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Societal Change and Change in Family Violence from 1975 to 1985 As Revealed by Two National Surveys

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This article compares the rate of physical abuse of children and spouses 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 severe physical violence against children ("child abuse") and a high incidence of violence against spouses. However, the 1985 rates, although high, were substantially lower than in 1975: the child abuse rate was 47% lower, and the wife abuse rate was 27% lower. Possible reasons for the lower rates in 1985 are examined and evaluated, including: (a) differences in the methods of the studies, (b) increased reluctance to report, (c) reductions in intrafamily violence due to ten years of prevention and treatment effort, and (d) reductions due to changes in American society and family patterns that would have produced lower rates of intrafamily violence even without ameliorative programs. The policy implications of the decreases and of the continued high rate of child abuse and spouse abuse are discussed.

CHILD ABUSE AND WIFE BEATING IN PREVIOUS HISTORICAL PERIODS

Although the purpose of this article is to compare the rates for physical violence against children and spouses in 1985 with the rates found in a 1975 study, we begin with a brief historical overview because that information is helpful for evaluating the results to be reported for 1975-85.

Wife Beating

The subordinate status of women in American society, and in most of the world's societies, is well documented (Blumberg, 1978; Chafetz, 1984). Since physical force is the ultimate recourse to keep subordinate groups in their place, women in the history of Euro-American society have often been the victims of physical assault (Straus, 1976).

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Blackstone's codification of the common law in 1768 asserted that a husband had the right to "physically chastise" an errant wife, provided the stick was no bigger than his thumb. As recently as 1867 this rule was upheld by an appellate court in North Carolina. It would be bad enough if the violence against women had been limited to this "rule of thumb." However, more severe beatings were common. In the Middle Ages women were burned alive "for threatening their husbands, for talking back to or refusing a priest, for stealing, for prostitution, for adultery, for bearing a child out of wedlock, for permitting sodomy (even though the priest or husband who committed it was forgiven), for masturbating, for Lesbianism, for child neglect, for scolding and nagging, and for miscarrying, even though the miscarriage was caused by a kick or a blow from the husband" (Davis, 1971).

Burning at the stake is now part of the dim historical past. The *right* to physically chastise has long since disappeared from the common law. However, what actually takes place in American marriages is a different matter. In 1975-76 we carried out a study of a nationally representative sample of 2,143 American couples. That study revealed that at least one violent incident occurred in 16% of American families during the year of the study (1975-76). If the referent period is since the marriage began, the figure is 28% (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). Although about two-thirds of the violent incidents were minor assaults such as slapping and throwing things, the other third of the incidents were serious assaults such as punching, biting, kicking, hitting with an object, beating up, or assaults with a knife or gun.

Child Abuse

The history of Western society reveals that children have also been subject to unspeakable cruelties, including the abandonment of infants to die of exposure (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. Anyone who spends an afternoon is a supermarket or shopping mall is likely to observe instances of children being hit or verbally abused. And that is but the tip of the iceberg. Most of the physical and mental cruelty that children experience every day goes on behind the closed doors of millions of American homes.

The rate of physical child abuse revealed by the 1975 study is astounding. Interviews with parents indicate that 36 out of every thousand American children from 3 through 17 years old (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 were living with both parents in 1975, approximately 1.7 million were "abused" that year.[1]

It may be that these 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. In fact, in only 6% of the child abuse cases was there a single incident. The mean number of assaults per year was 10.5 and the median 4.5.

IS THERE AN EPIDEMIC OF CHILD ABUSE AND SPOUSE ABUSE?

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 10% per year since the mid-seventies, (American Humane Association, 1983), one is tempted to take this as evidence that child abuse is rapidly escalating. Certainly, the statistics gathered by the American Humane Association show a rising trend. However, neither the high incidence rate nor the increase in the officially reported rate necessarily mean that child abuse is increasing. 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 from 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 that 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 childrearing. American society is now undergoing a "moral passage" (Gusfield, 1963) in which the definition of child abuse is being gradually enlarged to include acts that 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.

