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ABSTRACT

This study compared the rate of physical abuse of children from a 1975 study with the rates from a 1985 replication study. Both studies used nationally representative samples (2,143 families in 1975 and 3,520 families in 1985), and both found an extremely high incidence of physical assaults against children which were severe enough to constitute child abuse. Although the 1985 rates were high, they were substantially lower than the 1975 rates. There was a 47% decrease in physical child abuse reported from 1975 to 1985. Possible reasons for the decrease include: (1) differences in the methods of the studies; (2) increased reluctance to report incidents of child abuse; (3) reductions in intra-family violence due to 10 years of intensive prevention and treatment efforts; and (4) reductions due to changes in American society and family patterns which would have produced lower rates of intra-family violence even without ameliorative programs. Most likely the findings represent a combination of changed attitudes and norms, and changes in overt behavior. This interpretation is based on changes in American society in the areas of the family, the economy, the social acceptability of family violence, alternatives available to women, social control processes, and the availability of treatment and prevention services. (Policy implications of the decreases and of the continued high rate of child abuse, are discussed.) (Author/NB)

IS CHILD ABUSE INCREASING?

EVIDENCE FROM THE NATIONAL FAMILY VIOLENCE RESURVEY*1

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Abstract

This paper compares the rate of physical abuse of children from a 1975 study with the rates from a 1985 replication. Both studies used nationally representative samples (2,143 families in 1975 and 3,520 in 1985), and both found an extremely high incidence of physical assaults against children which were severe enough to constitute "child abuse." However, the 1985 rates, although high, were substantially lower than in 1975 Possible reasons for the decrease are examined and evaluated, including: (1) differences in the methods of the studies, (2) increased reluctance to report, (3) reductions in intra-family violence due to ten years of intensive prevention and treatment effort, and (4) reductions due to changes in American society and family patterns which would have produced lower rates of intra-family violence even without ameliorative programs. The policy implications of the decreases and of the continued high rate of child abuse, are discussed.

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CHILD ABUSE IN PREVIOUS HISTORICAL PERIODS

The history of Western society is one in which children have also been subject to unspeakable cruelties, starting with the fact that large numbers of children were simply abandoned to die (Radbill, 1980). Although every American state now seeks to protect children through child abuse laws, the task which remains is huge. Even prisoners in jail cannot legally be hit or verbally abused, but physical punishment of children is legal in every state. An afternoon spent in a supermarket or shopping mall is likely to reveal instances of children being hit or verbally abused. And that is but the tip of the iceberg. The bulk of the physical and mental cruelty which children experience every day goes on behind the closed doors of millions of American homes.

In 1975 my colleagues and I studied a nationally representative sample of 2,143 American families, about half of whom had a child living at home (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980). The rate of physical child abuse revealed by the 1975 study is astounding. Interviews with parents indicated that 36 out of every thousand American children 3 through 17 (i.e. almost 4%) experienced an assault that is serious enough to be included in our Very Severe Violence Index. A rate of 36 per thousand means that of the 46 million children of this age group in the United

States who live with both parents in 1975, approximately 1.7 million were "abused" that year.*2

It may be that this data overstated the amount of child abuse because a family is included if even one isolated incident of abusive violence occurred during the year. This was not the case. We found that if one assault occurred, several were likely. If fact, in only six percent of the child abuse cases was there a single incident. The mean number of severe assaults per year was 10.5 and the median 4.5.

IS THERE AN EPIDEMIC OF CHILD ABUSE?

Given the fact that millions of American children were physically abused by their parents in 1975, and that the number of cases of child abuse reported to social service agencies has been rising at a rate of about ten percent per year since the mid 70's (American Association for the Protection of Children, 1986), one is tempted to take this as evidence that child abuse is rapidly escalating. Certainly, the statistics from state child protective services are escalating. However, neither the high incidence rate nor the increase in the officially reported rate necessarily mean that child abuse is escalating. In fact, those concerned with America's children might be pleased that each year's "official statistics" on child abuse tops the previous year's figures. This is because the figures might indicate something quite different than a real increase in the rate of child abuse. The true incidence of child abuse may actually be declining even though the number of cases is increasing. What then do the reports from the 50 states indicate? There are at least two factors which might produce an increase in cases reported, even though the actual rate is declining.

The first factor is that all states now have compulsory child abuse reporting laws. As a result, a larger and larger proportion of the millions of previously unreported cases come to the attention of child welfare services. A dramatic example of this occurred in Florida. The year before the introduction of a statewide "hot-line" for reporting suspected cases of child abuse only a few hundred cases of child abuse were known to state authorities. However, in the year following the introduction of the "hot-line", several thousand cases were reported" (Nagi, 1976).

