term trends can cease or reverse. For this reason alone, it is important to reassess the findings in the previous chapter.

A reassessment of the trend is also needed because the decrease from 1975 to 1985 might have been the result of a methodological artifact, such as the difference in interviewing method used for the 1975 National Family Violence Survey (face-to-face interviews) and the 1985 survey (telephone interviews). The research summarized in this addendum used data from a third national survey that was conducted with face-to-face interviews. Therefore, if the trends from 1975 to 1985 have continued, the possibility

that the decrease in violence rates from 1975 to 1985 was really the effect of a change in the mode of interviewing is ruled out.

This addendum also examines changes in cultural norms concerning partner violence. In the previous chapter we suggested that cultural norms concerning partner violence had changed as a result of the feminist movement, but we had no empirical data to support this suggestion. Since then we used newly available data to carry out an analysis of changes in norms concerning couple violence and these findings will be summarized.

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## Methods

### *Partner Assault Data*

The National Alcohol and Family Violence Survey, conducted in 1992 (Kaufman Kantor, Jasinski & Aldarondo, 1994) provided the data which enabled us to see if the decrease in rates of partner violence by men has continued. For brevity, that study will be referred to as the 1992 survey. The 1992 survey was conducted by face-to-face interviews with a national probability sample of 1,970 married and cohabiting adults. The 1992 survey, like the 1975 and 1985 surveys, used the Conflict Tactics Scales or CTS (Straus, 1990) to estimate the rate of physical assaults by and against the partners in these relationships. Since all three studies were also based on national samples, the rates for the three years can be compared, provided the comparisons are based on the equivalent parts of the CTS and equivalent parts of the samples (see the preceding chapter and Straus and Kaufman Kantor, 1994, for the methods used to obtain equivalent samples and measures).

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### *Attitude Data*

The data on cultural norms concerning physical assault of a partner are from national surveys con-

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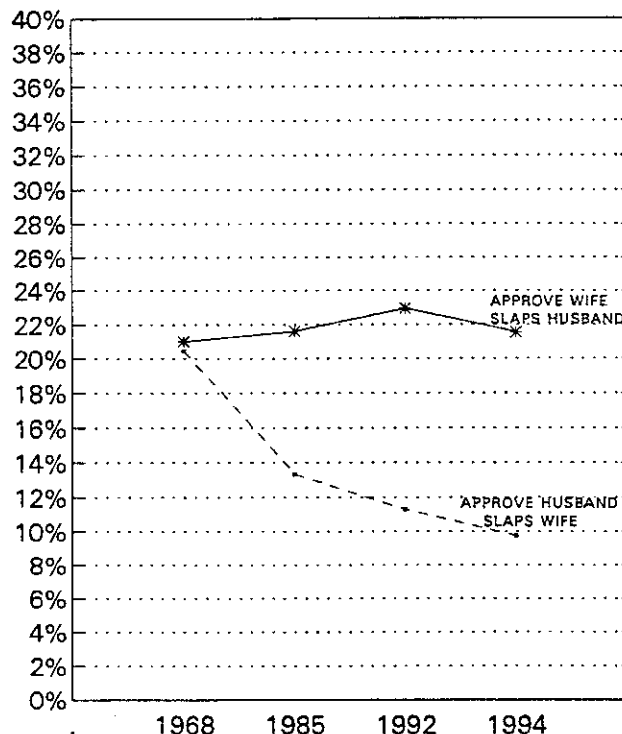
ducted in 1968, 1985, 1992, and 1994. The 1968 survey was conducted for the President's Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. The 1985 data are from the second National Family Violence Survey (Straus and Gelles, 1990). The 1992 data are from the National Alcohol and Family Violence Survey described above. The 1994 data are from an unpublished Gallup survey conducted by Moore and Straus.

