

# Corporal Punishment and Physical Abuse: Population-based Trends for Three-to-11-year-old Children in the United States

Corporal punishment is increasingly regarded as an act of violence against children. Corporal punishment includes any use of physical punishment against a child in response to misbehaviour. This most commonly includes spanking, smacking and slapping, but also includes the use of an object such as a rod or stick, hair pulling and ear twisting. A growing body of research has focused on discipline and the adverse effects of corporal punishment (Berlin *et al.*, 2009; Lansford *et al.*, 2009). The UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* asserts that States take ‘all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence . . .’ (UNICEF, 1989; Article 19, Center for Effective Discipline, 2009). The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006), in *General Comment Number 8*, has further clarified that:

‘Addressing the widespread acceptance or tolerance of corporal punishment of children and eliminating it, in the family and in the schools and other settings, is not only an obligation of States parties under the Convention. It is also a key strategy for reducing and preventing all forms of violence in societies’ (p. 3).

The US and Somalia remain the only nations that have failed to ratify the Convention. Only 24 countries have passed laws to ban corporal punishment in the home. One hundred and twelve countries have banned corporal punishment in schools (Center for Effective Discipline, 2009). In the US, corporal punishment is legal in schools and pervasive in the home (Center for Effective Discipline, 2009; Theodore *et al.*, 2005).

Corporal punishment has been repeatedly associated with child abuse, moral internalisation, aggression, delinquent and antisocial

\*Correspondence to: Adam J. Zolotor, MD, MPH, Department of Family Medicine, CB# 7595, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599-7595, USA. E-mail: ajzolo@med.unc.edu

## Short Report

**Adam J. Zolotor\***

Department of Family Medicine, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

**Adrea D. Theodore**

**Desmond K. Runyan**

Departments of Social Medicine and Pediatrics, The University of North Carolina School of Medicine, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

**Jen Jen Chang**

Department of Community Health in Epidemiology, Saint Louis University School of Public Health, St Louis, MO, USA

**Antoinette L. Laskey**

Department of Pediatrics, Children’s Health Services Research, Indiana University, Indianapolis, IN, USA

**‘A growing body of research has focused on discipline and the adverse effects of corporal punishment’**

**‘One hundred and twelve countries have banned corporal punishment in schools’**

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behaviour, decreased quality of the parent-child relationship, increased behavioural symptoms, later criminal behaviour, worse mental health, and perpetration of spouse and child abuse (Gershoff, 2002; Zolotor *et al.*, 2008). Recent official reporting data have suggested a decline in physical abuse in the US (Finkelhor and Jones, 2008), which has been further corroborated by a sentinel provider survey that recurs approximately every ten years known as the *National Incidence Study* (Sedlak *et al.*, 2010). A similar decline in the use of physical punishment and harsh physical punishment would support the idea that actual violence towards children was declining. Using data from four population-based surveys, we explored trends in corporal punishment and physical abuse of three-to-11-year olds, the children most likely to be subjected to corporal punishment.

### Methods

We examined the data on the use of corporal punishment by parents from four cross-sectional population surveys as shown in Table 1. The Carolina Survey of Abuse in the Family Environment (CarolinaSAFE) was an anonymous telephone survey of 1435 mothers to assess parenting behaviours in the Carolinas in 2002 (Theodore *et al.*, 2005). For comparison, we conducted analyses of the 1995 Gallup Poll and the National Family Violence Surveys (NFVS) from 1975 and 1985 (Straus and Gelles, 1976a, 1976b). The Gallup Poll conducted national random digit telephone interviews in 1995 with 1000 parents to assess disci-

**Table 1.** Comparison of epidemiologic surveys of corporal punishment and physical abuse

	1975	1985	1995	2002
Author	NFVS	NFVS	Gallup	CarolinaSAFE
Population	National	National	National	Regional (NC & SC)
Sample (N) <sup>a</sup>	1139	3360	1000	1435
Southeast (N/%)	379 (17.7%)	1031 (17.2%)	361 (16.0%)	1435 (100%)
Children ages 3–11 (N)	671	1616	522	705
Interview method	In person	Phone	Phone	Phone
Participant	Fathers and mothers	Couples	Parents	Mothers only
Response rate	65%	84%	81%	52% <sup>b</sup>
Sample specifics	Two-parent households only; did not interview parents of children <3	Included single-parent households; over-sampled Hispanic and Afro-American families	Only eligible households with children surveyed	Only eligible households with children were surveyed

