Social Change and the Trends in Approval of Corporal Punishment by Parents from 1968 to 1994

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1 Introduction

Corporal punishment of children by parents, such as spanking and slapping, has been an almost universal part of the childhood experience of American children. Research up to about 1980 shows that more than 90% of parents used corporal punishment on toddlers, and just over half continued this into the early teen years (Straus, 1994; Straus & Donnelly, 1993). Since then the rate has decreased, but it is still extremely high (Daro & Gelles, 1992; Straus, 1994). When a behavior is this prevalent, there is likely to be a set of social norms that encourage or at least legitimate it. Correspondingly, if structural changes in the society bring about a change in the behavior, cultural norms are likely to be recast to reflect and justify the new reality, as happened, for example, in the case of paid employment of middle-class mothers. Regardless of which occurs first, and despite many exceptions, over time, cultural norms and actual behavior tend toward consistency.

A major structural change in American society has been the shift toward a postindustrial economic system. Employment in manufacturing has declined drastically, as has the demand for unskilled manual workers. There is an increasing demand for professional, technical, and clerical workers. These are positions that, at a minimum, demand literacy and computational skills. A large proportion of these jobs also demand interpersonal and managerial skills. Kohn and others (Kohn, 1969; Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Straus, 1971) have argued that corporal punishment is inconsistent with the maximization of interpersonal and managerial skills. Consistent with that, Straus and Mathur (1994) found that corporal punishment was linked to a lowered probability of college graduation. Moreover, of those who did graduate from college, Gimpel and Straus (1992) found that corporal punishment decreased the probability of being in the top fifth of the U.S. occupation/income distribution. Kohn (1969) suggests that parents who expect their child to attend college and be employed in nonmanual work occupations tend to avoid using corporal punishment, and thus provide anticipatory socialization for social roles in which what is needed is information and negotiation skills rather than physical strength and compliance with the rigid routines of the assembly line. To the extent that this is correct, the norms and practices of American and other postindustrial societies should be moving away from use of corporal punishment in childrearing.
1.1 Cultural Norms Supporting Corporal Punishment

Although cultural norms supporting corporal punishment of children may be changing, there is abundant evidence that these norms are deeply rooted and pervasive (Greven, 1991; Straus, 1994). One of the most fundamental ways in which cultural norms supporting corporal punishment are expressed is in the criminal law on assault. In every state of the U.S., hitting a child for purposes of correction or control is exempt from the crime of assault, usually with the proviso that it is limited to "reasonable force." In practice, that includes the right to hit with belts and paddles, provided the child is not injured.

In the 1960s, every state in the US passed legislation designed to protect children from physical abuse and to provide services for abused children. Ironically, in order to garner sufficient votes to pass the child abuse laws, it was typically necessary to include a provision declaring that parents continued to have the right to use corporal punishment. As a result, legislation intended to protect children from physical abuse contained provisions that further legitimated a practice that increases the risk of physical abuse (Straus & Yodanis, cited in Straus, 1994).

Cultural norms supporting corporal punishment may also be observed through public opinion surveys asking respondents whether they approve of spanking. A 1968 survey commission by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence found that 94% of the population approved of spanking a child who misbehaves (Stark & McEvoy, 1970). The normative support for corporal punishment goes well beyond mere permission to hit children. It is a morally correct action, and parents who do not use corporal punishment are often thought of as bad parents who's children will "grow up wild." Carson (1986) found that nonspanking parents come under considerable pressure to spank from relatives, friends, and neighbors.

1.2 Trends in Approval of Corporal Punishment

A number of surveys of attitudes toward spanking have been done since the late 1960s. All have found very high rates of approval; the percentage who approve of spanking has varied considerably from study to study. However, for the most part, these studies cannot be compared to determine if there has been a change in support for corporal punishment, because the questions used are so different. In addition, several different and noncomparable types of populations have been surveyed. For example, a 1975 survey of a national sample of parents found that 77% believed that slapping or spanking a 12-year-old who misbehaved is normal and necessary (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). The 1986 General Social Survey found that 84% percent agreed that "It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good hard spanking" (Lehman, 1989). A survey of pediatricians found that 77% supported use of corporal punishment (White, 1993).