The second factor is much more fundamental. Without it, the reporting system would not work even to the extent that it now operates. This is the fact that new standards are evolving in respect to how much violence parents can use in child rearing. American society is now undergoing a "moral passage" (Gusfield, 1963) in which the definition of child abuse is being gradually enlarged to include acts which were not previously thought of as child abuse. This can create the misleading impression of an epidemic of child abuse. Changed standards are also the real force behind the child abuse reporting laws. Were it not for these changing standards, the reporting laws would not have been enacted; or if enacted, they would tend to be ignored.

Physical abuse of children may, in fact, be increasing; or it may be declining. An earlier paper argued that both wife beating and child abuse are probably decreasing (Straus, 1981b). But, like those who believe it

is increasing, no empirical evidence was presented at that time. The purpose of this paper is to report the results of a 1985 replication of the 1975-76 study. This replication enables the first comparison of rates of physical child abuse from epidemiological surveys at two time points.

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES DATA ON CHILD ABUSE

Although these are the most widely known and used statistics on child abuse, they have a number of limitations.

First, they vastly underestimate the actual extent of child abuse because they represent only those cases where the abuse was so obvious that it was noticed; and furthermore, only those cases where the person noticing decided to risk involvement with the legal and welfare bureaucracy.

Second, child protective services departments in most states are so severely understaffed that many reports are simply ignored, and even more are not investigated sufficiently to confirm or deny the allegation.

Third, as the number of child protective service workers has increased in the past decade, and as the public has become more sensitive to child abuse, the apparent incidence rate has climbed dramatically -- by 278% from 1976 to 1984. However, there is no evidence that this increase in reports reflects an increase in the number of abused children. Rather it might be an increase in the intervention rate rather than the incidence rate (Straus and Gelles, 1986).

THE 1975 AND 1985 NATIONAL FAMILY VIOLENCE SURVEYS

The limitations of the state child protective services data on child abuse outlined above led us to conduct surveys designed to measure the incidence of child abuse and spouse abuse in nationally representative samples.

Sample and Administration of the 1975 Study

A national probability sample of 2,143 currently married or cohabiting persons was interviewed by Response Analysis Corporation using an interview schedule designed by the authors. If the household included a child or children between the ages of 3 and 17 years of age, a "referent child" was selected using a random procedure. The restriction to children 3 through 17 was made because one aim of the study was to obtain meaningful data on sibling violence, and we did not feel that the data on children aged one or two would be meaningful for this purpose. A random half of the respondents were women and the other half men. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. The completion rate of the entire sample was 65%. More detailed information on the methodology of the study is given in Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980).

The 1985 National Family Violence Re-Survey*3

Data on a national probability sample of 6,002 households was obtained by telephone interviews conducted by Louis Harris and Associates. To be eligible for inclusion, a household had to include two adults, a male and female, 18 years of age or older who were: (1) presently married, or (2) presently living as a male-female couple; or a household might include one adult 18 years of age or older who was either (3) divorced or separated within the last two years, or (4) single parent living with a child under the age of 18. When more than one eligible adult was in the household, a random procedure was used to select the respondent. When more than one child under the age of 18 was in the household, a random procedure was used to select the "referent child" as the focus of the parent to child violence questions.

The sample was made up of four parts. The part analyzed for this paper is a national probability sample of 4,032 households which were selected in proportion to the distribution of households in the 50 states. The spouse abuse data is based on the 3,520 households containing a currently married or cohabiting couple, i.e. it excludes single parent and recently terminated marriages. The child abuse data is based on the 1,428 of these households with a child age 3 through 17 and with two caretakers present.*4

Interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes. The response rate, calculated as "completes as a proportion of eligibles" was 84%. A detailed report on the methodology of the study is available from the authors and in Gelles and Straus (1988), and the implications of the differences in methods between the two studies are discussed in a later section of this paper.

Method of Measuring The Incidence Of Child Abuse

The Conflict Tactics Scales or CTS (Straus, 1979; 1981a) was used to measure the incidence and frequency of violence.*5 The CTS starts by asking the respondent to think of the times when they had a conflict with their child or spouse or just got angry with them. Respondents are then given a list of tactics which they might have used in these situations of conflict or anger. The tactics ranged from calm discussion to attacks with a knife or a gun. The 1985 version of the CTS (used for this paper) consisted of 19 tactics, nine of which refer to acts of violence. The violent acts are: pushed, grabbed or shoved the child, slapped or spanked; threw something at the child; kicked, bit or hit with a fist; hit or tried to hit with something; beat up the child; burned or scalded the child, threatened with knife or gun; used a knife or gun.*6 The occurrence of these violent acts was used to compute the following measures of family violence:

> Minor Violence. This measure indicates the percent of parents who pushed, grabbed or shoved, slapped or spanked, or threw something at the child during the year covered by the study, but did not any of the things included in the two measures of child abuse described below.