Wife Beating

Until recently, there were no statistics on wife-beating cases known to the police or social service agencies (Lerman, 1981). Consequently, even the data for the three states that now record such cases cannot tell us about trends. However, the number of cases reported in newspapers and the number of magazine articles and television documentaries on wife beating increased dramatically during the 1970s and '80s. Although most of these articles described an "epidemic" of wife beating, the apparent increase may reflect a growing awareness and recognition of an already existing high incidence of wife beating, combined with an inability or unwillingness to believe that this much violence could previously have been characteristic of an institution as sacred as the family.

Marital violence 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 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 family violence from surveys at two time points.

DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT OF VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

The term *abuse* is a source of considerable difficulty and confusion because it covers many types of abuse, not just acts of physical violence, and because there is no consensus on the severity of violence required for an act to be considered "abuse." Since there is no standard definition of abuse, and no consensus on severity, the best that can be done is to make clear the way the terms *violence* and *abuse* are used in this article.

Violence is defined as an act carried out with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury to another person. See Gelles and Straus (1979) for an explication of this definition and an analysis of alternative definitions.[2]

The term *abuse* is restricted to *physical* abuse because we chose to concentrate the limited interview time with each family on this phenomenon. This decision was entirely a matter of research strategy. It does not imply that we think physical abuse is more important or more damaging than other types of abuse, such as psychological abuse and sexual abuse.

Child abuse was measured by the Very Severe Violence Index of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979, 1981a). 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 well as a scientific term. Despite this, we will use *abuse* for two reasons. First, it is less awkward than "Very Severe Violence Index." Second, the term is so widely used that avoiding it creates communication difficulties.

Operationalizing Violence and Abuse

Violence was measured by the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979; 1981a). This instrument has been used and refined in numerous studies of family violence (e.g., Allen and Straus, 1980; Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, and Lloyd, 1982; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, and Christopher, 1983; Giles-Sims, 1983; Hornung, McCullough, and Sugimoto, 1981; Jorgensen, 1977; Straus, 1974; Steinmetz, 1977).[3] Three different studies have established that the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) measure three factorially separate variables (Jorgensen, 1977; Schumm, Bollman, Jurich, and Martin, 1982; Straus, 1979): reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence or physical aggression. The violence index and the subindexes used as the measures of child abuse and spouse abuse are described below.

Format of the CTS. The introduction to the Conflict Tactics Scales asks respondents to think of situations in the past year when they had a disagreement or were angry with a specified family member and to indicate how often they engaged in each of the acts included in the CTS. The 1975 version of the CTS consisted of 19 items, 8 of which were acts of violence.

Violent acts. The violent acts in the version of the CTS we used for this study are: threw something at the other; pushed, grabbed, or shoved; slapped or spanked; kicked, bit, or hit with a fist; hit or tried to hit with something; beat up the other; threatened with knife or gun; used a knife or gun.[4]

Violence indexes. The violent acts included in the CTS can be combined to form a number of different violence indexes. The following measures are used in this study:

1. Overall violence. This measure indicates the percentage of parents or spouses who used *any* of the violent acts included in the CTS during the year covered by the study.

2. Severe violence. For purposes of this study, *severe violence* was defined as acts that have a relatively high probability of causing an injury. Thus, kicking is classified as severe violence because kicking a child or a spouse has a much greater potential for producing an injury than an act of "minor violence" such as spanking or slapping.[5] The acts making up the severe violence index are: kicked, bit, punched, hit with an object, beat up, threatened with a knife or gun, and used a knife or gun (see footnote 4).

3. Child abuse. What constitutes abuse is, to a considerable extent, a matter of social norms. Acts such as spanking or slapping a child, or even hitting a child with an object such as a stick, hair brush, or belt, are not abuse according to either the legal or informal norms of American society, although they are in Sweden and several other countries (Haeuser, 1985). Our operationalization of child abuse attempts to take such normative factors into consideration. In the present context, child abuse is the use by a parent of any of the acts of violence in the Severe Violence Index (see list 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.