<sup>a</sup> N includes the number of households with children aged from birth to 17 years (except 1975 survey, ages 3–17). <sup>b</sup> Response rate for CarolinaSAFE was adjusted according to Poll Research standards. This response rate is calculated by subtracting the ineligible and unknown eligibility numbers from the total numbers (8262 – 4611 – 1335 = 2316). Of the numbers with unknown eligibility, we assume that the proportion of eligible numbers is the same as the proportion among those of known eligibility status (0.33 \* 1335 = 441). The total adjusted response rate is the number of respondents divided by the total number of estimated and known eligible numbers (1435/(1435 + 881 + 441) = 52%). The American Association for Public Opinion Research (2005) response rate six provides a more generous estimate of the response rate in which we assume that unknown eligibility numbers are ineligible. Using this method, our adjusted response rate is 62 per cent. NFVS = National Family Violence Survey; CarolinaSAFE = Carolina Survey of Abuse in the Family Environment; NC = North Carolina; SC = South Carolina.

pline (Gallup News Service Poll, 1995). Using nationally representative samples, NFVS was conducted via in-person interviews in 1975 and by telephone in 1985 with 1139 and 3360 families with children, respectively (Straus and Gelles, 1976a, 1976b). Changes in sampling technique reflect changes in survey research in the US over the past four decades. Changes in the sample composition reflect changes in US demographics including more racial and ethnic minority families and older mothers.

### *Measures*

In all four surveys, the Conflict Tactics Scales or a modified version, the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales, was used to assess parental disciplinary practices over the preceding year (Straus, 1979). These tools have primarily been used for research purposes and are not typically used in the clinical assessment of children and families. The Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales has moderate reliability for most subscales (physical assault scale  $\alpha = 0.55$ , psychological aggression scale  $\alpha = 0.60$ , non-violent assault scale  $0.70$ ) with the exception of neglect ( $\alpha = 0.22$ ) and severe physical assault ( $\alpha = -0.2$ ), good construct validity and fair discriminant validity (Bennett *et al.*, 2006; Caliso and Milner, 1992; Jouriles and Norwood, 1995; Straus *et al.*, 1998). The surveys begin by asking the subject to think about conflicts that she or her spouse/partner had with the referent child during the previous 12 months and then respond to questions on what she or her spouse/partner did in those situations. For example in 2002, the parent was asked, 'How many times have you spanked him/her on the buttocks with a hand only?' Response options included various past year frequencies (once, twice, 3–5 times, 6–10 times, 11–20 times, more than 20 times), as well as 'not in the past year but this has happened before' and 'never'. For our analysis, responses were recoded to represent two options: occurred in the last year or did not occur in the last year.

### *Analysis*

Analysis was based on weighted data to adjust for selection probability to approximate estimates of the entire population as described in the source documentation for each dataset. Prevalence and 95 per cent confidence intervals were estimated for variables of interest to describe corporal punishment and more severe forms of physical punishment using questions that were similar across the four studies. Due to previous reports suggesting that corporal punishment is more common in the southern US (Straus and Stewart, 1999), we also applied the same analysis

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to the subset of subjects in the US Census division known as South Atlantic (Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia). This was done to approximate sample demographics in the CarolinaSAFE. Bivariate analysis examined the association between corporal punishment and child age. Analysis was performed using STATA 10.0 (StataCorp, 2007), a standard statistical software package.

## Results

### *Corporal Punishment without an Object*

There was an overall decline in the spanking and slapping of children. Between 1975 and 2002, 18 per cent fewer children were slapped or spanked by caregivers (see Table 2). Table 3 and Figure 1 show that, for the youngest children, there was little change in corporal punishment. In the South Atlantic states, the overall trend is unchanged (see Table 4). There is somewhat more spanking and slapping in the southeast in 1975 and 1985, and somewhat less in 1995, but the confidence intervals are well within the national estimates.

