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PHYSICAL VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN FAMILIES:  
INCIDENCE RATES, CAUSES, AND TRENDS\*

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It can be argued that costly surveys to produce statistics on the incidence of child abuse and women battering are not necessary because we already know these things exist and that they are wrong. According to this view, it is better to spend the money on programs that will reduce the level of intra-family violence, and to directly investigate the causes and treatment methods.

Although I applaud the humanitarian impulses behind that view, failure to establish the basic facts about incidence and prevalence would cost much more than it would save. Just two of the many costs can be named here.

First, it would make it harder to obtain financial support for services. The findings on incidence rates reported in this chapter indicate that violence is not the exclusive property of a few cruel or mentally ill parents or spouses. It occurs in millions of "normal" families. But as long as the public and members of legislatures continue to think of violence as a problem of a few "sick" persons, financial support for the effort needed to end family violence will be harder to obtain.

A second cost of not having information on incidence and prevalence rates among families in general, is the risk -- almost the certainty -- of serious policy errors or omissions. Research findings based on samples of abused children who are aided by child protective services, or women in a battered women's shelter, may not apply to other abused children or spouses. Obviously, the information obtained from studies of those "clinical groups" is necessary for helping these victims. However, it may not apply to the vast number of abused children and beaten women who are not part of a formal intervention effort.

The difference between results based on a clinical population and results based on a cross-section of the population is illustrated by findings on gender differences in domestic assaults. Findings from studies done in shelters for battered women or studies of police reports show that physical abuse of spouses is overwhelmingly an act of male violence. But studies of the general population show that women hit husbands about as often as husbands hit wives, and women also initiate assaults just as often (Stets and Straus, 1990; Straus, 1989). We cannot learn this from shelter statistics or police statistics for a number of reasons. First, when men are assaulted, they are injured much less often than are women (Stets and Straus, 1990), and the police tend to record only cases in which there is an injury. Second, men have greater economic resources and therefore do not as often need the equivalent of battered women's shelter. Third, male pride in physical strength and shame in not being able to "handle a woman" inhibits filing a complaint with the police, even when they are repeatedly assaulted by a wife. Although it does not show up in shelter statistics or police statistics, the high level of domestic assaults by women is critically important information for primary prevention (Straus, 1990b; Straus and Smith, 1990). It means that, although victim services and treatment efforts must continue to be focused on violence by men, an effort must also be made to alert women to the criminality and the danger to themselves that comes from assaulting a spouse.

These two examples illustrate the importance of information on the incidence of family violence in the general population. In view of the importance of this information, the first objective of this chapter is to present estimates of how much physical violence there is in American families. The second objective is to outline a theory of the social causes of intra-family violence. The last section of the chapter describes trends in family violence and uses this theory to interpret those changes.

## WHAT IS VIOLENCE?

### Obstacles To Perceiving Family Violence

The question of how much violence takes place behind the closed doors of American households is obscured by the principle of family privacy, and by certain paradoxes about the family.

One of the paradoxes has to do with the fact that the family is both a loving and supportive group and also an extremely violent group. In fact, the family is the most violent group that a typical citizen is likely to be part of. At the same time, the family is also the most loving and supportive group that a typical citizen is likely to be part of. That doesn't mean that all families are loving and supportive, nor does it mean that all families are violent. But on the average, love is more likely to occur in the context of one's family. Similarly, violence is more likely to occur at the hands of another member of one's family than it is at the hands of anyone else. In fact, for men, the probability being assaulted by someone who is a member of your own family is more than 20 times greater than the probability of being assaulted by someone who is not a family member, and for women, the risk is more than 200 times greater (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980:49).<sup>\*1</sup>

A second paradox is that even though the world outside the family is less violent than the world inside the family, we tend to see the family as non-violent. This is because the loving and supportive part obscures our ability to perceive the violent part of family life. It makes it hard to face up to how much violence there is. We do not want to see it. We have perceptual blinders.

