TRENDS IN PHYSICAL ABUSE BY PARENTS FROM 1975 TO 1992: A COMPARISON OF THREE NATIONAL SURVEYS

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Abstract

A previous paper reported a decrease between 1975 and 1985 in physical abuse by parents. Critics suggested that the purported decrease in physical abuse might be an artifact of methodological limitations, including: (1) Use of telephone interviews for the 1985 survey, whereas the 1975 survey was face-to-face. (2) Failure to control for differences in social class, ethnicity, age, and other socioeconomic characteristics. (3) Change in willingness to disclose to the interviewer rather than a change in actual violence. Analysis of a third national survey, conducted in 1992, found that the rate of physical abuse continued to decrease. The findings are unlikely to be due to a change in interview method because both the 1992 and 1975 surveys used face-to-face interviews. The decrease is also not likely to be due to changes in the demographic composition of the three samples because the analysis controlled for age, socioeconomic status, and ethnic composition. Part of the decrease in physical abuse probably results from a reduced willingness to report these behaviors. If true, that would represent a significant change in attitudes that may be a necessary precursor to change in actual behavior. However, we believe that part of the decrease we found reflects a decrease in the actual occurrence of violence by parents. Changes in American society which might have produced the decrease in physical abuse are discussed.

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IS VIOLENCE BY PARENTS DECREASING?

An article comparing rates of family violence from the 1975 and 1985 National Family Violence Surveys found that physical abuse of children had decreased substantially (Straus & Gelles, 1986). A lengthy list of changes in American society that could have produced the decrease was discussed. Despite that, a decline in physical abuse during an era when the number of cases dealt with by state child protective agencies was exploding did not seem plausible to many people. Critics such as Egley (1991) and Stocks (1980), and Straus and Gelles themselves, suggested that the purported decrease might really be an artifact of methodological limitations of their analysis. The decrease might reflect one or more of the following:

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Use of telephone interviews for the 1985 survey, whereas the 1975 survey used face to face
Failure to control for difference in the samples in respect to social class, ethnicity, age, and other socioeconomic characteristics.
Change in willingness of parents to report violence against their children rather than a change in actual assaults.

A third national survey in 1992 provided an opportunity to reinvestigate some of these issues in ways that take these alternative explanations into account and the results are reported in this paper. Specifically, the third survey used the same interviewing method as the first survey, and the statistical analysis controlled for change in five demographic variables. The research to be reported tested the hypothesis that the rate of physical abuse by parents continued from 1985 to 1992.

DEFINITION OF PHYSICAL ABUSE

The distinction between corporal punishment and physical abuse is not clear. The child abuse laws passed by all states in the late 1960's usually reaffirm the common law right of parents to use corporal punishment. They define physical abuse as acts which result in injury, or which carry a high risk of injury. However, the child abuse statutes do not specify specific acts. Consequently, as will be reported in the Methods section, we operationalized physical abuse by asking about a list of acts such as kicking and punching a child, which in our judgement, carry a higher risk of injury than do legal forms of corporal punishment such as spanking and slapping a child.

METHOD

Samples

To test this hypothesis, we created a data file that combines cases from three different surveys. Although the surveys differ in a number of ways, all three used the Conflict Tactics Scales (described below) to obtain data on violence by parents. All three also randomly selected either the father or the mother for interview. Thus, in each survey approximately half the respondents are the father of the referent child and half are the mother. When there was more than one child under 18 living at home, all three surveys used a random selection procedure to select one of those children as the "referent child" for the questions on physical abuse.

1975 National Family Violence Survey. This survey was designed by Richard J. Gelles and Murray A. Straus. The sample design and interviewing were done by Response Analysis Corporation. The survey was conducted using face-to-face interviews with a national probability sample of 2,143 persons age 18 and over who were married or cohabiting with a person of the opposite sex. Further information on the survey may be found in Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) and Straus and Gelles (1986, 1990). A data tape and documentation is available from the Interuniversity Consortium For Political And Social Research at the University of Michigan, and a CD ROM version is available from Sociometrics Inc, Palo Alto, California.
1985 National Family Violence Survey. This survey was designed by Richard J. Gelles and Murray A. Straus. The survey was conducted by Louis Harris Associates using telephone interviews. A total of 6,002 persons were interviewed. The sample consisted of two parts: a national probability sample of persons age 18 and over who were married or cohabiting with a person of the opposite sex, and over-samples of married or cohabiting African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and residents of smaller states. Further information on the survey may be found in Straus and Gelles (1986, 1990). A data tape or CD ROM are available from the sources listed above.