4. Spouse violence and wife beating. The problem of terminology and norms is even greater for violence between spouses than for violence by parents. Although slapping a child occasionally is not usually considered abuse (or even violence), our perception is that the same act is often considered to be violence if done to a spouse. Thus, in the case of violence between spouses, the "overall violence" rate is more important than is overall violence by parents.

In addition, because of the greater average size and strength of men, the acts in the Severe Violence list are likely to be more damaging when the assailant is the husband. Consequently, to facilitate focusing on the rate of severe violence by husbands, the term *wife beating* will be used to refer to that rate.

THE TWO NATIONAL SURVEYS

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 with the use of an interview schedule designed by the authors. If the household included a child or children between the ages of 3 and 17 years, a "referent child" was selected by a random procedure. The restriction to children from 3 to 17 years old 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 1 and 2 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[6]

Data on a national probability sample of 6,002 households were 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: (a) presently married, or (b) presently living as a male-female couple; or a household might include one adult 18 years of age or older who was either (c) divorced or separated within the last two years, or (d) a 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 gender and marital status of 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 article is a national probability sample of 4,032 households that were selected in proportion to the distribution of households in the 50 states. The spouse abuse data are based on the 3,520 households containing a currently married or cohabiting couple; households with a single parent or a recently terminated marriage are excluded. The child abuse data are based on the 1,428 of these households with a child aged 3 through 17 and with two caretakers present.[7]

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

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

Type of Violence	Rate per 1,000 Children Aged 3 through 17[a]		t for 1975-1985 Difference
	1975 n = 1,146[b]	1985 n = 1,428[c]	
A. Minor Violence Acts			
1. Threw something	54	27	3.52***
2. Pushed/grabbed/shoved	318	307	0.54
3. Slapped or spanked	582	549	1.68
B. Severe Violence Acts			
4. Kicked/bit/hit with fist	32	13	3.31**
5. Hit, tried to hit with something	134	97	2.91**
6. Beat up	13	6	1.86
7. Threatened with gun or knife	1	2	0.69
8. Used gun or knife	1	2	0.69
C. Violence Indexes			
Overall Violence (1-8)	630	620	0.52
Severe Violence (4-8)	140	107	2.56**
Very Severe Violence (5-8) ("child abuse" for this article)	36	19	2.67***

[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.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN 1975 AND 1985[8]

Table 1 enables one to compare the 1975 and 1985 rates per thousand children for each violent act as well as three summary indexes of violence.[9] The data in Parts A and B show that, with the exception of the most unusual and severe forms of violence (Items 7 and 8: threatening and using guns and knives), *the occurrence of each form of violence toward children declined in the last 10 years*. However, only two 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 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 3-year-olds, the 1975 figure was much higher: 97%. For children aged 15 and over, the rate was much lower: "only" about a third of 15-to-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 that 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*.

VIOLENCE BETWEEN SPOUSES IN 1975 AND 1985[10]

Table 2 summarizes the findings on violence between married or cohabiting couples in the form of three indexes (data on each violent act sepa-

TABLE 2. MARITAL VIOLENCE INDEXES: COMPARISON OF 1975 AND 1985

Violence Index	Rate per 1,000 Couples		t for 1975-1985 Difference
	1975	1985	
A. Husband-to-Wife			
Overall Violence (1-6)	121	113	0.91
Severe Violence (4-8) ("wife beating")	38	30	1.60
B. Wife-to-Husband			
Overall Violence (1-6)	116	121	0.57
Severe Violence (4-8)	46	44	0.35
C. Couple			
Overall Violence (1-6)	160	158	0.20
Severe Violence (4-8)	61	58	0.46
Number of cases[a]	2,143	3,520	

[a]A few respondents were omitted because of missing data on some items, but the n is never decreased by more than 10.

rately is presented in Table 3). These indexes differentiate between "minor violence" (pushing, slapping, and throwing things) and "severe violence" (kicking, biting, punching, etc.). All but one of the nine comparisons in Table 2 show that the rate of violence was lower in 1985 than in 1975. However, as compared to the changes in parental violence, the decreases from 1975 to 1985 are much smaller.