All four surveys asked "Are there any situations that you can imagine in which you would approve of a husband slapping his wife's face?" and "Are there any situations that you can imagine in which you would approve of a wife slapping her husband's face?" Respondents could answer Yes or No. Further information on the methods used in these three studies can be found in Straus, Kaufman Kantor and Moore (1994).

### Change in Cultural Norms Accepting Assaults of Partners

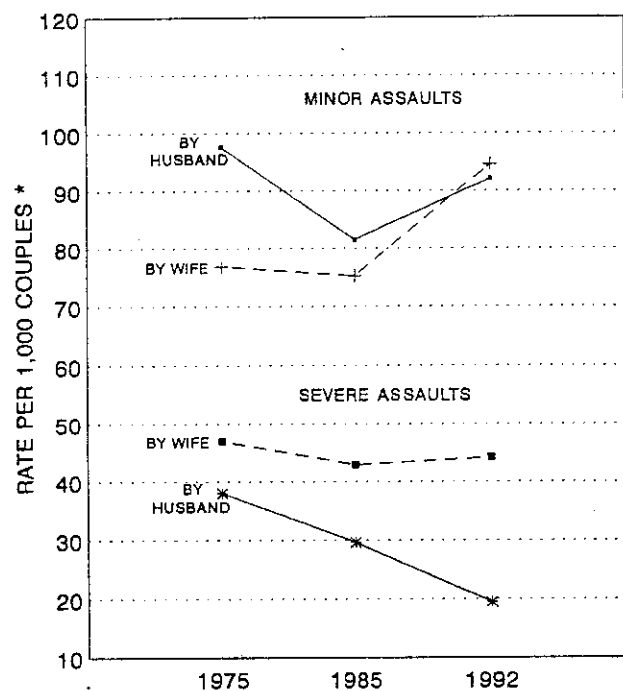
Figure 1 shows that the percent of the US population who approve of a husband slapping his wife's face (lower line) decreased steadily from the high of just over 20% in 1968 to half that rate in 1994. The decrease is statistically significant. Since the analysis controlled for changes in eight demographic variables, the significant decrease in the percentage approving a husband slapping his wife's face is likely to

FIGURE 1. APPROVAL OF SLAPPING SPOUSE\*



\*Adjusted for covariates and independent variables.

FIGURE 2. TRENDS IN MINOR AND SEVERE ASSAULTS BY HUSBANDS AND WIVES



\*Weighted to adjust for oversamples.

indicate a change in the culture rather than a change in demographics.

Although approval of a husband slapping his wife decreased sharply from 1968 to 1994, that is not the case for approval of a wife slapping her husband. The upper line in Figure 1 shows that the percent of the U.S. population who approve of a wife slapping her husband's face remained almost identical over the 26 years.

What situations did those who said that they could approve of a husband slapping his wife or a wife slapping her husband have in mind? The 1968 survey asked those who approved to indicate the situation in which they would approve. None mentioned self defense or altruistic situations such as to defend a child or to revive a spouse from a seizure. The most frequently mentioned situation was if the partner was sexually unfaithful: 72% of those who approved of a husband slapping a wife had this in mind, as did 75% of those who approved of a wife slapping her husband.

### Change in Spouse Assault Rates from 1975 to 1992

#### Trends in Assaults by Male and Female Partners

*Minor Assaults.* The top half of Figure 2 shows that minor assaults by men (solid line) decreased from

1975 to 1985, whereas minor assaults by women (broken line) hardly changed at all during that period. However, from 1985 to 1992, minor assaults by both men and women increased.

*Severe Assaults.* The broken line in the lower half of Figure 1 shows that severe assaults by women did not change over this 18-year period. On the other hand, the solid line shows that severe assaults by men decreased steadily from 38 per thousand in 1975 to 19 per thousand in 1992. This is a 48% decrease and is statistically significant (see the full results in Straus and Kaufman Kantor, 1994).