1992 National Alcohol and Family Violence Survey. This survey was designed by Glenda Kaufman Kantor. The sampling design and interviewing were carried out by the Institute For Survey Research of Temple University using face-to-face interviews. A total of 1,970 persons were interviewed. The sample consisted of two parts: a national probability sample of persons age 18 and over who were married or cohabiting with a person of the opposite sex, and over-samples of married or cohabiting Hispanic-Americans. Further information on the survey may be found in Kaufman Kantor, Jasinski, & Aldarondo (1994).

Comparability of Surveys. The surveys differ in respect to several characteristics. Some of the differences are characteristics that can be discussed when evaluating the findings, but cannot be statistically controlled. These include the method of interviewing (face-to-face versus telephone), the length of the interview (from 30 to 65 minutes, and the organization conducting the survey. The three surveys also differ in how many and what questions preceded the section on violence by parents. In addition, for Hispanics, the 1975 and 1992 surveys allowed respondents to choose Spanish or English, whereas the 1985 survey was monolingual. There were also the following differences between the three surveys that it was possible to control:

The 1985 survey included single parent families, whereas respondents for the other two surveys were currently married to or cohabiting with a partner of the opposite sex. The 1975 survey questioned the parent about a randomly chosen child between the ages of 3 and 17, whereas the 1985 and 1992 surveys included questions on children from birth through 17. To make the surveys comparable in respect to the universe sampled, the single parent respondents were excluded from the 1985 survey, and parents with a child under 3 were excluded from the 1985 and 1992 surveys.

The 1985 and 1992 surveys over-sampled African-American and Hispanic-American parents, and residents of small states, to provide enough cases for statistically dependable analyses. Weights were used to adjust for these deviations from an equal probability design. The combination of the sample exclusions described in the previous paragraph, and of weights to adjust for over-samples, means that the three surveys represent comparable parts of the U.S. population, and specifically, couples with a child between the ages of 3 and 17 living at home.

It is important to keep in mind that there are different respondents in each survey, i.e. that this is not a panel study in which the same respondents are reinterviewed at three time points. Rather it is what is known as a trend study. In a trend study, the unit for which change is being investigated is not the individual respondents, but a group such as a community, a college, or a nation. Therefore, a valid trend study requires that the samples at each time point be representative of the social unit at that time, such as the three nationally representative samples used for this study. If for example, the ethnic composition of a society changed over time, a panel study following up Time 1 respondents would become
unrepresentative because the Time 2 measurement would not correctly represent the ethnic composition of the population.

**Number of Cases.** The N’s used for the analyses differ depending on which of two levels of physical abuse (described below) is the focus. The N’s are lower for the measure of less severe abuse because that analysis excluded cases in which there was also severe physical abuse. The N’s with complete data on all variables used in the analyses for this paper are 964 in 1975, 2,190 in 1985, and 676 in 1992. The primary reason why these N’s are lower than the overall N’s for the three surveys is that more than half of the respondents did not have a child between 3 and 17 living at home. This is consistent with census data on American household.

**Measures of Physical Abuse**

The Conflict Tactics Scales or CTS (Straus, 1979; 1990; Straus et al., 1995) was used to obtain the data on violence by parents. The introduction to the CTS say that “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 would like you to tell me how often you did it with him/her in the last.” The physical abuse items in the CTS are listed below. The response categories range from Never to More than 20 times in the past year.

**Prevalence.** The prevalence of physical abuse was measured by whether the parent kicked, bit, or punched the child, hit the child with an object, or “beat up” the child, threatened with a knife or gun, or actually used a knife or gun. These acts are classified as physical abuse, even though some of them, such as hitting a child with a belt hairbrush or paddle are legal in every state, because in our judgement they put the child at a high risk of physical injury. Further information on the conceptual basis for this measure of physical abuse, and the similarities and differences relative to legal definitions of physical abuse may be found Straus and Gelles (1986, 1990). The 1985 version of the CTS included an additional physical abuse item (burned or scalded). To make the 1985 measure comparable with the measure used in 1975 and 1992, that item was excluded when the items were combined to form the physical abuse index for this paper.

**Prevalence And Chronicity.** The previous paper on change in family violence from 1975 to 1985 analyzed only changes in the prevalence rate, i.e., the percent of the population who engaged in one or more instances of physical abuse. However, it is also important to know how often such attacks occurred. We therefore computed measures of the chronicity of physical abuse. The chronicity of physical abuse was measured by the mean number of times parents who engaged in physically abusive attacks did so.