### *Hitting with an Object*

Earlier studies asked parents and caregivers about hitting a child with an object, but did not specify an area of the body. In each result that follows, the rate of reported behaviour is given per 1000, followed in parenthesis by the 95 per cent confidence interval, an estimate of precision. In 1975, 186/1000 (155–220) parents reported hitting the child with an object (see Table 2). In 1985, this declined by 35 per cent to 121/1000 (104–139). Hitting on the buttocks and hitting elsewhere were separated in the 1995 and

**Table 2.** Comparison of corporal punishment and physical abuse rates per 1000 children (95% confidence intervals) occurring within the last year for children ages three to 11, by survey year 1975–2002

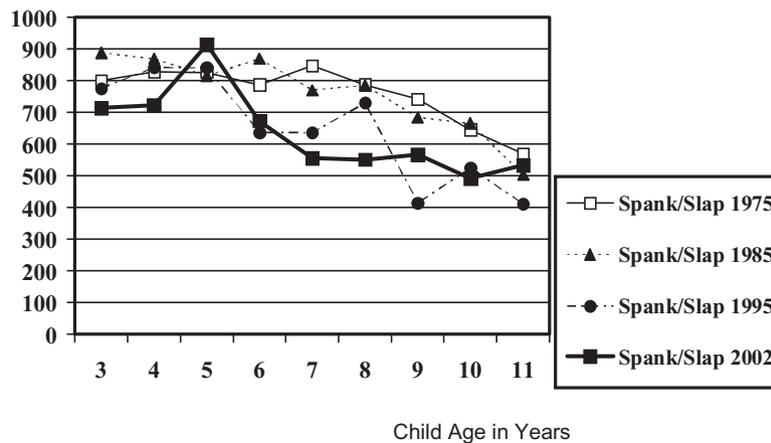
	1975	1985	1995	2002
Slapped or spanked	765 (728–798)	768 (744–791)	654 (609–696)	623 (569–675)
Hit child w/object (on buttocks)	<sup>a</sup>	<sup>a</sup>	270 (230–315)	332 (282–385)
Hit child w/object (somewhere other than buttocks)	<sup>a</sup>	<sup>a</sup>	42 (26–66)	48 (31–74)
Hit child w/object (unspecified)	186 (155–220)	121 (104–139)	280 (239–324) <sup>c</sup>	343 (293–397) <sup>c</sup>
Kicked, bit or hit with fist <sup>b</sup>	36 (24–57)	9.4 (5.4–16)	2.7 (0.6–11)	3.6 (0.7–17)
Beat child up <sup>d</sup>	8.2 (3.1–22)	6.5 (3.8–11)	3.3 (0.4–23)	0
Burned or scalded on purpose	<sup>a</sup>	5.3 (2.5–11)	0	0.2 (0.03–2)
Threatened to use knife/gun	0	2.9 (1.0–8.4)	0	0

<sup>a</sup> Denotes a question that was not asked on the survey. <sup>b</sup> Biting was excluded in 1995 and 2002; the 1995 survey asked did the caregiver 'hit with fist or kick hard' and the 2002 survey asked if the caregiver 'kicked' the child. <sup>c</sup> Hit child with object (unspecified) in 1995 and 2002 is an aggregate of two survey items: (1) hit child with object on buttocks and (2) hit child with object (somewhere other than buttocks). <sup>d</sup> In 2002, the survey question asked if child was 'beat, that is, hit over and over again with an object or fist'; it did not include the word 'up'.