Although the studies just cited cannot be compared to determine trends in cultural norms concerning corporal punishment, there is evidence that actual use of corporal punishment is decreasing (Daro & Gelles, 1992; Straus, 1994). Such a change is also consistent with the theory that parents tend to socialize children in
ways that will help them fit into the social environment that the parent perceives the child will experience as an adult, and specifically, as indicated above, a postindustrial society. Both the actual changes in use of corporal punishment and the presumed underlying changes in the social structure, make it seem likely that there has also been a corresponding change in cultural norms. A decrease in approval of spanking was therefore the first of the two hypotheses tested. This hypothesis could be tested because we were able to acquire data files for seven studies that used identical or similar questions to determine approval of corporal punishment. Moreover, all seven studied nationally representative samples of adults.

1.3 Definition of Corporal Punishment

Most surveys, including the surveys analyzed for this paper, operationalized corporal punishment by asking whether the respondent approves of "spanking." If one takes this literally, then the present papers are about spanking, that is, hitting a child on the buttocks. However, many parents use "spanking" to mean any form of corporal punishment that is not severe enough to be classified as physical abuse. Thus, one mother who had slapped her child's hand during the course of the interview, told the interviewer "Sometimes, spanking is the only way to stop him." We believe that most of the respondents in the surveys we analyzed used corporal punishment as a general term to refer not just to spanking, but also to other legal and socially permissible forms of corporal punishment. Consequently, to reflect the broader meaning that we think our respondents intended, we shall often refer to the data analyzed in this paper as "approval of corporal punishment." A detailed conceptual analysis of corporal punishment is given in Straus (1994). For purposes of this paper, we define corporal punishment as:

An act by a parent or other caretaker that is intended to cause physical pain, but not injury, for purposes of correction or control.

1.4 Group Differences in Approval of Corporal Punishment

The second purpose of the study was to examine whether different socio-cultural groups in American society differ in support of corporal punishment, and if there are differences between groups in the trend over the 26 year period of this study. The evidence on this issue is contradictory. Flynn (1994) analyzed the 1988 General Social Survey and found that approval of corporal punishment varies among different regions of the United States. The West, Midwest, or the South had more favorable attitudes to corporal punishment than the Northeast. Flynn also found that blacks are more likely than whites to favor spanking, and that low education, being male, and being young are also more likely to approve of corporal punishment. However, the 1968 survey by Stark and McEvoy (1970) found no difference on any of these variables. The fact that Flynn found differences between regional and other groups, and Stark and McEvoy did not, is puzzling since both were national surveys. Therefore, one of the objectives of the
study was to reexamine these group differences. With seven different surveys available, it might be possible to uncover the reason or reasons for the discrepancy. However, for purposes of the statistical analysis, the second hypothesis predicts no statistically significant difference between socio-cultural groups and no difference between groups in the trend from 1968 to 1994.

2 Method

2.1 The Samples

2.1.1 Merged Data Set
To carry out the study, we merged data from seven different surveys into a single data file. The year of each survey was one of the variables in this merged file. In order to do this, the data sets had to be edited to make the variable names, variable labels, and coding system identical. The merged data set and the statistical analyses were carried out using the program SPSS/PC. The merged file has an $N$ of 6,794. Each of the surveys in the merged file is described below.

1968 National Violence Survey
The 1968 National Violence Survey was designed by Rodney Stark and James McEvoy III. The survey was conducted by the National Family Violence Commission. Louis Harris Associates carried out face-to-face interviews with a national probability sample of persons age 18 and over ($N = 1,160$). Additional information on the survey may be found in Stark and McEvoy (1970), the Commission Reports (1969), and in Owens and Straus (1975). The data file used for this paper was obtained from the Interuniversity Consortium For Political And Social Research at the University of Michigan.

1986-1991 General Social Surveys
The General Social Survey (GSS) is a yearly omnibus survey of a national probability sample of persons 18 and over (Davis & Smith, 1992). Each year had the following number of cases: 1986 $N = 1,460$; 1988: $N = 978$; 1989: $N = 994$; 1990: $N = 917$ and 1991: $N = 283$. The 1987 GSS survey was not included in the study because it lacked questions concerning corporal punishment of children by parents.