Child Abuse.*7 What constitutes "abuse" is, to a considerable extent, a matter of social norms. Spanking or slapping a child, or even hitting a child with an object such as stick, hair brush, or belt, is not "abuse" according to either the legal or informal norms of American society, although it is in Sweden and several other countries (Haeuser, 1985). The operationalization of child abuse attempts to take such normative factors into consideration by computing two child abuse rates: Child Abuse 1 is the use by a parent of any of the acts of violence in the Severe Violence Index (see listed above), except that, to be consistent with current legal and informal norms, hitting or trying to hit with an object such as a stick or belt is not included. Child Abuse 2 adds hitting with an object such as a belt or paddle, even though many people do not consider that to be abusive, because such acts carry a greater risk of causing an injury.*8

TABLE 1. PARENT TO CHILD VIOLENCE: COMPARISON OF RATES IN 1975 AND 1985

Type of Violence	Rate Per 100 Children Age 3 through 17[a] 1975 N=1,146[b]	1985 N=1,428[c]	t For 1975-1985 Difference
A. Minor Violence Acts			
1. Threw Something	5.4	2.7	3.41***
2. Pushed/Grabbed/Shoved	31.8	30.7	0.54
3. Slapped or Spanked	58.2	54.9	1.68
B. Severe Violence Acts			
4. Kicked/Bit/Hit with Fist	3.2	1.3	3 17**
5. Hit, Tried to Hit with Something	13.4	9.7	2.91**
6. Beat Up	1.3	0.6	0.26
7. Threatened with Gun/Knife	0.1	0.2	0.69
8. Used Gun or Knife	0.1	0.2	0.69
C. Violence Indexes			
Overall Violence (1-8)	630.0	620.0	0.52
Severe Violence (4,6,7,8)	14.0	10.7	2.56**
Very Severe Violence (4,6,8) ("child abuse" for this paper)	3.6	1.9	4.25***

* = p <.05, ** = p <.01, *** = p <.001 (two-tailed tests)

a. For two caretaker households with at least one child 3 to 17 years of age at home.

b. A few respondents were omitted because of missing data on some items, but the N is never less than 1,140.

c. A few respondents were omitted because of missing data on some items, but the N is never less than 1,418.

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN 1975 AND 1985

Table 1 enables one to compare the 1975 and 1985 rates per thousand children for each violent act as well as four summary indexes.*9 The data in parts A and B shows that, with the exception of the most unusual and severe forms of violence (items 8 and 9: threatening and using guns and knives), the occurrence of each form of violence towards children declined in the last 10 years. However, only three of these differences are statistically significant. The more important and reliable results are those for the summary indexes shown in part C, and discussed below.

Overall Violence Rate

The Overall Violence Index row of part C indicates whether a parent used any of the eight forms of violence at least once during the 12 month period covered by the survey. It shows that there was essentially no change in the rate of violence between 1975 and 1985. The decrease from 630 per thousand children in 1975 to 620 per thousand children in 1985 is equivalent to saying that in 1975 almost two thirds of the parents in the sample (63%) reported hitting the "referent child" (the child selected as the focus of the interview) during the survey year, and that in 1985 the figure was 62%. However, these high rates are somewhat misleading because they do not take into account the age of the child. For three year olds, the 1975 figure was much higher: 97%. For children age 15 and over, the rate was much lower: "only" about a third of 15-17 year olds were hit by a parent during the year of the study.

Severe Violence

The second row of Table 1, part C shows that the rate of Severe Violence (kicking, biting, punching, hitting or trying to hit with an object, beating, threatening with a gun or knife, or using a gun or knife) declined from 140 per thousand children in 1975 to 107 in 1985.

Child Abuse Rate

The difficulty with the Severe Violence Index as a measure of physical child abuse is that many parents do not consider item 5 (hitting with an object such as a stick, hair brush or belt) to be abuse. Consequently, as explained earlier, we used the "Very Severe Violence Index" shown in the third row of part C as the measure of "child abuse" for this paper. This is the same as the Severe Violence index, except that it omits hitting with an object, and is therefore the index which comes closest to the public conception of child abuse. The rate of such indubitably abusive violence declined from 36 per thousand children to 19. This is a decline of 47% in the rate of physical child abuse since 1975.