Husband-to-Wife Violence

The first row of Table 2, Part A, shows that the Overall Violence rate of violence by husbands declined from 121 to 113. Thus, the husband-to-wife violence rate declined by 6.6%, which is not statistically significant.

The second row of Part A reports the rate of Severe Violence by husbands—our measure of "wife beating." It shows that the rate declined from 38 per thousand couples to 30 per thousand couples in 1985. A decrease of 8 per thousand may not seem large, and it is not statistically significant ($p < .10$). However, it is worth interpreting because, relative to the 1975 rate, it represents a 21.8% decrease in the rate of wife beating, and the difference comes close to being significant. In addition, a decrease of 8 per thousand in the rate of wife beating is worth noting because, if correct, it represents a large number of couples. Specifically, if the 1975 rate for husband-to-wife severe violence had remained in effect, the application of this rate to the 54 million couples in the U.S. in 1985 results in an estimate of at least 2,052,000 severely assaulted wives each year. However, if there has been a 22% decrease in the rate, that translates to 1,620,000 beaten wives, which is 432,000 fewer than would have been the case if the 1975 rate prevailed. That would be an extremely important reduction. On the other hand, the 1985 estimate of 1.6 million beaten wives is hardly an indicator of domestic tranquility."

Wife-to-Husband Violence

Although the trend for husband-to-wife violence is encouraging, the situation for wife-to-husband violence is at best mixed. Part B of Table 2 shows that the Overall Violence rate actually increased slightly. The rate for Severe Violence against a husband decreased, but only slightly. Neither of these changes is statistically significant.

In addition to the trends, the violence rates in Part B reveal an important and distressing finding about violence in American families—that, in marked contrast to the behavior of women outside the family, women are about as violent within the family as men. This highly controversial finding of the 1975 study is confirmed by the 1985 study and also by findings on other samples and by other investigators (Brutz and Ingoldsby, 1984; Gelles, 1974; Giles-Sims, 1983; Laner and Thompson, 1982; Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985; Jouriles and O'Leary, 1985; Makepeace, 1983; Sack, Keller and Howard, 1982; Saunders, 1986; Scanzoni, 1978; Steinmetz, 1977, 1977-78; Szinovacz, 1983).

Although the two national surveys and the ten studies just cited leave little doubt about the high frequency of wife-to-husband violence, the meaning and consequences of that violence are easily misunderstood. For one thing, as pointed out elsewhere (Straus, 1977; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980: 43), the greater average size and strength of men, and their greater aggressiveness (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Tavris and Offir, 1977), mean that the same act (for example, a punch) is likely to be very different in the amount of pain or injury inflicted (see also Greenblat, 1983). Even more important, a great deal of violence by women against their husbands is retalia-

tion or self-defense (Straus, 1980; Saunders, 1986). One of the most fundamental reasons why some women are violent within the family, but not outside the family, is that the risk of assault for a typical American woman is greatest in her own home (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980: chapters 1 and 2). Nonetheless, violence by women against their husbands is not something to be dismissed because of the even greater violence by husbands.

On the other hand, the cost of drawing attention to violence by wives is that the information will be used to defend male violence. Our 1975 data, for example, have been used against battered women in court cases, and also to minimize the need for shelters for battered women. However, in the long run, the results of the present study suggest that the cost of denial and suppression is even greater. Rather than attempting to deny the existence of such violence (see Pleck, Pleck, Grossman, and Bart, 1977, for an example and the reply by Steinmetz, 1978), a more productive solution is to confront the issue and attempt to eliminate violence by women. This is beginning to happen. Almost all shelters for battered women now have policies designed to deal with the high rate of child abuse, and some are also facing up to the problem of wife-to-husband violence.

