A PROFILE OF VIOLENCE TOWARD CHILDREN:
A NATIONAL STUDY

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Abstract—This paper presents a profile of violence toward children in the United States, based on the results from the Second National Family Violence Survey. A national probability sample of 6,002 households was surveyed by telephone in 1985, of which 3,232 households had at least one child under 18 years old living at home. Minor violence, or physical punishment, was most common among mothers, caretakers 18 to 37 years old, fathers who were unemployed, caretakers with blue-collar occupations, households with two to four children at home, and among caretakers who used alcohol and other drugs, male children, and children 3 to 6 years old. The highest rates of abusive violence occurred in families located in the East, families whose annual income was below the poverty line, families where the father was unemployed, families where the caretakers held blue-collar jobs, families with four or more children, caretakers who used drugs at least once, male children, and children 3 to 6 years old. Logistic regressions were done to examine the predictive value of these variables.

Key Words—Child abuse, Violence, Family, Children.

INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF this paper is to update the 1975 profile of violence toward children, derived from the First National Family Violence Survey (Gelles, 1980). This update serves four functions for the professional community: (a) it provides a concise description of the distribution of violence towards children, including abusive violence; (b) it suggests how the nature of violence towards children may be changing, and offers some insight into the effectiveness of intervention and prevention efforts from the mid-1970s to mid-1980s; (c) it identifies where prevention and treatment resources are more currently needed; and (d) it permits clinicians and case workers to identify high-risk groups, for whom more detailed assessment may be warranted. (A word of caution is needed in the identification of high-risk groups based on these data: to the extent that respondents admitted they were violent towards children, the profile accurately represents the problem. But, to the extent that some people who use violence may not fully disclose their behavior, we regard the profile as the “lower limit” profile of such behaviors.)

Profiles of Abuse and Maltreatment

There are three main sources of data on the incidence and correlates of violence and abuse of children: (a) official statistics, (b) clinical samples, and (c) survey data. Each source has

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specific strengths, weaknesses, and sources of bias with regard to estimates of the extent of abuse and the factors associated with abuse and violence (see Gelles & Straus, 1988, for a comparative discussion of these sources of data). Clinical samples dominate the literature and are generally based on small, nonrepresentative samples. Official report data are biased by the study of only those cases known to reporting agencies (e.g., the local Child Protective Service), and fall short of describing the larger population of all children. Survey data are limited by the willingness of subjects to report violence and abuse. Survey data have the advantage of allowing us to test some of the theories derived from the other two types of research. This paper is based on survey data from the Second National Family Violence Survey.

Factors Associated With Maltreatment

There are three previous profiles of abusive violence towards children. One profile is based on official report data (American Association for Protecting Children [AAPC], 1986) and two are based on self-report survey data (National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect [NCCAN], 1988; and Gelles, 1980). The most recent analysis of case report data by the American Association for Protecting Children (AAPC, 1986) on characteristics of children and families involved in child neglect and abuse reports is for 1984. These data indicate that the average child reported for child abuse and neglect was 7.2 years old, females were slightly more likely to be victims of maltreatment than males, and that Black children were over-represented in abuse and neglect reports. Caretakers reported for abuse had a mean age of 31.9 years. Females were much more likely to be reported for abuse or neglect. Blacks were over-represented as perpetrators, as were single parent families.

Data from the 1988 Study of National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN, 1988) indicate that females were more likely to be reported for maltreatment, including injury and impairment. The incidence of all forms of maltreatment increased with the child’s age, and this trend held for abuse as well. Only fatal injuries showed an inverse relationship with age. No significant association was found between the rate of maltreatment and the child’s race/ethnicity. Children from lower income families (total family income less than $15,000) had significantly higher rates of maltreatment compared to children from higher income homes. Children from lower income homes had a rate of physical abuse 3.5 times greater than children from higher incomes families. Maltreatment rates and physical abuse rates were higher in homes with four or more children compared to homes with fewer children. No significant differences were found in the rates of maltreatment by location of residence.

A third source of data on the factors related to physical abuse of children is the First National Family Violence Survey, carried out in 1975 (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). The profile of households that had the highest risk of acts of severe or abusive violence toward children was:

Region: Midwest
Size of locality: large city
Number of children: five
Gender of caretaker: female (Mothers spend much more time caring for their children than do fathers. Therefore, the finding that females were more frequent offenders is not surprising. One means of controlling the time and responsibility of caretaking is to compare single-parent mothers to single-parent fathers. This comparison reveals single-parent fathers have higher rates of abusive violence than single-parent mothers [Gelles, 1989]).