1994 Gallup Survey
This survey was designed by David Moore and Murray A. Straus. The survey was conducted in January 1994 by the Gallup Organization using telephone interviews. The subjects were a national probability sample of persons age 18 and over ($N = 1,002$). Additional information on this survey may be obtained from the Gallup Organization.
Comparability of Surveys
The three surveys differ on several characteristics: the size of the sample (from 283 to 4,632 per year) the method of interviewing (face-to-face vs. telephone), the organization conducting the survey, and the context in which the approval of violence questions were asked (a survey on violence, an omnibus survey, and a political opinion survey). The confounding of the year of the survey with these differences raises questions about the appropriateness of analyzing them as a single data set. In addition, as explained below, the question on approval of corporal punishment was slightly different in 1968. However, as will be shown, the findings follow consistent pattern over time, which suggests that the findings are probably not the result of confounding with one or more of the differences just discussed.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Approval of Corporal Punishment
The following question was asked in the five General Social Surveys and the 1994 Gallup Survey: "Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree that it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good hard spanking?". A somewhat different question was used in the 1968 National Violence Survey which asked: "Are there any situations that you can imagine in which you would approve of a parent spanking his or her child assuming the child is healthy and over a year old?" Respondents in this survey could answer only Yes or No rather than a give a four category response. In order to make all seven surveys more congruent, the General Social Survey and Gallup Survey answers were dichotomized by combining Strongly Agree and Agree into Agree, and combining Disagree and Strongly Disagree into Disagree.

2.2.2 Independent Variables
The year in which the survey was conducted was the independent variable for testing the hypothesis concerning changes in approval of corporal punishment by parents. The variables to investigate group differences in approval of corporal punishment were the race of the respondent, the region the respondent lived in, and the gender of the respondent. Control variables for age, income, and education were also included in the form of Z scores. The data for these three variables were transformed to Z scores before creating the merged data set. This was necessary because the various studies used different class intervals to code the data. Z scores makes them comparable in the sense that all express the score for each respondent as the number of standard deviations above or below the mean of all respondents in that survey.
2.3 Statistical Analysis

2.3.1 ANCOVA

The hypotheses were tested using a 7 x 2 x 3 x 4 analysis of covariance with three covariates. The seven category variable is year (1968, 1986, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1994), the two category variable is gender of the respondent, the three category variable is race (Euro-American, African-American, Other), and the four category variable is region (North East, North Central, South, West). The three covariates are age, income, and education.

The six sociodemographic factors in the analysis enable us to test the hypothesis that these groups do not differ significantly in approval of corporal punishment. In addition, their inclusion addresses the question of whether trends in approval of corporal punishment reflect a change in cultural norms per se, or a change in the demographic structure of American society. For example, the average age of the population has been increasing. If people aged 18 to 25 are more favorable to corporal punishment, the overall level of approval could decrease because there are fewer people in that age group, even though there might be no change in the extent to which 18- to 25-year-olds approve of corporal punishment. Thus, if the hypothesized decrease is found after controlling for these six demographic variables, it is plausible to infer that the decrease reflects a change in cultural norms rather than a change in demographic composition.

Figure 1. PERCENT APPROVING SPANKING

![Graph showing percent approving spanking over time](image-url)
Figure 1 shows an overall decrease in approval of corporal punishment from 1968 to 1994. The black bars show the rate of approval after adjusting for overlap with the six demographic variables. The gray bars are the unadjusted rate. Both bars reveal a decrease from 1968 to 1994, despite some minor deviations from this overall downward trend in 1990 and 1994. Table 1 shows that the relationship between year and approval of corporal punishment is significant at the .001 level.

As noted previously, the corporal punishment question in the 1968 survey was somewhat different than the question used from 1986 on. The extremely high rate of approval of corporal punishment in 1968 may be partly due to the wording of the question that year. But since the pattern continues down at about the same rate per year, from 1986 on, the rate shown in Figure 1 for 1986 may be correct.