2002 surveys. In 1995, 280/1000 (239–324) parents endorsed either hitting with an object on the bottom or hitting elsewhere with an object, or both. Using the same questions, the 2002 rate in the Carolinas was markedly higher at 343/1000 (293–397). In the analysis from the South Atlantic states, the rates of hitting with an object are slightly higher in the southeast in 1975, 186/1000 (155–220), slightly lower in 1985, 121 (104–139) and

**Table 3.** Rate of corporal punishment per 1000 children (95% confidence intervals), stratified by year of survey and age category

	3–5 years	6–8 years	9–11 years
Slapped/spanked, 1975	822 (766–867)	805 (739–857)	643 (566–713)
Slapped/spanked, 1985	859 (824–887)	808 (767–844)	616 (567–663)
Slapped/spanked, 1995	815 (749–867)	673 (591–745)	452 (371–535)
Slapped/spanked, 2002	788 (703–854)	600 (506–687)	524 (429–617)



**Figure 1.** Corporal punishment (spanking/slapping) by year of survey and child age, prevalence per 1000 children

**Table 4.** Comparison of corporal punishment and physical abuse rates per 1000 children (95% confidence intervals) occurring within the last year for children ages three to 11, by survey year 1975–2002, sample restricted to the US Census Division of the southeastern US

	1975	1985	1995	2002
Slapped or spanked	804 (714–870)	783 (720–834)	571 (446–686)	623 (569–675)
Hit child w/object (on buttocks)	<sup>a</sup>	<sup>a</sup>	403 (288–529)	332 (282–385)
Hit child w/object (somewhere other than buttocks)	<sup>a</sup>	<sup>a</sup>	99 (43–21)	48 (31–74)
Hit child w/object (unspecified)	117 (66–201)	140 (98–196)	403 (288–529) <sup>c</sup>	343 (293–397) <sup>c</sup>
Kicked, bit or hit with fist <sup>b</sup>	38 (13–102)	1 (0.1–8)	9 (1–63)	3.6 (0.7–17)
Beat child up <sup>d</sup>	0	5 (1–14)	0	0
Burned or scalded on purpose	<sup>a</sup>	2 (0.3–17)	0	0.2 (0.03–2)
Threatened to use knife/gun	0	0	0	0

<sup>a</sup> Denotes a question that was not asked on the survey. <sup>b</sup> Biting was excluded in 1995 and 2002; the 1995 survey asked did the caregiver ‘hit with fist or kick hard’ and the 2002 survey asked if the caregiver ‘kicked’ the child. <sup>c</sup> Hit child with object (unspecified) in 1995 and 2002 is an aggregate of two survey items: (1) hit child with object on buttocks and (2) hit child with object (somewhere other than buttocks). <sup>d</sup> In 2002, the survey question asked if the child was ‘beat, that is, hit over and over again with an object or fist’; it did not include the word ‘up’.

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markedly higher in 1995, 403 (288–529). However, all confidence intervals overlap with the national estimates (see Table 4). Hitting with an object peaks somewhat later than with a hand, at age eight (49%) and age nine (50%) in the Carolinas, an age-related trend that was similar in previous surveys (data not shown).

#### *Physical Abuse*

There were several questions related to harsher discipline common to at least three surveys (see Table 2). Caregivers were asked if they had ‘beat up their child, that is, hit over and over again with their fist or other object’. Rates for this question suggest a decline from 1975 to 2002. Further, comparing 1975 to 1985, fewer children were ‘kicked, bit or hit with [an adult’s] fist’ in the more recent survey. Between 1985 and 2002, fewer children were burned or scalded on purpose; and in 1995 and 2002, no parents endorsed threatening to use a knife or gun.

#### **Discussion**

Population surveys over the last three decades allow for monitoring self-reported disciplinary practices among caregivers. These data demonstrate a downward trend in corporal punishment by 18 per cent. Trends in corporal punishment with an object and harsher forms of discipline are less clear. Whereas parents report a reduction in the use of spanking or slapping over time, the majority of preschool-aged children, nearly eight in ten, are still disciplined in this fashion without marked change since 1975, and nearly half of children aged eight and nine were hit with an object in the Carolinas in 2002.