**Validity of the CTS.** The CTS has been employed in more than a hundred studies in several countries. The construct validity, reliability, factor structure, and independence from social desirability response set effects, has been demonstrated in research (see Straus, 1979, 1990 for a summary of some of this research). There is comprehensive test manual which includes a bibliography listing more than 400 papers using data obtained by the CTS, and methodological and theoretical evaluations (Straus, 1994), which includes a chapter on use of the CTS to measure physical and psychological abuse of children.
Socioeconomic Status (SES) Index

Each of the three surveys included information on the education and occupation of the wife and the husband and family income. The occupations were coded into Trieman occupational prestige scores (Trieman, 19??). Factor analyses of these five items resulted in a one factor solution for each of the three samples. This factor accounted for ??% of the variance in 1975, ??% in 1985, and ??% in 1992. The factor score index for each year was transformed into a normalized stanine score.

Statistical Analysis

The hypothesis was tested by an ANOVA using study year (1975, 1985, 1992) as one of the independent variables. The analysis included five other independent variables in order to investigate the extent to which the hypothesized changes occurred within subgroups of the population: age of child (classified into four age groups: 3-5, 6-8, 9-12, 13-17); minority ethnic group (1 = minority, 0 = non-Hispanic White); sex of child (1 = girl, 0 = boy); the parent whose use of is measured (1 = mother, 0 = father), and socioeconomic status (1 = low fifth, 2 = middle 60%, 3 = high fifth). In addition to examining the interaction of these five variables with the year of the study, we Finally, since the hypotheses refer to change resulting from differences in the behavior of parents, rather than to change in physical abuse that might have occurred because of change in these five aspects of the demographic composition of the population, we will report means that are adjusted for the five demographic variables.

Comparability With Previously Published Rates

The physical abuse rates for 1975 and 1985 in this article are parallel to, but not identical with, the rates in the article on change from 1975 to 1985 (Straus and Gelles, 1986). The rates differ because the weights used for this paper to adjust for over-samples in the 1985 study were not available when the original article was written. Consequently, the 1975 and 1985 samples were made comparable by removing over-sample cases from the 1985 survey, whereas in the present study, the samples are made comparable by weighting. A second reason the rates differ somewhat from those previously published is because the analysis used multivariate techniques to control for changes in the demographic composition of the sample over the 17 year span of the three surveys and this required excluding cases with missing data one or more of the independent variables.

FINDINGS

(Insert Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2 about here)

Physical Abuse

Main Effect For Study Year. Part A of Table 1 gives the ANOVA analysis for the prevalence of physical abuse. The first row shows that the variable STUDY (i.e. 1975, 1985, 1992) is highly significant. The left half of the solid line in Figure 2 shows that, as reported in an earlier paper (Straus & Gelles, 1986), there was a large decrease in the percent of parents who reported acts classified as physical abuse between 1975 and 1985. That right half of the line for the main effect of study year shows that the downward trend continued between 1985 and 1992.
Main Effects For Demographic Variables. The main effects of the demographic variables are not a key issue because the focus of this paper is on the effect of study year. However, the findings will be briefly mentioned because they may be of interest to some readers. The rows in Part A of Table 1 for the main effects of the demographic variables show that two of the five are significantly related to the prevalence of physical abuse: Mothers had a higher rate of physical abuse than fathers, and younger children were more likely to be abused than older children.

Interaction With Demographic Variables. The rows for the interaction of the demographic variables with STUDY in Part A of Table 1 show that change in the prevalence of physical abuse was contingent on two of the demographic variables. Figure 1 plots the adjusted means for the first of these interaction effects. It shows that physical abuse by mothers decreased much more than by fathers, so that over this 17 year period, the large difference between mothers and fathers that existed in 1975 was almost eliminated. Figure 2 shows that there were differences in the trends in physical abuse for children of different ages. The biggest decrease was for children 6 to 9. Abuse of teenagers did not change at all during the period covered by this study.

Chronicity Of Physical Abuse

Main Effects For Study Year. The first row of Part B of Table 1 shows a relationship between STUDY year and how many times the parent interviewed reported using each of the acts in the physical abuse list on the referent child in the previous 12 months that is almost significant (p < .06). The solid line in Figure 3 shows that mean number of attacks among those who abused a child decreased from 9.6 in 1975, to 5.1 in 1985, and 5.6 in 1992. Thus, the decrease from 1975 to 1985 in the chronicity of severe attacks on children did not continue between 1985 and 1992.