Table 1: Analysis of Covariance of Approval of Corporal Punishment (N = 8,477)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Variation</th>
<th>Regr. Coef.</th>
<th>Sum of squares</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Signif. of F</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main Effects</td>
<td>574,435.808</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>47,869.651</td>
<td>32.447</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Year</td>
<td>361,073.162</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60,178.860</td>
<td>40.790</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>53,834.017</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>53,834.017</td>
<td>36.489</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnic</td>
<td>55,619.047</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27,809.524</td>
<td>18.850</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>66,280.103</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22,093.368</td>
<td>14.975</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2-way Interactions</td>
<td>175,211.069</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3,727.895</td>
<td>2.527</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Year gender</td>
<td>43,286.514</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7,214.419</td>
<td>4.890</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Year ethnic</td>
<td>19,565.840</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1,630.487</td>
<td>1.105</td>
<td>.350</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Year region</td>
<td>67,693.330</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3,760.741</td>
<td>2.549</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Covariates</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>23,706.706</td>
<td>16.069</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.783</td>
<td>7,426.471</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7,426.471</td>
<td>5.034</td>
<td>.025</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.122</td>
<td>148.161</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>148.161</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td>.751</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educ</td>
<td>-.306</td>
<td>48,973.442</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>48,973.442</td>
<td>33.195</td>
<td>.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explained</td>
<td>820,766.994</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>13,238.177</td>
<td>8.973</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Residual</td>
<td>9,346,222.690</td>
<td>6,335</td>
<td>1,475.331</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10,166,989.684</td>
<td>6,397</td>
<td>1,589.337</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Year = Year of the study  
Gender = Gender of respondent (0 = Male, 1 = Female)  
Ethnic = Ethnic group of respondent (1 = Euro-American 2 = African-American 3 = Other)  
Region = Region of respondent: Four census regions  
Age = Age of respondent, z score, 5 categories  
Income = Income of respondent, z score, 5 categories  
Educ = Education of respondent, z score

In view of the deeply embedded nature of the belief that corporal punishment is sometimes necessary, and the clear legal and informal norms approving use of corporal punishment, the decrease of 26 percentage points from the high of 94% in 1968 to 68% in 1994 is a remarkable cultural change. Since controlling for changes in the demographic composition of the population made no difference in
the downward trend, it seems likely that the decrease represents a change in culture rather than a change in demographics.

3.2 Group Differences

Since adjusting the rate of approval of corporal punishment made no important difference, the graphs showing differences in trends by gender, race, and region show the original data, that is they are not adjusted for covariates or other independent variables. However, the tests of significance in Table 1 take these factors into account.

3.2.1 Gender

The row for Gender in the Main Effects part of Table 1 shows that the difference between men and women in approval of corporal punishment is statistically significant. Examination of the rates themselves shows that although the difference is significant, it is not very large: 83% of men approved of corporal punishment compared to 76% of women.

Figure 2. GENDER OF RESPONDENT AND APPROVAL OF SPANKING

Figure 2 shows that approval of corporal punishment decreased for both men and women. However, the $F$ test in Table 1 for the interaction of year and gender is significant. Examination of Figure 2 reveals the nature of the interaction effect: In 1968 slightly more women than men approved of corporal punishment (95% vs. 92%). However, by 1994 this had reversed and fewer women than men approved of corporal punishment (61% vs. 76% of men). Thus the effect of year on approval of corporal punishment to some degree depends upon whether the
respondent is a man or woman. Men have held on to the old values concerning corporal punishment somewhat more than women.

3.2.2 Race
Respondents were divided into three ethnic categories: Euro-American, African-American, and Other. The row labeled ETHNIC in Table 1 shows that the difference between ethnic groups in approval of corporal punishment is significant at the .001 level. The highest rate of approval is for African-Americans (91%) followed by Euro-Americans (90%), and the lowest approval percentage is for the Other category (78%).

Trends for each ethnic group are shown in Figure 3. It shows large decreases in approval of corporal punishment for both Euro-Americans and Others over the 26 year period. African-Americans clearly do not follow the same trend. African-American respondents decreased in their approval of corporal punishment only 14 percentage points over the same period, whereas Euro-Americans and Others decreased about twice that amount (32 percentage points for Euro-Americans and 26 percentage points for the Other category). As a result of the nearly identical pattern for the Euro-American and Other groups, the $F$-test for Ethnic Group, shown in Table 1, does not reach an acceptable level of significance. However, since Figure 3 clearly shows that the decrease in approval of corporal punishment was much less among African-Americans than the rest of the population, it seemed appropriate to retest the hypothesis after combining Euro-Americans and Others into a single category. The results from that
ANCOVA showed a significant interaction of Year with Ethnic Group ($F = 2.99$, $p = .03$).

3.2.3 Region
The row for Region in the Main Effects part of Table 1 shows that there is a significant difference between regions in approval of corporal punishment. The region of the United States with the largest percentage approving corporal punishment is the South. The regions with the lowest rate of approval of corporal punishment are the North East and the West. The approval rates for the four regions are: 75% in the North East, 77% in the West, 81% in the North Central, and 85% in the South.