PREVENTION AND TREATMENT PROGRAMS AND CHANGE IN FAMILY VIOLENCE

The two National Family Violence Surveys covered a number of different types of intra-family violence in addition to physical abuse of children. The comparison of 1985 rates with the 1975 rates showed that the largest decrease was in physical child abuse, the next largest decrease was in the rate wife-beating. On the other hand, there was no change in the extent to which parents used ordinary physical punishment, nor was there a change in the rate of wife-to-husband violence. These differences in the rate of change of different forms of intra-family violence parallel the extensiveness and the intensity of prevention and treatment programs for each of these aspects of intra-family violence.

Child abuse. This form of physical violence entered the public agenda as a major social problem with the classic paper by Kempe, et al (1962). There have been compulsory reporting laws in every state since 1971, and a large educational effort. In addition, child abuse has had the largest share of financial resources, in comparison to other forms of domestic violence. There are now thousands of social workers assigned to child abuse work who were not available a decade or more ago. The fact that we found a larger decrease for child abuse than for any other aspect of family violence may reflect the fact that it has been the object of the longest and most intensive campaign.

Wife Beating. The campaign against wife beating, by contrast, began a decade or more later and has been less intensive, and far fewer resources have been invested. Shelters have mostly been a private endeavor of the women's movement. Even the feeble effort of the federal government in the form of an information clearinghouse was abolished early in the Reagan adminstration. Many bills to provide funds for shelters have been introduced and defeated. When a bill appropriating a modest sum was finally passed in 1985, the administration refused to spend the funds. Nevertheless, by 1985 the women's movement succeed in creating a national consciousness, and in establishing hundreds of shelters for battered women (Back, et al., 1980; Warrior, 1982); and by 1985 our study found a substantial reduction in the rate of wife beating.

Violence by Wives. Violence by wives has not been an object of public concern. There has been no publicity, and no funds invested in ameliorating this problem because it has not been defined as a problem. In fact, our 1975 study was bitterly criticized for presenting statistics on violence by wives."[10] Our finding of little change in the rate of assaults by women on their male partners is consistent with the absence of concern about assaults by wives, much less an ameliorative program.

Physical Punishment of Children. Not only has physical punishment of children not been a focus of a public effort, but most Americans consider it morally correct to hit a child who misbehaves (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). The most widely sold books on child rearing do not even mention it, or do so only incidentally, and none takes a clear "no spanking" position (Carson, 1987). Consistent with this, we found only small and non-significant differences between 1975 and 1985 in the overall parent-to-child violence rate.

Overall, the findings of this study are consistent with the idea that the longer an aspect of violence has been the object of public condemnation, and the more resources that are put into the effort to change that aspect of violence, the greater the reduction in the objectionable behavior.

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

I have presented some startling and controversial findings. When the Christian Science Monitor interviewed criminologist Richard Berk concerning the results of this study (November 18, 1985: 3-4), he commented "Given all we know about the pattern of crime statistics, a 47% drop is so unprecedented as to be unbelievable. Never before has there been a drop of that magnitude, that rapidly." But, contrary to Berk's assertion, other crime rates have changed that much and that fast. The homicide rate for example, increased by over 100% between 1963 and 1973; and in the four years from 1980 to 1984, homicide dropped by 29% -- a rate which, if continued for another six years will produce a ten year decrease that is greater than the 47% decrease we found for child abuse (Straus, 1986).

(Figure 1 about here)

The homicide statistics indicate that there is a precedent for changes in crime rates of the magnitude we found for physical child abuse and wife beating. In fact, the statistics on the decrease in child abuse parallel the recent decreases in homicide, including intra-family homicide (Straus, 1986). In addition, the decreases in the two key rates are statistically significant. Nevertheless, it is important to regard these results with caution because, with the data available, one can only speculate about the processes with produced the decreases. We will discuss three of the possible explanations for the findings.

Methodological Differences Between The Two Surveys

Data for the 1975 survey were collected by in-person interview, while the 1985 survey was conducted over the telephone. Research on differences between telephone and in-person interviews has shown no major differences in results (Groves and Kahn, 1979; Marcus and Crane, 1986) and the telephone is now the most widely used method of interviewing, including the National Crime Survey. To the extent that there is a difference, we believe that the anonymity offered by the telephone leads to more truthfulness, and thus increased reporting of violence. Thus, the difference in interview method should have produced higher, not lower rates of reported violence in 1985.

However, a characteristic of telephone surveys which is usually an advantage -- the higher rate of completed interviews -- might have affected the difference between the 1975 and 1985 rates. The 1985 survey had an 84% completion rate, versus 65% for the 1975-76 survey. Assuming that a higher completion rate means a more representative sample, the question is whether this makes for a lower or a higher rate of reported violence. That depends on whether those who refused to participate are

more or less likely to be violent. If those who refused are less likely to be violent, then the fact that there were fewer refusals in 1985 would tend to reduce the violence rate. However, we think it more likely that the violence rate is higher among those who refuse to participate. If so, a reduction in refusals would tend to produce a higher rate of violence, whereas the we found a lower rate of violence in 1985 despite the much lower number of refusals.