(insert Figure 3 about here)

Main Effects For Demographic Variables. The rows for the demographic variables in Part B of Table 1 indicate significant effects for gender of child and age of child. Inspection of the means shows that, among children whose parents carried an attack that was serious enough to be classified as physical abuse, boys were more frequently attacked than girls, and younger children more frequently attacked than older children.

Interaction With Demographic Variables. The rows for interaction effects in Part B of Table 1 show that the only significant interaction was with gender of the child. Figure 3 shows that, among abused children, the average number of times boys were physically abused was much greater than the average number of attacks on girls in 1975. However, the decrease was also greater for boys than for girls. As a result, in 1985 there was no important difference between boys and girls. From 1985 to 1992, the mean for girls decreases slightly, and the mean for boys increased slightly. This combination restored a little of the previous difference between boys and girls in the chronicity of physical abuse.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Summary

The paper reports the results of research to test the hypothesis that the previously reported decrease from 1975 to 1985 in the rate of physical abuse by parents continued from
1985 to 1992. In addition, we investigated changes in the chronicity of physical abuse, and whether there were differences in the pattern of change by mothers fathers, by low, middle, and high socioeconomic status parents; or in physical abuse of boys and girls, minorities and whites, and of children in four age groups.

We found that the prevalence rate of physical abuse, as reported by parents, did continue to decrease from 1985 to 1992. As for the chronicity of physical abuse, it too decreased sharply between 1975 and 1985, but remained relatively constant since then.

Finally, there were important differences between mothers and fathers, and between younger and older children, and between boys and girls in the pattern of change. The rate of physical abuse by mothers decreased at a much faster rate than did physical abuse by fathers, the rate at which adolescents were abused remained constant whereas abuse rates decreased for other age groups, and the chronicity of physical abuse decreased more for boys than for girls. Since, in 1975, the rates for mothers, for boys, and for young children were much higher than the rates for fathers, for girls, and for older children, the effect of the greater decrease for these groups was to almost eliminate the large differences between mothers and fathers, between boys and girls, and between adolescents and younger children that existed at the start of the 17 year period covered by this study.

Explaining The Trends

A large number of explanations are possible for the trends we found. They can be grouped into methodological explanations and explanations based on changes that have been occurring in American society.

Change in Interviewing Method. The possibility that the differences between the 1975 and 1985 rates reported in a previous paper (Straus and Gelles, 1986) could be an artifact of having used face-to-face interviews in 1975 and telephone interviews in 1985 is virtually eliminated by the fact that the 1992 survey also used face-to-face interviews.

Change in Demographic Characteristics of the Population. There have been important changes in the demographic structure of the population since 1975. It is possible that changes in such demographic characteristics as the ethnic composition of the population could account for part of the decrease in physical abuse. However, demographic shifts are not likely to have been large enough to account for decreases as large as we found. Moreover, the analysis controlled statistically for five demographic characteristics. Consequently, the findings probably represent a change in parental attitudes or behavior rather than a change in these five aspects of the demographic composition of the population. However, that does not rule out the possibility that changes in other demographic characteristic influenced the changes in physical abuse that we reported. We are planning a study to test hypotheses about what might have produced the changes reported in this paper. It will include a number of these demographic characteristics and will use a statistical analysis that is more suited to examining that issue.

Change in Family Structure. There have been changes in a number of aspects of the family which are associated with violence, including; a rise in the average age at first marriage, an increase in the average age for having a first child, a decline in the number of children per family, and therefore, a corresponding decrease in the number of unwanted children (Statistical Abstract, 19??: Tables 120, 92, 63, 97). Each of these family characteristics are related to lower rates of child abuse.
As with many other aspects of life, there are also trends in the opposite direction, especially among the poor minority segments of the population. However, since these are minority segments, the contrary direction of change in the family does not include enough families to outweigh the trends among the majority population. But that should not blind us to the urgent needs of millions of minority group children.

**Economic Change.** Child abuse is known to be associated with unemployment and economic stress (??, ; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). The economic climate of the country was better in 1985 and 1992 than in 1975 (at least for the population we are examining -- intact families). The rate of unemployment and inflation is down (Statistical Abstract, 19??: Table 777). The one-year referent period used for the 1985 survey coincided with one of the more prosperous years in the period since 1975, and the same for 1992 as compared to 1985??. Thus, the lower level of economic stress in 1985 and 1992 may have contributed to the decline in physical abuse of children.