Age of caretakers: under 30 years old
Race: Native American, Asian, or other.
Income: below the poverty line
Education: H. S. graduates
Employment of husband: unemployed, employed part time or blue collar
Gender of child: male
Age of child: 3–5 and 15–17. (The 1975 National Survey of Family Violence did not include children younger than 3 years old. This omission was due to the study objective of also examining violence between siblings).

Ten years after the First National Family Violence Survey, Gelles and Straus replicated their inquiry into the state of family violence in the United States. In 1985, the Second National Family Violence Survey collected data on marital violence and violence toward children from a nationally representative sample of 6,002 households. These data were used to update the profile of violence toward children from the 1975 survey.

METHODS

Sample and Administration

A national probability sample of 6,002 households comprised the Second National Family Violence Survey. While the total sample size was 6,002, the actual number of cases analyzed in this and other papers is 5,941. Cleaning the data revealed that 22 cases failed to meet the inclusion criteria and 46 cases were mis-categorized (e.g., classified as single parents, but had no children living at home). These cases were eliminated before we carried out our analyses. The sample was drawn using a Random Digit Dial procedure and was composed of four parts. Initially, 4,032 households were selected in proportion to the distribution of households in the 50 states. Then, 958 households were oversampled in 25 states; this was done to assure that there would be at least 36 states with at least 100 completed interviews per state. Finally, two additional oversamples were drawn containing 502 Black and 510 Hispanic households. Data presented in this article have been weighted to account for the three oversamples.

To be eligible for inclusion in the sample, the respondent had to be an adult 18 years of age or older, who met one of the three following conditions: (a) currently coupled (married or unmarried cohabitating opposite sex couples), or (b) previously coupled (previously married or unmarried cohabitating opposite sex couples separated for less than 2 years), or (c) a single parent with a child under 18 years of age and living in the same household. If more than one eligible respondent was in the household, a random procedure was used to select the gender of the respondent. The overall sample was made up of 3,522 female and 2,480 male respondents.

The survey included 3,232 households with at least one child under 18 years of age at home. If more than one child under 18 years old resided in the home, a random procedure was used to select the “referent child.”

Telephone interviews were conducted by trained interviewers employed by Louis Harris and Associates, the national survey research firm. When telephones were busy, there was no answer, or the desired respondent was not available, three follow-up calls were attempted prior to substituting a new household. If contact was made and subjects refused to participate in screening or subsequent parts of the interview, trained “refusal conversion” interviewers were assigned to the household.

The response rate, calculated as completes as a proportion of eligible, was 84%. Interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes.

Defining and Operationalizing Family Violence

Violence was nominally defined as an act “carried out with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury to another person.” The intent of the act could range from slight pain, (like a slap), to homicide. The motivation for the action might range
from concern for a person’s safety (e.g., a child is spanked for going into the street) to hostility so intense that the death of the person is desired (Gelles & Straus, 1979). Alternately stated, the act could be a means to an end (i.e., instrumental aggression) or an end in itself (i.e., expressive aggression). We defined abusive violence as those acts of violence that have a high probability of causing injury to the person (an injury does not have to occur). That is, it is the intent that differentiates violence from other acts, and the high risk of injury, were such an act to be carried out, that defines it as abusive.

Violence was operationalized through the use of the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979, 1990). First developed at the University of New Hampshire in 1971, this technique has been modified and used extensively in numerous studies of family violence (e.g., Allen & Straus, 1980; Cate, Henton, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Giles-Sims, 1983; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983; Hornung, McCullough, & Sugimoto, 1981; Jorgensen, 1977; Steinmetz, 1977; Straus, 1974).

The Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) presents a hierarchy of possible responses to conflict. The CTS measures three categories of tactics used in interpersonal conflict within the family: reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression. The parent/child version of the CTS begins with the following instructions: “Parents and children use many different ways of trying to settle differences between them. I’m going to read a list of some things that you might have done WHEN YOU HAD A PROBLEM WITH THIS CHILD (i.e., the referent child). I would like you to tell me how often you did it (each one) with him/her in the last year. . . .”