Another methodological difference is that, in the 1975-76 survey, respondents were handed a card listing the response categories for the Conflict Tactics Scales All possible answers, including "never" were on the card. For the 1985 telephone interviews, interviewers read the response categories, beginning with "once" and continuing to "more than 20 times." Respondents had to volunteer "never" or "don't know" responses. Experience has shown that rates of reported sensitive or deviant behavior are higher if the subject has to volunteer the "no" or "never" response (see for example, Kinsey et al., 1948).

These differences in methodology between the two studies should have led to higher, not lower rates of reported violence. Since the rates of child abuse and wife beating decreased, it seems unlikely that the change is due to the different methods of data collection.

Reluctance To Report

A second plausible explanation for the decline in the rate of child abuse is that respondents may have been more reluctant to report severe violence in 1985 than in 1975. As indicated above, the last ten years has seen a tremendous increase in public attention to the problem of child abuse. National media campaigns, new child abuse and neglect laws, hot-lines, and almost daily media attention have transformed behaviors that were ignored for centuries into major social problems. The decrease in child abuse may reflect a "moral passage" (Gusfield, 1963), as assaults on children becomes less acceptable and consequently fewer parents are willing to admit such acts. The implications of this a change in American culture will be discussed in the conclusions section.

Change in Behavior

The third explanation is that there has indeed been a decline in child abuse. This explanation is consistent with changes in the family and other developments during the last ten years which might have served to reduce the rate of family violence. These fall into four broad categories: changes in the family and the economy which are associated with less violence, treatment programs, and deterrence.

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, 1985: Tables 120, 92, 63, 97). Parents in 1985 are among the first generation to be able to choose a full range of planned parenthood options (including abortion) to plan family size. All these

factors are related to lower rates of child abuse, and may have an indirect effect on spouse abuse by lowering the level of stress.*11 In addition, later marriage, and the greater acceptability of divorce, tends to equalize the balance of power between husband and wife.

The fact that, bit by bit, American marriages are becoming more equalitarian (Thornton, Alwin and Camburn, 1983) has important implications for family violence because previous research shows that male dominant marriages have the highest, and equalitarian marriages the lowest, rate of both spouse abuse and child abuse (Coleman and Straus, 1986; Straus, 1973; Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980).

There are many reasons for the increasing equality between husbands and wives in addition to the two mentioned above. For the decade in question, two of the most important factors are the diffusion of feminist ideology to a broader population base, and the increase in the percent of women with paid jobs. Moreover, since we found that full time housewives experience a higher rate of wife beating (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980), the rapid increase in paid employment (Statistical Abstract, 1985: Tables 669-672) might also be associated with a lower rate of wife beating.

Economic Change. Both child abuse and wife beating are associated with unemployment and economic stress. The economic climate of the country is better in 1985 than in 1975 (at least for the population we are examining -- intact families). The rate of unemployment and inflation is down compared to 10 years ago (Statistical Abstract, 1985: Table 777). The one-year referent period used for the 1985 survey coincided with one of the more prosperous years in the past decade. Thus, the lower level of economic stress in 1985 may have contributed to the decline in severe violence.

Treatment Programs. New and innovative prevention and treatment programs for child abuse and wife beating proliferated during or immediately before the 1975-85 decade. 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 understaffing of these programs, the presence of thousands of new child protective service workers*12 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.

The services to prevent and control wife-beating are also relevant for because of the extremely high rate of child abuse which also occurs in families where the wife is assaulted. There are now more than 750 shelters for battered women, whereas none existed before 1973. There were no treatment programs for men who assault their wives existed in the early 1970's, but many such programs were available by 1985 (Pirog-Good and Stets-Kelly, 1985), including a number of court mandated programs; and there is some evidence of their effectiveness (Lerman, 1981). Finally, family therapy of all types has grown tremendously. It was probably the fastest growing human service profession in the 1975-85 decade.*13 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 intra-family violence.

Deterrence. Deterrence of a crime depends on the perception of potential offenders that the act is wrong, and that there is a high probability of being apprehended and punished (Williams and Hawkins, 1986). The decade in question has been characterized by activities which were intended to change both internalized norms and objective sanctions about family violence. There has been extensive efforts to alert the public to the problem of child abuse and wife beating. In addition, shelters for battered women may have an indirect effect. The process of publicizing the availability of a shelter can contribute to husbands redefining "I just slapped her a few times" to "I was violent." Each of these activities probably contributed to changed perception of the legitimacy of violence against children and wives, and therefor plays a preventative or deterrent role.