**Treatment Programs.** New and innovative prevention and treatment programs for child abuse came into being at the start of the time period of our research and have continued to grow throughout the period. States enacted compulsory reporting laws for child abuse and neglect, and public and private social services have been developed to treat and prevent child abuse. Despite the underfunding and under staffing of these programs, the presence of thousands of new child protective service workers is likely to have had an impact. Only a small percentage of the cases they deal with are the gory (and difficult to treat) cases which make the newspaper headlines. Most are parents at their wits end who can and do benefit from the help and the additional resources that state social service departments provide.

Family therapy of all types has grown tremendously. It was probably the fastest growing human service profession in the period since 1975. The increased use of family counseling, and the increasing proportion of therapists who directly raise the issue of violence, may have had a part in reducing child abuse.

**Reporting Effects.** The treatment and prevention efforts just mentioned may also have made parents less willing to tell our interviewers about incidents in which they had severely assaulted a child. This would occur if the programs heightened awareness that severe attacks on children are illegal and harmful. We believe that this led some respondents to not report behaviors that they would have reported in 1975 or even 1985. We also believe that the decrease represents a combination of a reduction in violence toward children and a reduction in willingness to tell our interviewers about such behavior. The relative constancy in rates of abuse of teenagers provides some indirect evidence supporting this view. If willingness to report were the primary determinant of the changes we found, it should also apply to violence against adolescent children. It might even apply to disclosure of violence toward that age group even more than for younger children. But let us for the moment assume that the findings are entirely the result of differences in willingness of parents to report. That would still be an important change in American society. It would indicate a major change in awareness and standards, and those cognitive and normative changes are a necessary part of the process of changing the actual behavior of parents.

**Historical Trends in Human Rights and Violence.** There have also been broader changes in society that we believe may be contributing to a reduction in physical abuse. These changes are part of a centuries long trends that has progressively expanded the range of human rights and decreased the scope of permissible interpersonal violence. Slavery has been abolished; Women have the right to vote. The are child labor laws. Torture and burning at the stake, trial by ordeal, and dueling are no longer acceptable. Husbands no longer have the right to
use corporal punishment on wives. Even the current homicide rate in the U.S. is lower than in most previous periods of American history (Graham & Gurr, 1979). In fact, homicide rates have been decreasing since the late middle ages (Given, 1977; ??, 1977). These large scale and long term trends also likely to affect the level of violence used in child rearing.

**Implications for Child Abuse Treatment and Prevention Programs**

It may at first seem as though there is a contradiction between the large reductions in physical abuse reported in this paper and the equally large increase in child abuse case loads. We believe that the two statistical series are complementary, not contradictory. The complimentary relationship occurs because the case load statistics are best thought of as an "intervention rate" whereas the statistics reported in this paper are closer to a "prevalence rate." Each case reported to state agencies represents an intervention, at least on the part of the person who made the report instead of following the age old practice of looking the other way. If these interventions are even somewhat effective, it follows that the prevalence of physical abuse rate should decrease, and that is what we found. It may not be too far fetched to conclude that our findings provide support for continuing and enlarging programs to combat child abuse.

**Implications For American Society**

The changes in American society which we think explain at least part of the reduction in physical abuse are continuing. If these explanations are correct, and if those societal changes continue, it is likely that there will be further reductions in the use of violence in child rearing that has been a major element of Euro-American societies for thousands of years. Furthermore, in view of the extensive evidence concerning the links of child abuse to low educational attainment, to violence and other crime, and to mental illness, there are grounds for believing that the reduction in violent child rearing will have important benefits for society as a whole in addition to the benefits to the children who are spared such experiences.
REFERENCES (incomplete)


### Table 1. ANOVA Analyses of Physical Abuse

#### A. Physical Abuse - Prevalence

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#### B. Physical Abuse - Chronicity

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Fig. 1
TRENDS IN PHYSICAL ABUSE
BY MOTHERS AND FATHERS

ADJUSTED FOR AGE OF CHILD, SEX OF CHILD, SES, & RACE

Fig. 2
TRENDS IN PHYSICAL ABUSE
BY AGE OF CHILD

ADJUSTED FOR SEX OF PARENT & CHILD, SES, AND RACE
TRENDS IN PHYSICAL ABUSE
CHRONICITY
FOR ALL CHILDREN, AND BOYS AND GIRLS

ADJUSTED FOR AGE OF CHILD, SEX OF PARENT, SES, & RACE
CP31832