![Figure 4. REGION OF RESPONDENT AND APPROVAL OF SPANKING](image)

The trend lines in Figure 4 show that respondents from all four regions decreased in approval of corporal punishment over the 26 years of this study. However, respondents from the South generally had the highest rate of approval of corporal punishment at each time point and decreased less than the other regions form 1968 to 1984. The North East started out in 1968 as having basically the same percent approval of corporal punishment as the South. By 1994, however, the North East was approximately 17 percentage points lower than the South in approval of corporal punishment. The North East decreased a total of 35 percentage points from 1968 to 1994, whereas the South decreased only 21 percentage points during the same time interval. The regions thus grew more different from each other in the proportion approving corporal punishment mainly because the South did not decrease as much as other regions. These differences between regions in trends are reflected in the significant $F$ test for the interaction of year and region in Table 1.
3.2.4 Age
Age was included in the ANCOVA as a covariate rather than an independent variable because including age as an additional independent variable would have resulted in many empty cells. The row for AGE in Table 1 shows that age is significantly associated with greater approval of corporal punishment.

Table 1, however, cannot provide information on whether the trend from 1968 to 1994 was the same for all age groups. To investigate trends by age of the respondent, and also trends by income and by education (the other two covariates), we computed an analysis of variance with these three variables categorized so that they could be used as blocks in the design. The other independent variables were year of the study, gender of the respondent and region. We classified the age of the respondents into quintiles. The results for age were again significant ($F = 4.067, p = .003$), but inspection of the approval rates for the four age groups showed that the differences are not large: the maximum difference between any two age groups is only 6%. As for trends, inspection of the trends within each of the five age groups showed that all five followed the general downward trend over the 26-year period.

3.2.4 Income
There was no significant relationship found between income and approval of corporal punishment, and all five age groups followed a similar downward trend in approval of corporal punishment from 1968 to 1994.

3.2.5 Education
For purposes of examining trends within educational groups, the respondents were classified into four groups: more than one $SD$ (standard deviation) below the mean, up to one $SD$ below the mean, up to one $SD$ above the mean, and more than one $SD$ above the mean. The results of the ANOVA show that with increasing amounts of education, there is a consistent decrease in approval of corporal punishment. This relationship between education and approval of corporal punishment is significant at the .001 level ($F = 12.632$). The percent approving corporal punishment for the four educational groups are: 75% (highest education), 80%, 82%, and 84% (lowest education).

All educational groups decreased in approval of corporal punishment over the 26-year period, but the highest education group decreased at a faster rate. In 1968, the highest educational group had about the same level of approval as the other educational groups (the rates in 1968 ranged from 95% (highest education), 97%, 93% to 88% (lowest education)). However, by 1994, the highest education group had a somewhat lower rate of approval than the other education groups: The rates in 1994 ranged from 64% (highest education group), 69%, 72% to 68% (lowest education group). Although the larger decrease for the highest education group is important, all education groups decreased, and the differences between education groups in 1994 are not large.
4 Discussion

A 1968 national survey found that 94% of the U.S. population approved of spanking by parents. Except for the obligation to provide for the basic needs of a child, it is hard to think of any other aspect of childrearing on which there was or is such consensus. However, as argued in the introduction, corporal punishment interferes with children acquiring the skills and values needed for advancement in the labor market of a postindustrial society. This assumption, together with studies that found a decrease in use of corporal punishment by parents in recent years (Daro & Gelles, 1992; Straus, 1994) led to the hypothesis that cultural norms supporting use of corporal punishment have eroded. The findings from the analysis of national surveys from 1968 to 1994 reported in this paper confirm that hypothesis. The percent of the U.S. population who approve of corporal punishment declined over the 26 year period from 94% in 1968 to 68%.

4.1 Decline in Consensus

The findings also show that within this general decrease there are differences in the rate of decrease that have altered the former normative consensus on the necessity of corporal punishment. The decline in approval of corporal punishment has been greater in certain parts of the population and smaller in others. These differences have produced a widening gulf in attitudes toward the appropriateness of spanking children. For example, although the South decreased in approval since 1968, the decrease was smaller than in other regions of the United States, so that by 1994 the South was more favorable to corporal punishment than other regions. Similarly, approval of corporal punishment by African-Americans declined less than in other ethnic groups. As a result, norms supporting corporal punishment are now stronger among African-Americans than other ethnic groups. Also, approval of corporal punishment by men has decreased less than approval by women. Therefore, men have emerged as being more approving than women.