Public opinion poll data suggests that those programs seem to have been effective. A 1976 study found that only about 10% of Americans considered child abuse a serious problem (Magnuson, 1983), whereas a 1982 poll conducted by Louis Harris and Associates found that 90% felt that child abuse was a serious national problem. This is a huge increase in public awareness. The publicity and media attention to wife beating has been less, but still major. It is not implausible to suggest that the advertising campaigns and media attention has had some effect in making parents more cautious about assaulting children and husbands more cautions about severely assaulting wives.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper compares the rates of physical violence against children from a 1975-76 survey with the rates from a 1985 study which used the same instrument to measure child abuse. Physical child abuse (as measured by the number of children who were kicked, punched, bitten, beaten up, or attacked with a knife or gun) decreased by 47% from 1975 to 1985. Even with this reduction, the rate of child abuse remains extremely high.

Factors Underlying The Findings

The lower rates of severe violence in the 1985 study could have been produced by a number of factors, including: (1) differences in the methodology used in the two surveys, (2) by a greater reluctance on the part of the respondents to report assaulting a child, or (3) by a decrease in the number of parents who severely assault a child. The decrease is probably not due to differences in the methods used in the two surveys because those differences would tend to increase rather than decrease the 1985 rate. This leaves two plausible explanations -- the decrease could reflect a change in reporting behavior, or change in behavior.

From the perspective of the welfare of children and families, the most desirable interpretation is that the differences between 1975 and 1985 represents fewer physically abused children. However, even if the reduction was entirely due to a greater reluctance to report violence, that is also important. It suggests that the effort to change public

attitudes and standards concerning assaults on children have achieved a certain measure of success. In view of the fact that this refers to changes in the relatively short period of ten years, perhaps it could even be considered a remarkable degree of success. Moreover, a change in attitudes and cultural norms is an important part of the process leading to change in overt behavior. If all that has been accomplished in the last ten years is to instill new standards for parents about the inappropriateness of violence, that is a key element in the process of reducing the actual rate of child abuse.

Most likely the findings represent a combination of changed attitudes and norms, and changes in overt behavior. This interpretation is based on a number of changes in American society which took place during or immediately before the decade of this study, including: changes in the family, in the economy, in the social acceptability of family violence, in alternatives available to women, in social control processes, and in the availability of treatment and prevention services.

Policy Implications

If nation-wide availability of child abuse treatment programs is one of the factors bringing about a decline in the child abuse rate, it helps explain the seeming contradictions between the decrease reported in this paper and the even greater increase in cases known to child protective services (American Association for the Protection of Children, 1986). To understand this, it is necessary to abandon the terminology which identifies the cases known to protective service workers as the "official" or "reported" rate, and the rate from our survey as the "real" rate of child abuse. Both are reported rates and both are real rates. The difference is not that one is right and the other wrong, but that they measure different phenomena. The rate based on cases known to child protective services in the various states can be thought of as a measure of services provided, or as a treatment rate; whereas the rate produced by our surveys is closer to an incidence rate.*14 The increase in the former (which is a proxy for the number of cases treated) is one of the factors which made possible the decrease in the number of child abuse incidents reported in this paper.

The interpretations of the findings just presented have important policy implications which contrast sharply with the interpretation given in Child Protection Report (November 22, 1985: 3) under the headline "Gelles Study Strikes Discordant Note," and which reports that child protection advocates were angered at our findings because they fear the sharp decrease in rates of child abuse might undercut support for child abuse programs. But what if we had found no change? Critics could then argue that ten years and millions of dollars of public and private funds had been wasted. We believe that the findings should be regarded in the same way as the findings on the sharp decrease in smoking by men, and the parallel finding that lung cancer rates for white males have turned down (New York Times, Dec. 3, 1985, p. A1). Those findings supported rather than hindered increased efforts to reduce smoking.

As in the case of research on smoking, our findings provide a basis for believing that when a national effort is made about some aspect of intra-family violence, a national accomplishment can be achieved.