The list begins with items from the Reasoning Scale, such as “discussed the issue calmly, and progresses to items from the Verbal Aggression scale, such as “insulted or swore at him/her.” Finally, it queries about items from the Physical Aggression scale, which are the focus of this article.

The physical aggression items used in the CTS will be further divided into two indexes: the Minor Violence Index and the Severe Violence Index. The Minor Violence Index items are: threw something at the other family member; pushed, grabbed or shoved; slapped or spanked. The Severe Violence Index items are: kicked, bit or hit the other family member with a fist; hit or tried to hit with an object; beat up; burned or scalded; threatened with a gun or a knife; used a knife or a gun. This last index is the measure of abusive violence.

In addition to the minor and severe violence indexes, the physical aggression items from the CTS can be represented as the Overall Violence Index, which is the sum of all the component physical aggression items, and the Very Severe Violence Index, which includes all of those items in the Severe Index, except “hit or tried to hit with an object.” It appears that depending on whether the object is a hairbrush, or a tire iron, different cultural perceptions exist as to whether the act is a “just punishment” (i.e., similar to what we refer to as minor violence) or abusive. But we will employ the Severe Violence Index as our working definition of abusive violence, since we regard hitting a child with any object as abusive violence. A second benefit of retaining the broader definition is that it renders more reliable comparisons of the 1975 and 1985 profiles.

The response categories for each of the items in the CTS are: none, once, twice, 3–5 times, 6–10 times, 11–20 times, and 20 or more times. These were recoded as 0 = none, and 1 = some, to obtain the physical aggression indexes.

This article reports data from the Minor and Severe indexes of the CTS, as they are part a possible continuum of physical methods of conflict resolution; they are orthogonal indexes, in that there is no overlap in their item pools.

We used the Severe Violence index as the source of data for discussing abusive violence, as we believe that hitting a child with an object is indeed abusive. Was the victim of this act a stranger, there would be little question that it would potentially constitute an act of at least criminal battery, and possibly be felonious, depending on the object chosen and other factors, such as outcome.
Table 1. Rates of Violence (per 1,000 children) by Region of the Country and Size of Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Minor</th>
<th>Severe*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East (n = 661)</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central (860)</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South (1150)</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West (558)</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*χ²(3) = 7.47, p = .058

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Community</th>
<th>Minor</th>
<th>Severe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City (n = 830)</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburb (1577)</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural (824)</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A long-held traditional assumption is that violence is on a continuum from the mildest form (e.g., a slap) to the most severe and deadly forms (e.g., shot with a gun). This largely unexamined theoretical view has been the foundation of nearly all research and policy on family violence. Recently, Gelles (1991) challenged this view and suggested that there may be two distinct categories of violence: physical punishment and abusive violence. Therefore, we will employ that convention for the duration of this paper.

Reliability and validity of the CTS. Reliability and validity of the CTS have been, and continue to be, assessed over the 20-year history of the instrument's use. There is evidence of adequate internal consistency reliability, concurrent validity, and construct validity. For the interested reader, a thorough presentation of the evidence regarding the psychometric properties of the CTS, the arguments made by its critics, and counter-arguments can be found in Straus and Gelles (1990).

RESULTS

The base rate for Minor Violence is 619/1,000 children. The base rate of Severe Violence is 110/1,000 children, or about one out of ten children experienced one or more abusive incidents during the survey year, 1985. These are the base rates that serve as comparisons for the analyses that follow (see Gelles & Straus, 1987, for more detailed information on incidence).

Region and Size of Community

There are no notable variations in the rates of minor violence by region of the country and size of community, however, differences in the rates of severe violence approached statistical significance (p = .058), with the East having the highest rate of abusive violence, 35% higher than any of the other three regions (Table 1).

There are no significant variations in the rates of either type of violence in terms of the size of the place of residence.

Family Structure Variables

Length of residence. The rate of minor violence decreases as the length of residence increases, with those families who moved recently having about a 20% higher rate than families who report living in their community for at least 14 years (Table 2). The difference for abusive
Table 2. Rates of Violence (Per 1,000 Children) by Length of Residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Residence (yrs.)</th>
<th>Minor*</th>
<th>Severe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1 (n = 175)</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3 (444)</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-13 (1236)</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14+ (1359)</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* \chi^2(3) = 28.45, p < .001

violence between newly settled families and long term residents is 40%, but this difference is not statistically significant.