Similarly, approval of corporal punishment has declined less for people with lower education and for older age groups. As a result, less educated and older people are now more approving of corporal punishment than better educated or younger persons. These differences in the rate of change have resulted in a greater differentiation in norms between different sectors of American society.

4.2 The Backlash

A decrease from 94% approval of corporal punishment to 68% is a major social change, as is the decrease in consensus on this aspect of childrearing. A change in a normative principle as deeply embedded as the idea that corporal punishment is necessary to properly socialize the next generation is likely to be threatening to many. This may be one of the reasons for the "backlash" against child protective service agencies that have responsibility for enforcing the legislation intended to protect children from physical and other abuse. An example of the backlash is the
legislation before the Florida legislature in the spring of 1994. It would have prohibited child protective services from ruling that a child had been abused if the only evidence was that the parents used corporal punishment and the child exhibited welts or bruises. The bill was passed overwhelmingly but was vetoed by the governor. However, the reason for the veto was not a disagreement with the purpose of the bill; it was because the governor believed it would create administrative problems (Gainsville Sun, 7/24/94, p. 1; Miami Herald, 5/7/94, p. IA).

4.3 Policy Implications

The backlash and the widening gulf between socioeconomic status groups in respect to corporal punishment is a source of concern. Ignoring these problems could interfere with the transition to new norms that prohibit rather than require corporal punishment. It could exacerbate class and race conflict if efforts to end corporal punishment are seen as an attempt to control and limit the lives of the underprivileged. Such a perception would be ironic because of the evidence suggesting violent socialization in the form of frequent use of corporal punishment reduces the probability of upward social mobility (Gimpel & Straus, 1992; Straus & Mathur, 1994). To help avoid either extreme - failing to take steps to end a practice that harms children and the society, or the perception of cultural imperialism - it is essential that educational programs to reduce corporal punishment among disadvantaged groups be designed and implemented by members of those groups.

Despite the recent backlash, approval of corporal punishment by parents has decreased drastically since 1968. A related change is occurring in corporal punishment in schools. In the 40-year period from 1940 to 1980, only four states made the practice illegal. Since 1980, such legislation has been passed at an accelerating rate, so that by 1993, just over half the states of the U.S. prohibited corporal punishment in the schools (Hyman, 1990). The decrease in the rate of approval and actual use of corporal punishment by parents, together with the dramatic decrease in the number of states that permit corporal punishment in schools is encouraging given the evidence that corporal punishment is no more effective than other methods of discipline for young children, that it is less effective than other methods with older children, and that it increases the probability of many harmful side effects (Straus, 1994). Among the harmful side effects are a greater risk of the child being violent and delinquent and engaging in crime as an adult (Straus, 1991, 1994), and decreased probability of upward social mobility. Moreover, the greater adherence to corporal punishment by low socioeconomic status groups suggests that the shift away from corporal punishment among the majority, and the lesser change among low socioeconomic status groups, is likely to have important consequences for social stratification: children of the majority are likely to suffer fewer psychological problems, and that will facilitate their occupational success; whereas children of the minority who continue to be frequent users of corporal punishment are likely to suffer still further impediments to their ability to be upwardly mobile, and social class differences are therefore likely to increase.
4.4 Legislative Approaches

Legislation to prohibit spanking or other form of corporal punishment was enacted in Sweden in 1979. It is important to note that this legislation does not include a criminal penalty. It is purely for purposes of educating and assisting parents. Since then the other Scandinavian countries and Austria have enacted legislation prohibiting corporal punishment by parents. However, in the United States, even among those who are opposed to corporal punishment, all but a few doubt the possibility of such legislation for many years. Moreover, there is a fear that attempts to enact a no-spanking law at this point would further exacerbate the backlash. But social change is notoriously difficult to predict. Although the decrease in normative support for corporal punishment has not yet progressed far enough to have the issue raised in any of the 50 state legislatures of the U.S., the time may be closer than either the critics or the advocates of legislation believe. If the trends described in this paper continue, the United States may not be far from the day when state legislatures in the United States will be considering laws that are almost the opposite of the Florida legislation mentioned above, that is legislation to prohibit corporal punishment by parents. Such legislation can contribute to the well-being of children, and also contribute to reducing social inequality by avoiding the impaired opportunity for social mobility that occurs when lower socioeconomic status groups socialize their children using corporal punishment.

Note

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References