Couple Violence and Specific Violent Acts

Couple violence. Part C of Table 2 combines the data on violence by husbands and wives. The first row shows that in 1975, a violent act occurred in 160 out of every thousand families, and that the 1985 rate was almost as high. Similarly, the second row reveals only a small decrease in the rate of *severe* assaults on a spouse—from 61 to 58 per thousand couples. This is a 5% reduction, which is not statistically significant.

Specific violent acts. Table 3 presents the rates for each of the violent acts making up the 1975 and 1985 versions of the CTS. These rates are presented for the record and to show what went into the summary indexes discussed above.

PREVENTION AND TREATMENT PROGRAMS AND CHANGE IN FAMILY VIOLENCE

This section considers the extent to which change in different forms of intrafamily violence parallels the extent of the intensity of prevention and treatment programs.

Child Abuse

This form of physical violence entered the public agenda as a major social problem with the classic paper by Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, and Silver (1962). Since 1971, every state has adopted compulsory reporting laws, and an extensive educational effort has developed across the country. In comparison to other forms of domestic violence, the largest share of financial resources has been allocated to child abuse. 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. Providing shelters has mostly been a private endeavor of the women's movement. Even

TABLE 3. MARITAL VIOLENCE: COMPARISON OF SPECIFIC ACTS, 1975–1985

Type of Violence	Husband-to-Wife		Wife-to-Husband	
	1975	1985	1975	1985
A. Minor Violence Acts				
1. Threw something	28	28	52	43
2. Pushed/grabbed/shoved	107	93	83	89
3. Slapped	51	29**	46	41
B. Severe Violence Acts				
4. Kicked/bit/hit with fist	24	15*	31	24
5. Hit, tried to hit with something	22	17	30	30
6. Beat up	11	8	6	4
7. Threatened with gun or knife	4	4	6	6
8. Used gun or knife	3	2	2	2
Number of cases[a]	2,143	3,520	2,143	3,520

[a]A few respondents were omitted because of missing data on some items, but the *n* is never decreased by more than 10.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$ (two-tailed *t* tests for 1975–85 differences).

the feeble effort of the federal government in the form of an information clearinghouse was abolished early in the Reagan administration. 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 succeeded in creating a national consciousness and in establishing hundreds of shelters for battered women (Back, Blum, Nakhnikian, and Stark, 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 have been invested in ameliorating this problem because it has not been defined as a problem. In fact, our 1975 study was criticized for presenting statistics on violence by wives.[12] Our 1985 finding of little change in the rate of assaults by women on their male partners is consistent with the absence of ameliorative programs.

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). Consistent with this, we found only small and nonsignificant differences between 1975 and 1985 in the overall rate of parent-to-child violence.

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

We have presented some startling and controversial findings. When the *Christian Science Monitor* interviewed criminologist Richard Berk concerning the results of this study ("2 researchers say," 18 November 1985, pp. 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 6 years, will produce a 10-year decrease that is greater than the 47% decrease we found for child abuse (Straus, 1986).

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, our statistics on the decrease in child abuse and wife beating parallel the recent decreases in homicide, including intrafamily homicide (Straus, in press). Nevertheless, it is important to regard these results with caution because, with the data available, one can only speculate about the processes that produced the decreases. We will discuss three 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; Smith, in press), and telephone interviewing is now the most widely used method of conducting surveys, including the National Crime Survey. To the extent that there is a difference, we believe, the anonymity offered by the telephone leads to more truthfulness and, therefore, increased reporting of violence. The difference in interview method should have produced *higher*, not lower, rates of reported violence in 1985.

However, a characteristic of telephone surveys that 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 85% 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 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 survey, 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, Pomeroy, and Martin, 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 and wife beating is that respondents may have been more reluctant to report severe violence in 1985 than in 1975. As indicated above, the last 10 years have seen a tremendous increase in public attention to the problem of child abuse and wife beating. 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 and wife beating may reflect a "moral passage" (Gusfield, 1963), as family violence becomes less acceptable and consequently fewer parents and fewer husbands are willing to admit to participating in violence. The implications of such a change in American culture are discussed at the conclusion of this article.