**Number of children.** The relationship between Minor and Severe Violence and number of children in the household, as shown in Figure 1, was curvilinear, with a peak at four and five children, respectively. This finding is in contrast to the reported ascending trend in the NCCAN (1988) profile.

**Caretaker Variables**

**Gender and age of caretakers.** Women caretakers report a higher rate of minor violence than men, but the difference for Severe Violence was not significant. Age of the respondent reveals an inverse relationship for both punishment and abusive violence (Table 3). Almost twice as many children were physically punished by younger caretakers as by older ones (p < .001). This ratio is 40% for Severe Violence, a difference that, while not statistically significant, is too large to dismiss.

**Race/ethnicity and religion.** Black respondents report the highest rates for both Minor and Severe Violence, a finding that is consistent across some previous profiles (but not the NCCAN data). Hispanic respondents had the lowest rate of Minor Violence and were higher

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![Figure 1. Violence by Number of Children in the Home.](image-url)
than average for Severe Violence. In contrast, White respondents reported rates about the same as Blacks for Minor and the lowest of all the groups for Severe Violence (Figure 2).

There were no statistically significant differences among religious denominations for either Minor or Severe Violence.

*Income, education and employment.* We used an annual family income of $10,000, the national poverty line for a family of four in 1985, to examine the relationship between violence and poverty (Table 4). There was no significant relationship between physical punishment and income. In contrast, the Severe Violence pattern is quite clear, with poor respondents reporting 1.5 times more abusive violence than more affluent families ($p < .01$).

Rate of violence by educational level, as measured by the highest completed year of education, is shown in Figure 3. Mothers refer to female caretakers and fathers to male caretakers, irrespective of marital status. For both mothers and fathers, the least educated caretakers reported the lowest rates of punishment ($p < .01$). Mothers showed no noteworthy differences when we look at abusive violence. But, fathers who completed less than a high school education reported the highest rates of severe violence, while those with either only grade school, or college educations were the least abusive to their children ($p < .01$).

Fathers who were employed part-time reported the highest rate of physical punishment of any of the categories for either parent’s employment status ($p < .05$). Mothers who reported that they were unemployed, but not housewives, had the highest rates of abusive violence (see Table 5).

Children whose mothers and fathers held blue collar jobs experience about 5% more Minor Violence than those whose parent(s) held white collar jobs (statistically significant for mothers only, $p < .05$). When looking at Severe Violence, this difference jumps to 10% more for mothers ($p < .05$), and 50% more for fathers, who held blue collar as compared to white collar jobs ($p < .001$) (see Table 6).

*Alcohol and Other Drugs*

Respondents were asked to report on their alcohol and drug use. Figure 4 shows the rates of violence with respect to alcohol use, recoded as abstainers, those who drink 1–3 times/month, and those who drink at least weekly. There were no significant differences for either punishment or abusive violence. In contrast, substance use (further unspecified: Drug usage was assessed in the survey with the following question: “In the past year, how often would you guess you got high on marijuana or some other drug?”) was dichotomized into abstainers and those who used an illegal drug such as marijuana at least once during the referent year. Drug
users reported 20% more Minor Violence ($p < .001$) and 46% more Severe Violence than abstainers ($p < .05$).

**Gender and Age of Child**

Gender of the child showed a pattern opposite to that found for gender of the parent, with males having higher rates of victimization (Table 7), a finding that is in contrast to AAPC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income of Family</th>
<th>Minor</th>
<th>Severe*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;$10,000 (n = 352)$</td>
<td>644</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,0001 + (2734)$</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $\chi^2(1) = 7.67, p < .01$. 
Profile of violence

![Bar chart showing rate of violence by education level of caretakers for minor and severe categories.]

**minor** (fathers): $X^2(3) = 19.43, p < .001$

**minor** (mothers): $X^2(3) = 15.16, p < .01$

**severe** (fathers): $X^2(3) = 13.39, p < .01$

*Figure 3. Violence by Education of the Caretakers.*

(1984) and NCCAN (1988) data, but consistent with Gelles 1975 profile (1980). Males 0–17 years old were victims of physical punishment about 10% more than their female peers ($p < .001$). Male children were victims of abusive violence almost 35% more than female children ($p < .01$).

The age of the referent child showed a curvilinear pattern for both Minor and Severe Violence. Table 7 indicates that teens are the least likely to be victims of Minor Violence, experiencing less than half as much physical punishment as preschoolers ($p < .001$). The preschoolers were victims of abusive violence at least 1.5 times as much as were infants/toddlers and teens ($p < .001$).