A limitation of our analysis is that these four surveys did not ask identical questions. In addition, the sampling frame varied (national versus two state). We tried to adjust for this sampling difference by restricting part of the analysis to the South Atlantic division of the US. Our restricted analysis yielded similar results, contradicting previous reports that corporal punishment is more common in the South (Straus and Stewart, 1999), a finding that has been associated with higher rates of religious conservatism (Mahoney *et al.*, 2001). Studies that have compared the South to the rest of the US have often included Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas, whereas restriction to the South Atlantic states more closely approximates the Carolinas. Further, we must acknowledge the limitations of cross-sectional survey design generally and the comparison of different surveys more specifically. This type of research is particularly subject to social desirability bias. In later surveys, efforts were made to make survey response anonymous however, the degree to which this has been possible

has varied over time and respondents may not have been forthcoming with particularly heinous behaviours (such as kicking or burning a child). Given the prevalence of corporal punishment in the US, it is unclear if social desirability would affect reported rates of spanking in a positive or negative direction. Survey research is also limited in the ability to apply findings to a base population if there is little or no information on non-responders. This challenge increases with decreasing sample sizes, which have been a growing challenge to survey research. The use of weighted analysis compensates for this challenge analytically by giving more weight to respondents with less represented characteristics. However, our inability to compare responders to non-responders in key characteristics limits the ability to infer behavioural responses to the base population. Lastly, we must acknowledge that changes in procedure (face-to-face versus telephone, number of call back attempts, eligibility) may affect the comparability of survey results over time. We have attempted to summarise these differences in Table 1.

To date, a parent in the US has the ‘right’ to discipline a child, with their hands or an instrument, provided that the disciplinary measure does not cross the line defining that state’s child abuse statute. Conversely, it is *illegal* to strike or inflict pain on adults. In 30 states, corporal punishment has been banned in the school environment (Center for Effective Discipline, 2009). The use of physical discipline is known to lose its effectiveness with increased use, sometimes escalating into abuse (Kadushin and Martin, 1981). That nearly a third of children are disciplined with an object is alarming, given the potential for escalation and the close association with abuse (Zolotor *et al.*, 2008). The UN cites that the US has not yet ratified the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* because it is studying the degree of compliance of the Convention with existing law and practice at state and federal levels (UNICEF, 2006). Others have speculated about the controversial nature of the Convention or the politicised process in a country where spanking is so common it is normative. In a country where nearly 80 per cent of preschoolers are spanked, there is unlikely to be sufficient popular support for a law that prohibits spanking or a convention which so strongly condemns spanking. To engage the US populace in a meaningful dialogue around a ban on corporal punishment, it is likely to be necessary to curb spanking through a combination of education, programme and policy initiatives that seek to eliminate spanking under some circumstances and to help parents develop a more complete set of tools for skilful child rearing. For example, a policy approach might seek to ban spanking among young children (perhaps less than one or two) and spanking with an object rather than spanking more generally. Parenting education that sought to promote effective

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parenting by focusing on such rubrics as time in, time out, positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, token economies and selective inattention might lessen parental reliance on corporal punishment as they learned about the effectiveness of other approaches. These efforts would probably need to precede or concur with changes in the law to garner popular support for signing of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* or a legal ban on all corporal punishment.

Other sources indicate an overall recent decline in family violence. There are two indicators of a decline in child abuse in the US: first, the number of substantiated reports to child protective services for physical and sexual abuse has declined over the last decade (Finkelhor and Jones, 2008). Furthermore, the decennial sentinel provider survey (*National Incidence Study*) corroborates this trend (Sedlak *et al.*, 2010). A yearly survey of crime victims has shown a similar decrease in reports to law enforcement for partner violence (Rennison, 2003). There are numerous reasons cited that may explain these declines. Economic prosperity, primary and secondary prevention successes, public awareness, more aggressive prosecution and incarceration, and new mental health treatment strategies have been cited as potential explanations for this decline in family violence (Finkelhor and Jones, 2008). Cautious optimism suggests we are on the right track towards a reduction in violence in the homes of children.

### **Conclusion**

Four large surveys of self-reported discipline used by parents demonstrate promising downward trends in corporal punishment. However, spanking remains normative in the US, especially among preschool children, and the rates of hitting with an object remain high. To enhance our ability to track these trends, future surveys should incorporate similar measures (Zolotor *et al.*, 2005).

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