Change in Behavior

The third explanation is that there has indeed been a decline in child abuse and wife beating. This explanation is consistent with changes in the family and other developments during the last 10 years that might have served to reduce the rate of family violence. These fall into five broad categories: changes in the family and the economy that are associated with less violence, more alternatives for abused women, treatment programs, and deterrence.

Change in family structure. There have been changes in a number of aspects of the family that 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.[13] In addition, later marriage and the greater acceptability of divorce tend 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 violence (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 percentage of women with paid jobs. Moreover, we found that full-time housewives experience a higher rate of wife beating (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980); thus 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 employment 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.

Alternatives for battered women. As noted earlier, there were only a handful of "safe houses" or "shelters" for battered women in 1975, as contrasted with about 700 in 1985 (Back et al., 1980; Warrior, 1982). The existence of shelters provides an alternative that did not exist in 1975. In addition, the fact that shelters provide an alternative may have emboldened more women to tell their partner that his violence is unacceptable, and to make this more than an idle threat. Similarly, the tremendous growth in paid employ-

ment of married women in the 1975–85 period not only helped rectify the imbalance of power between spouses, but also provided the economic resources that enable more women to terminate a violent marriage (Kalmuss and Straus, 1982). Finally, the increased acceptance of divorce probably also helped more women to terminate violent marriages.

Treatment programs. New and innovative prevention and treatment programs for child abuse and wife beating proliferated during or immediately before the 1975–85 decade. All 50 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 workers in child protective services is likely to have had an impact.[14] Only a small percentage of the cases they deal with are the gory (and difficult to treat) cases that 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.

In respect to wife beating, whereas no treatment programs for men who assault their wives existed in the early 1970s, 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.[15] 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 intrafamily 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, in press). The decade in question has been characterized by activities that were intended to change both internalized norms and objective sanctions about family violence. Extensive efforts have been made 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 a husband's redefining "I just slapped her a few times" to "I was violent." Each of these activities probably contributed to a changed perception of the legitimacy of violence against children and wives and therefore plays a preventative or deterrent role. Public opinion poll data suggest 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 problem of wife beating, although emphasized less than child abuse, has also received a major amount of publicity. It is not implausible to suggest that the advertising campaigns and media attention have had some effect in making parents more cautious about assaulting children and husbands more cautious about severely assaulting wives.

Another important change affects the certainty and severity of legal sanctions for wife beating. The police are gradually changing methods of dealing with wife beating. At the time of the 1975 study, the training manual for police officers prepared by the International Association of Chiefs of Police recommended separating the warring parties and leaving the scene of the marital violence. That manual now recommends dealing with all assaults on the same bases, irrespective of whether they are in the home or elsewhere (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1976). A growing number of police departments are doing that. To the extent that this change in police policy was known to potential offenders, it is not implausible to think that it has had an effect. Indeed, a study comparing three different methods used by the police to deal with domestic violence suggests that there is a lower recidivism rate when wife beating is treated as a criminal act rather than a private problem (Sherman and Berk, 1984).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article compares the rates of physical violence against children and spouses from a 1975–76 survey with the rates from a 1985 study that used the same instrument to measure violence. The most important findings are as follows: (a) 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. (b) Wife beating (measured by the occurrence of these same acts, plus hitting with an object) decreased by 22%, but similarly severe assaults by wives on husbands decreased only 4.3%. (c) Even with these reductions, the rates of child abuse and wife beating remain 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: (a) differences in the methodology used in the two surveys, (b) a greater reluctance on the part of the respondents to report violence, or (c) a decrease in the amount of child abuse and wife beating. Our interpretation is that 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 a change in violent 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 and fewer beaten wives. However, even if the reduction is 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 family violence have achieved a certain measure of success. In view of the fact that this decrease refers to changes in a relatively short period of 10 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 10 years is to instill new standards for parents and husbands about the inappropriateness of violence, that is a key element in the process of reducing the actual rate of child abuse and wife beating.