**Table 5. Rates of Violence (Per 1,000 Children) by Employment Status of Mother and Father**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status of Mother</th>
<th>Minor</th>
<th>Severe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time ($n = 1347$)</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time (478)</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed (275)</td>
<td>654</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired (19)</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife (936)</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (92)</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status of Father</th>
<th>Minor*</th>
<th>Severe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time ($n = 2451$)</td>
<td>617</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time (74)</td>
<td>719</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed (93)</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired (43)</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (88)</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $X^2(4) = 13.11, p < .05$. 
Table 6. Rates of Violence (Per 1,000 Children) by Blue Collar/White Collar Caretakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Employment</th>
<th>Minor $^a$</th>
<th>Severe $^b$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue Collar (n = 1089/1526)</td>
<td>647/636</td>
<td>117/131 $^c$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Collar (n = 1527)</td>
<td>513/605</td>
<td>36/64 $^c$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$ mother/fathers.  
$^b$ x$^2$(2) = 17.13, p < .001.

A Summary Profile of Punishment and Severe Violence

The previous discussion examined the relationship between individual social and demographic factors with physical punishment and severe violence. This section examines the combined effects of these individual variables. To summarize the social and demographic risk factors for both minor and severe violence, we constructed two violence checklists. Each checklist is a unit weighted frequency count for the variables that may be associated with punishment and severe violence (Table 8).

![Histogram 1](image1.png)  
**minor**: $X^2(2)=5.67$, $p=.059$

![Histogram 2](image2.png)  
**minor**: $X^2(1)=16.51$, $p<.001$  
**severe**: $X^2(1)=4.93$, $p<.05$  

Figure 4. Violence by Alcohol and Substance Use of Respondent.
Table 7. Rates of Violence (Per 1,000 Children) by Gender and Age of Child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of child</th>
<th>Minor*</th>
<th>Severe**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female (n = 1600)</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (1610)</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* \( \chi^2(1) = 12.39, p < .001 \)

\* \( \chi^2(1) = 8.52, p < .01 \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of child</th>
<th>Minor*</th>
<th>Severe**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–2 years (n = 567)</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–6 (740)</td>
<td>891</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–12 (771)</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13–17 (1149)</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* \( \chi^2(3) = 566.57, p < .001 \)

\* \( \chi^2(3) = 20.51, p < .001 \)

The construction of the checklists involved four steps. (Missing data were replaced using sample means for the variable for both the discriminant function analyses and the logistic regression analysis used to construct the checklists). The first step was to enter the variables, recoded as reported in the univariate analysis (above), into a stepwise discriminant function analysis (DFA) using Wilks’ criteria and forward entry. The dependent variables were the dichotomized minor and severe violence indexes. The assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance-covariance were not tested. In addition, we used some categorical variables.

Table 8. Minor and Severe Violence Checklists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Minor Violence Checklist</th>
<th>Severe Violence Checklist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age child</td>
<td>3–6 years</td>
<td>Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age respondant</td>
<td>18–37 years</td>
<td>Gender child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>2–4 children</td>
<td>Number children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of child</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>White, Black</td>
<td>Gender respondant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender respondant</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Drug use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug use</td>
<td>used ≥1X/yr</td>
<td>Years in community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beta Weight</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Beta Weight</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.6878</td>
<td>.7696</td>
<td>.5588</td>
<td>.5657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.4745</td>
<td>.6341</td>
<td>.5550</td>
<td>.5618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.2453</td>
<td>.3137</td>
<td>.4592</td>
<td>.4583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.2233</td>
<td>.1502</td>
<td>.3447</td>
<td>.3470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.1478</td>
<td>.1121</td>
<td>.0724</td>
<td>.1723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.1246</td>
<td>.1244</td>
<td>.0664</td>
<td>.2211</td>
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<tr>
<td>.0004</td>
<td>.2090</td>
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\( ^a \) Standardized canonical discriminate function coefficients.

\( ^b \) Pooled within-groups correlations between discriminating variables and canonical discriminate functions (i.e., correlation between the variable and the linear combination).

\( ^c \) Standardized canonical discriminate function coefficients.