Moreover, the findings also show that an intensified effort is needed. Even if all the reduction from 1975 to 1985 were in actual assaults (i.e. none of it a reduction in reporting of assaults), and even disregarding the underestimate resulting from the omission of the "high risk" categories of single parent families and children under three, a reduction in child abuse of 47% still leaves a minimum estimate of over ~~a~~ 1.5 million abused children ~~aged 3-17 in two parent households.~~ (Straus & Gelles, 1988)

FOOTNOTES

1. Paper presented at the 11th Annual Meeting of the American Association For Protecting Children, Austin Texas, October 27, 1987. This is an abridged version of a paper covering both child abuse and spouse abuse (Straus and Gelles, 1986). The paper a publication of the Family Violence Research Program, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824. Reprints and a bibliography listing other papers available for distribution are available on request. The research was carried out with funds provided by the National Institute of Mental Health, grant MH40027. It is also a pleasure to acknowledge support for the larger research program of which this project is a part. These include the National Center On Child abuse and Neglect, the National Institute of Justice, the Graduate School of the University of New Hampshire, and a "training grant" (T32 MH15161) from the National Institute of Mental Health.

2. Child abuse is defined as a particular type of violence (see section on Definition and Measurement for specifics). The more general term, violence, is defined as an act carried out with the intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person. This is synonymous with an "assault" in legal terms, and synonymous with "physical aggression" as that term is used in social psychology.

As pointed out in a previous theoretical article (Gelles and Straus, 1979), the fact of a physical assault having taken place is not sufficient for understanding violence. Several other dimensions also needed to be considered. However, it is also important that each of these other dimensions be measured separately so that the their causes and consequences and joint effects can be investigated. Among the other dimensions are the seriousness of the assault (which can range from a slap to stabbing and shooting), whether a physical injury was produced (which can range from none to death), the motivation (which might range from a concern for a person's safety, as when a child is spanked for going into the street, to hostility so intense that the death of the person is desired), and whether the act of violence in normatively legitimate (as in the case of slapping a child) or illegitimate (as in the case of slapping a spouse), and which set of norms are applicable (legal, ethnic or class norms, couple norms, etc.).

3. The 1985 survey differs from the 1975-76 study in a number of important ways. It includes several groups which were omitted from the first survey, such as single parents; and it includes additions to the CTS violence index. However, the instrumentation was designed to permit the comparable questions to be selected, and the sample was chosen in a way which permits selection of a comparable part of the 1985 sample to be used for the 1975 to 1985 change analysis. Unless otherwise indicated, the

material reported in this paper is restricted to the comparable parts of the 1985 sample, and the comparable parts of the instrumentation. See also footnote 4.

4. The other three parts consisted of oversamples for specific purposes. First, certain states were oversampled because one objective of the second national survey was to collect data that could be aggregated by state for analysis of state level trends and relationships. The oversample consisted of 958 households in 25 states. This was done to assure that there would be 36 states with at least 100 completed interviews per state. Finally, two additional oversamples were drawn -- 508 black and 516 hispanic households. Future analyses which include these oversamples will be weighted to take into account the state, black, and hispanic oversamples.

5. The CTS has been used and refined in numerous studies of family violence (e.g. Allen and Straus, 1980; Cate et al., 1982; Henton et al., 1983; Giles-Sims, 1983; Hornung, et al., 1981; Jorgensen, 1977; Straus, 1973; Steinmetz, 1977) Three different studies have established that the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) measures three factorially separate variables (Jorgensen, 1977; Schumm et al., 1982; Straus, 1979): Reasoning, Verbal Aggression, and Violence or physical aggression. The reliability and validity of the Conflict Tactics Scales have been assessed in several studies over the 15 year period of their development. See Straus (1979) for evidence of internal consistency reliability, concurrent validity, and construct validity. Other investigators have confirmed some of these findings. See for example, Arias and Beach, 1987; Jouriles and O'Leary (1985), Jorgenson (1977) and Schumm et al. (1982).

6. The 1985 version contains an additional item for parent-child violence (scalding or burning). This item was excluded from the analysis in the present paper because it could not be used to compare 1975 rates with 1985 rates. However, it is used in latter papers (for example, Straus and Gelles, 1988) which are concerned with the current situation. In addition, the 1985 CTS was supplemented by questions intended to assess the consequences or outcomes of acts of violence, including the violence produced an injury which required medical attention -- either seeing a doctor or overnight hospitalization, and also questions intended to measure social psychological problems of children who were abused. These will be reported in a forthcoming book and articles (Gelles and Straus, 1987, 1988).

The 1985 survey also differs from the 1975-76 study because it includes several groups which were omitted from the first survey, such as single parents. However, the instrumentation was designed to permit the comparable questions to be selected, and the sample was chosen in a way which permits selection of a comparable part of the 1985 sample to be used for the 1975 to 1985 change analysis. Unless otherwise indicated, the material reported in this paper is restricted to the comparable parts of the 1985 sample, and the comparable parts of the instrumentation.

7. From a scientific perspective it would be preferable to avoid the term "abuse" because of the definitional problems just mentioned and because it is a political and administrative term as a scientific term. Despite this, we will use "abuse" for two reasons. First, it is less awkward than "Very Severe Violence Index." Second, it is such a widely used term that avoiding it creates communication difficulties.