Most likely the findings represent a combination of changed attitudes and norms along with changes in overt behavior. This interpretation is based on a number of changes in American society that 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 nationwide 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 article and the even greater *increase* in cases known to child protective services (American Humane Association, 1983). To understand this, it is necessary to abandon the terminology used earlier in this article, 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.[4] The increase in the former (which is a proxy for the number of cases treated) is one of the factors that made possible the decrease in the number of child abuse incidents reported in this article.

The interpretations of the findings presented here have important policy implications that contrast sharply with the interpretation given in *Child Protection Report* under the headline "Gelles Study Strikes Discordant Note" (22 November 1985, p. 3), 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 10 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*, "Lung cancer," 3 December 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 intrafamily violence, a national accomplishment can be achieved. Moreover, the findings also show that an intensified effort is needed. Even if all the reductions 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 million abused children aged 3 through 17 in two-parent households. Similarly, a reduction of 27% in wife beating still leaves over a million and a half beaten wives each year in the United States.

FOOTNOTES

1. See the section on definition and measurement for definitions of the terms *abuse* and *violence* as they are used in this report.

2. 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 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 persons'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 is 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 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, Jouriles and O'Leary (1985), Jorgensen (1977), and Schumm et al. (1982).

4. The 1985 version contains an additional item for parent-child violence (scalding or burning) and an additional item for husband-wife violence (choking). These items are excluded from comparisons of 1975 rates with 1985 rates but will be presented in a later paper (Straus and Gelles, 1986). In addition, the 1985 CTS was supplemented by questions intended to assess the consequences or outcomes of acts of violence. We added a series of questions that asked whether an act of violence produced an injury that required medical attention—either seeing a doctor or overnight hospitalization—and also questions on depression and other possible mental health effects. These data will also be reported in a later paper.

5. It should be recognized that in most instances, being kicked, although painful, does *not* result in an injury. However, the absence of injury does not make it less abusive an 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 that 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.

6. The 1985 survey differs from the 1975–76 study in a number of important ways. It includes several groups that 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 that 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 article is restricted to the comparable parts of the 1985 sample and the comparable parts of the instrumentation. See also footnote 4.

7. 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 that include these oversamples will be weighted to take into account the state, black, and Hispanic oversamples.

8. This section is relatively brief because violence against children is covered in detail in a companion paper focused entirely on that aspect of family violence (Gelles and Straus, 1985).

9. Previous reports on the 1975 study expressed the violence rate as a *percentage* of husbands, wives, or children, whereas, starting with this article, we use a rate per thousand couples or children. There are three reasons for this. (a) *Rate per thousand is comparable with other crime and child abuse rates.* The National Crime Survey (U.S. Department of Justice, 1985), 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 National Crime Survey rates for assault and other crimes. Another alternative is the Uniform Crime Reports system of rates per hundred thousand. However, such a rate is not appropriate, because our survey samples were in the thousands, not hundred thousands. (b) *Results are presented as integers.* It is customary in demography, criminology, and medical sociology to use a rate that 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, rather than as 0.184% versus 0.012%. (c) *Rate per thousand avoids confusion with percentage change.* In the context of this article, using "X per thousand" instead of "X%" avoids confusion with "X% change" or the awkwardness in spelling out the latter as "X% change in the percentage violent."

10. For convenience and economy of wording, terms such as *marital, spouse, wife,* and *husband* are used to refer to couples, irrespective of whether they are married or nonmarried cohabiting persons. For an analysis of differences and similarities between married and cohabiting couples in the 1975-76 study, see Yllö (1978); Yllö and Straus (1981).

11. In addition, the 1985 rate presented in this article is restricted to the comparable part of the sample and the comparable list of violent acts. The figures to be presented in a later paper using all couples and the enlarged CTS list of violent acts yields a somewhat higher rate.

12. 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 project 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.

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

14. 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 five 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, an increase of 41, or a 43% increase. *Rhode Island:* The number of CPS workers increased from 12 in 1974 to 125 in 1985, 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 (from 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 1970s.

15. 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, 11 March 1986).

16. 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 actually 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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