\( ^d \) Pooled within-groups correlations between discriminating variables and canonical discriminate functions (i.e., correlation between the variable and the linear combination).
as this procedure was not used to predict category membership, but rather to select the best possible variables for the checklist. Because of problems with comparing categorical variables in logistic regressions, we chose to use DFA as the beta weights are directly interpretable. The second step was to dichotomize the best predictors around the category or categories that demonstrated the highest rates. Third, we entered the newly recorded variables into another DFA and only those variables that were retained after the third step were selected for use in a checklist. Finally, two new variables were created for each respondent that was the sum of the number of high risk items they had for both minor and severe checklist items. These sums represent the minor and severe violence checklists.

The high-risk categories of the selected checklist variables are: Minor Violence: caretaker female, caretaker 18 to 37 years of age, caretaker White or Black, caretaker has lived in community less than 14 years, caretaker reports using marijuana or some other drug, male child, child 3-6 years old, two to four children in the home; Severe Violence: male child, caretaker Black, caretaker reports using marijuana or some other drug, father has some high school education or has graduated high school, four to six children in the home.

The checklists were analyzed for three attributes: (a) any trend in number of items to rate of violence; (b) predictive ability of the variables included in the checklist; and, (c) predictive ability of the checklists. The last two analyses used logistic regression. (Logistic regression is appropriate when: (a) The dependent variable is dichotomous; (b) the independent variables are either continuous or categorical; (c) prediction of the dependent variable [i.e., category membership] is desired, and (d) the assumptions of multivariate normality and homogeneity of variance-covariance are, by definition, not strictly met [Norusis, 1990; Hosmer & Lemeshow, 1989]).

Figures 5 and 6 summarize the checklists for minor and severe violence, respectively. Both figures indicate that individuals with the greatest number of checklist items (i.e., risk factors) have the highest rates of minor and severe violence. In addition, the checklists for each form of violence are slightly different, with some factors being related to minor but not severe violence, and vice versa.

Although there is a clear trend that the risk of violence increases with more risk factors, neither the minor violence checklist nor the severe violence checklist is an appropriate predictor of punishment or abusive violence. One reason for this is that the logistic regression equations for the variables and the checklists failed to meet the goodness-of-fit criteria for accurate prediction. Furthermore, the combination of a low base rate behavior (e.g., severe violence) and an imperfect predictor leads to a potentially high rate of false positives (deciding abuse when there is no abuse). Therefore, the checklists should not be used in clinical settings for assessment and diagnosis, other than to identify groups for which more detailed inquiry into conflict resolution is warranted. However, the checklists are useful summary indexes of how combinations of social and demographic variables are associated with elevated risks of punishment and abusive violence.

DISCUSSION

This paper examined the profile of physical punishment and abusive violence towards children. The profile of abusive violence towards children in 1985 was:

Region: East
Length of residence: less than one year
Number of children: five
Gender of caretaker: female
Age of caretaker: 18–27
Race: Black
Income: below the poverty line
Education: some high school
Employment status: unemployed
Type of employment of father: Blue Collar
Drug use: yes
Gender of child: male
Age of child: 3 to 6 years old.

There were no important differences found for the size of community, religious affiliation, or alcohol use.

Patterns of Change

Some important changes have surfaced between the profiles generated from the data of the two National Family Violence Surveys. In 1975, the Midwest was the region with the highest rate of abusive violence; in 1985, it was the East. While city dwellers were the most abusive a decade earlier, the 1985 survey revealed no differences between the inner city and rural areas.

A second change pertains to race and religion. The 1975 profile indicated that the residual "other" category of respondents were the most abusive for both race and religion. In 1985, Blacks and Whites were highest and there were no differences based on religious affiliation.

The third change between the two profiles is that in 1975, fathers who were high school graduates had the highest rates of abusive violence, while in 1985 fathers with some high school education or who were high school graduates had the highest rates of severe violence.

The last notable change is in some of the characteristics of the victims. Preschoolers more
recently have replaced teens as the most likely victims of abusive violence. Boys remain the more likely victims of both minor and severe violence in 1985.

One explanation for these changes can be that the actual profile has changed as a result of social programs, public awareness, and perhaps even a change in the cultural fiber of the U.S. population. An alternative perspective is that sampling factors and methodology are at least partly responsible for the changes. Given the low base rates of some of the behaviors, caution is warranted in discounting the latter explanation.