8. It should be recognized that in most instances, the outcome from being kicked, although painful, does not result in an injury. However, absence of injury does not make it less of an abusive act. Our distinction between minor and severe violence parallels the legal distinction between a "simple assault" and an "aggravated assault" An aggravated assault is an attack which is likely to cause grave bodily harm, such as an attack with a knife or gun, irrespective of whether the object of the attack was actually injured.

9. Previous reports on the 1975 study expressed the violence rate as a percentage of husbands, wives, or children; whereas, starting with this paper, we use rate per 1,000 couples or children. There are three reasons for this. (1) Comparability With Other Crime and Child Abuse Rates. The National Crime Survey (NCS), which has become the de facto standard for survey research on the incidence of crime and victimization, and the annual rates of child abuse cases reported to child protective services in the United States, both use rate per thousand. Adopting that standard facilitates comparison of rates from this survey with the rates for reported cases of child abuse, and with NCS rates for assault and other crime. Another alternative is the Uniform Crime Reports system of rates per 100,000. However, a rate per hundred thousand is not appropriate since our survey samples were in the thousands, not hundred thousands. (2) Results are presented as integers. It is customary in demography, criminology, and medical sociology to use a rate which enables the data to be presented in integers. For example, the 1981 cancer death rate is given in the Vital Statistics as 184 per 100,000 population rather than 0.00184 per capita or 0.184% because most people find it easier to conceptualize integers. Thus, the difference between the cancer rate and the suicide rate is more easily perceived when presented as 184 versus 12 per 100,000, than as 0.184% versus 0.012%. (3) Avoids confusion with percent change. In the context of this paper, using "x per thousand" instead of "x percent" avoids confusion with "x percent change" or the awkwardness in spelling out the latter as "x percent change in the percent violent."

10. For a few years, the advocacy of karate on the part of some in the women's movement, put women on record as favoring violence as a means of ending violence. The futility of such an approach is indicated by the fact that the willingness of men to use force does not protect them from assault. Three times as many men are murdered as women (Riedel and Zahn, 1985, Table 3-2), and three times as many men are victims of assault (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1985, Table 3). Readiness to use force, in our opinion, is no more likely to provide security for women than it does for men; and no more likely than "star wars" is to provide security for the nation.

11. Although this section focuses on changes in the family which are associated with a reduction in violence, there have also been changes in aspects of the family which are plausibly associated with an increase in violence (see Straus, 1981b for a listing and discussion).

12. Calls to several federal and private organizations concerned with child abuse revealed that no national statistics are available on the number of child protective service (CPS) workers. However, some indication of the magnitude of the change can be gleaned from data on the New England states. I am grateful to the Directors or Associate Directors

of the relevant departments for providing the following statistics in response to my telephone requests: Connecticut: The number of case workers assigned to children's services increased from 244.5 full time equivalent workers in 1976 to 308 in 1985, an increase of 63.5 or 26%. Maine: The number of CPS workers increased from 163 in 1977 to 238 in 1985, an increase of 75, or 46%. Massachusetts: The budget for child protective services increased from $120 million in 1980 (the earliest date for which comparable figures are available) to $293 million in 1985, a 144% increase in the last 5 years of the 1975-85 decade. New Hampshire: Separate figures are not kept on CPS workers. The number of state employed social workers increased from 95 in 1972 to 136 in 1985, a 43% increase. Rhode Island: The number of CPS workers increased from 12 in 1974 to 125 in 1985, an increase of 41 or a 792% increase. Vermont: Separate figures were not kept for CPS. The total number of state employed social workers was essentially unchanged from 1975 to 1985 (105 to 110). However, a larger proportion of this staff was probably engaged in CPS work in 1985 than in 1975. Allowing for a few states such as Vermont, it is not unreasonable to assume that even small states added at least 50 CPS workers during the decade under review, and larger states many more. If each state added an average of only 50 CPS workers during this decade, that would result in 2,500 CPS workers providing services in 1985 who were not engaged in child abuse intervention in the early 1970's.

13. For example, membership in the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists tripled from 3,373 in 1975 to 12,302 in 1985 (information provided by telephone to Straus, March 11, 1986).

14. Of course both rates are confounded with other factors. The rate of cases known to protective services is confounded with the resources available to conduct investigations and provide treatment. Consequently, it is much higher than the number of families accually receiving assistance. Similarly, the survey rate is confounded with willingness to self-report violence and is therefore much lower than the "true" incidence rate. Nevertheless, we regard the former as a reasonable indicator of trends in treatment, and the latter as a reasonable indicator of trends in incidence.

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