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### *Assaults as Reported by Male and Female Partners*

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The rates in Figure 2 combine the data obtained by interviewing men and women. Perhaps the rate of assault by men decreased because men became alerted to the fact that what they were doing is a crime, and hence fewer were willing to disclose committing such crimes. A detailed analysis of this issue is given in Straus and Kaufman Kantor (1994). The results are too complicated to fully summarize in a brief addendum. So we will focus on assaults by men.

*Minor assaults.* The rates based on interviews with men show a continuing decrease from 1975 to 1992. However, the rate of assaults by men based on interviews with women did not continue the decrease we found from 1975 to 1985. The findings on minor assaults therefore lend some support to the idea that part of the explanation for the decrease in the assaults by men may be a "reporting effect," i.e., the decrease may result from less willingness of men to report having assaulted their partner, rather than a decrease in the actual prevalence of wife beating.

*Severe assaults.* The rates in 1992 were lower than the rates in 1975, regardless of whether the rates are calculated from data obtained by interviews with men or women, i.e., according to both men and women respondents, severe assaults by men decreased.

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### **Discussion**

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The findings summarized in this chapter show that cultural norms concerning the legitimacy of hitting a spouse, and the actual rates of such attacks, decreased for men but not for women. If these findings are correct, they have important implications. It is therefore necessary to consider the validity of the findings.

One source of error might be that the rates decreased because men are covering up. To examine this we computed the trends separately for data based on interviewing men and women and results were similar regardless of whether the analyses used data provided by male or female respondents.

The findings might also be questioned because they seem to be inconsistent with trends such as the growing number of shelters for battered women or the increasing number of newspaper reports of wife beating. We think these trends reflect a growth in public concern and efforts to do something about wife beating, not a growth in the number of beaten women. The data on actual rates of violence against women that is closest to our data is the FBI data on murders of intimate partners by men. A trend analysis by Fox (1994) found a 22% decrease in this type of homicide between 1976 and 1992 (Fox, 1994).

The change from 1975 to 1985 might have been an artifact resulting from using in-person interviews in 1975 and telephone interviews in 1985. However, the fact that the decrease continued from 1985 to 1992, despite going back to face-to-face interviews in 1992, makes that explanation unlikely.

If for purposes of this discussion, we assume that the findings are correct, they combine good news and bad news. The good news, of course, is the decrease in approval of male violence and the decrease in the rate of assaults by men. The bad news is that there has been little change in approval of violence by women or in the rate of assault by women on their male partners. This is a serious problem, despite the fact that assaults by women result in fewer injuries that need medical attention. One reason it is a serious problem is that witnessing these assaults is a traumatic experience for millions of children. The effect of witnessing a mother assaulting a father seems to be at least as serious as witnessing fathers assault mothers (Straus, 1992). It is also important because even minor assaults by women on their partners are contrary to the feminist ideal of a non-violent world, and even minor assaults are criminal acts.

Finally, seemingly harmless and justified "minor violence" by women is a serious problem because it helps perpetuate norms that make it legitimate for men to hit a partner who persists in an objectionable behavior and "won't listen to reason." It is a danger to women because, sooner or later, almost every woman is likely to engage in behavior that her partner thinks is intolerable. When that happens, her previous use of violence to deal with his intolerable behavior helps to provide the justification for the man to do the same thing. Consequently, one of the many steps needed to reduce physical abuse of women by men is an effort to end what may seem to be harmless violence by women. The steps might include public service announcements directed at violence by women similar to those directed at male violence, and also school based programs that explicitly recognize and condemn violence by girls as well as boys.

Although reducing violence by women is extremely important for primary prevention of physical abuse

of women, the effort to achieve that reduction must not obscure the fact that women are the main victims of partner violence. They are physically injured to the point of needing medical attention seven times as often as husbands, they suffer psychological injury at much higher rates (Stets and Straus, 1990), and they are locked into violent marriages because of the economic inequities of American society (Gelles and Straus, 1988).

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### Note

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