While some factors have changed between the two profiles, many other factors have remained the same. More than one in ten children were victims of severe violence at the hands of caretakers during both survey years. The rate of abusive violence actually declined from 140/1,000 in 1975 to 110/1,000 in 1985 (Gelles & Straus, 1987). One plausible explanation for this trend is that the proportion of respondents who were reluctant to disclose these actions may have increased in the 10 years between surveys, as a result of increased visibility of efforts to remedy the problem. The decrease could also be real and the explanations for a real decline are discussed in Gelles and Straus, 1987. Larger families are still more abusive. The youngest parents are consistently the most abusive caretakers. Additionally, unemployment and underemployment still drive the rates higher. Finally, poorer children remain at the highest risk level.

CONCLUSION

Our data are consistent with a structural social stress model of family violence, where social and economic stressors are positively correlated with abusive violence. The youngest, poorest, most socially isolated and economically frustrated caretakers are the most likely to act violently toward their children.

But, while it is quite clear that certain stressors escalate children's risk, abusive violence crosses all social, racial, religious, educational and financial boundaries, albeit not evenly. Therefore, we prefer to conclude that a psychosocial diathesis-stress model (for more detailed
information, see Goldberger & Breznitz, 1982) is a more parsimonious explanation of abusive violence toward children. That is, socially learned and/or otherwise constitutional predispositions for violence, in combination with adverse or stressful conditions, leads to the display of violent behavior. Our conception of a psychosocial diathesis-stress model grows out of the more traditional use of diatheses-stress models for physical and mental dysfunction, in which a diathesis is any constitutional predisposition (i.e., a trait) for a condition, the signs of which only appear for that individual in the presence of an environmental stressor (see Willerman & Cohen, 1990). An example of this model is an allergy to dust, where an individual will not sneeze or have other typically allergic signs unless they have a predisposition for the allergic response and they are placed in close proximity to dust. Since we know that violence, as a response to conflict, can be socially learned (and unlearned), we regard the predisposition to respond to stress with violence as a diathesis-like phenomenon.

The potential for acting abusively is present in many individuals in Western society, but to varying degrees as result of social learning. Social or psychosocial stresses only exacerbate those tendencies and beliefs, and result in violent attempts to resolve social conflicts. This model both accounts for why abusive violence transcends economic, racial, gender and age boundaries, and also why it is more common in some parts of the population than in others (e.g., economically disadvantaged).

A second conclusion is that the multivariate analysis of the factors related to punishment and severe violence revealed slightly different patterns. Drug use by the caretaker and male children as the targets of aggression were consistent for both punishment and severe violence. However, abusive parents were more likely to be Black and have four to six children at home. Similarly, abusive fathers had either some high school education or were high school graduates, while education did not predict punishment for either gender caretaker or for abusive violence for mothers. On the other hand, length of residence in the community, age of caretaker, having two to four children at home, male caretakers, and White and Black caretakers were the risk factors for punishment, but not good predictors of severe violence. The multivariate analysis suggests that abusive violence may be a distinct behavior and not simply part of a continuum of violence toward children.

In summary, we urge advocates and lawmakers to concentrate limited prevention and intervention resources in those communities with the highest risks for abusive violence. But, educational and other prevention programs for diminishing the use of physical punishment should be aimed at the overall population as the higher base rate of physical punishment suggests that these programs should be targeted toward a broad audience.

REFERENCES


Resumen—Este trabajo presenta un perfil de la violencia contra los niños en los Estados Unidos, basado en los resultados de la Segunda Encuesta Nacional de Violencia Familiar. En 1985 se encuestó por teléfono una muestra probabilística de 6,002 hogares, de los que 3,232 viviendo en la casa. Entre los madres lo más común era la violencia menor o el castigo físico, los que cuidaban los niños medios, los padres estaban desempleados, los hogares tenían 2 a 4 niños en la casa, entre los cuidadores los que usaban alcohol y otras drogas, niños varones, y niños de 3 a 6 años de edad. Las tasas más altas de violencia abusiva ocurrieron en familias localizadas en el Este, familias con un ingreso anual por debajo de la línea de pobreza, familias donde el padre estaba desempleado, familias donde lo que cuidaban a los niños se desempeñaban como técnicos medios, familias con 4 o más hijos, entre persona al cuidado de los niños que habían usado drogas por lo menos una vez, niños varones, y niños de 3 a 6 años de edad. Se realizaron las regresiones logísticas para examinar el valor predictivo de estas variables.