### Definition And Measurement of Violence

Another obstacle to estimating how much violence there is between family members occurs because the estimates can vary tremendously, depending on how violence is defined and the method used to measure violence. The definition of violence used for the research reported in this chapter is from Gelles and Straus (1979):

An act carried out with the intention or perceived intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person

Two elements in this definition, act and intention, need some further explanation. The import of the "act" part of the definition can be seen if one imagines a husband who shoots a gun at his wife. Fortunately, most men are bad shots, and unless at point blank range, he will usually miss.

But according to this definition (and also the legal definition of assault), that is still serious violence, even though she is not injured. It is the act, the assault, which matters. Using the act as a defining criterion of violence, the incidence rates will be much higher than if only assaults which actually resulted in injury are counted. As for intent, suppose a couple is moving a piece of furniture and it slips and a toe is broken. That is not violence as defined here because there was no intent to cause pain or injury.

Acts Versus Injuries. Child protection workers and the staffs of shelters for battered women often define violence in terms of injuries. A battered child means an injured child. For some purposes, measuring violence by injuries is appropriate, for example, if the purpose is to estimate the need for medical services. However, as suggested above, this method of measuring violence greatly underestimates the total amount of violence because, only about five percent of physically abused children and three percent of physically abused women are injured enough to require medical care (Stets and Straus, 1990; Straus, 1989b). These are children and wives who are suffering, both from the psychological impact of being assaulted by a parent or spouse, and from physical blows which hurt even if they do not injure. If injury is used as the basis for defining and measuring intra-family violence, the rates of child abuse and wife abuse would be less than a 20th of those given below, and we would be ignoring over 95 percent of the problem.

Other Aspects Of Violence. There are a number of other dimensions which need to be considered to understand violence. One of these is whether the violent act is legitimate according to the legal norms or the informal norms of society. Some violence is legitimate, such as slapping a child; and some is illegitimate, such as slapping a spouse. Another important dimension is whether the violence is "instrumental" to some other purpose, such as to coerce someone to do or not do something, or whether it is an "expressive" act, carried out for its own sake, i.e., something done just to see the other person in pain.

Physical Violence Is Not The Only Type Abuse. Although the focus of this chapter on physical violence, that does not imply that physical assaults are the only, or even the worst, types of abuse that family members can inflict on each other. One can hurt a child or a spouse terribly by verbally assaults without lifting a finger (Straus, Sweet and Vissing, 1989; Vissing and Straus, 1990). Children and wives are frequently sexually assaulted (Finkelhor, 1986; Finkelhor and Yllo, 1985), and theft by a family members is more common than theft by a stranger (Straus and Lincoln, 1985).

#### HOW VIOLENT ARE AMERICAN FAMILIES?

##### Physical Punishment And Murder

The incidence rates for two types of family violence have been known for many years -- physical punishment of children and murder of a family member.

The rate of physical punishment is known because child development researchers have studied it since the 1920's. Those studies leave no doubt that physical punishment is just about universal in American society. It may seem inappropriate to count physical punishment as violence, and that issue will be discussed later. For now, however, it only needs to be noted that physical punishment is an act intended to cause the child a certain degree of physical pain, and that this is almost exactly how violence was defined a few paragraphs above.

As for murders of family members, statistics on this crime have been collected by the FBI for many years, and there are also data from other countries. These data make it clear that a typical citizen is more likely to be murdered by a member of his or her own family than by anyone else (Straus, 1986, 1988). In the United States, the figure is only about a quarter of all homicides, in Canada it is about half, and in Denmark about two thirds of all homicides are within-family (Straus, 1988).

The differences between nations is puzzling at first because Denmark also has one of the world's lowest overall homicide rates. But among those few homicides, most take place within the family, and this is what produces the 67% figure. In Denmark, the few family homicides that do occur are a large slice of a very small pie. On the other hand, "only" about one quarter of homicides in the United States are within-family homicides because there are so many murders of non-family members. In the US, the large number of family homicides are a small slice of a large pie. Or putting it another way, when homicide is just about eliminated in a society as is the case with Denmark, then the one place where it tends to persist is within the family.

#### The National Family Violence Surveys

Although information about physical punishment and murders has been known for a number of years, what has not been known is the rate of violence that is more serious than physical punishment (such as physical abuse of children) but less serious than murder (such as wife-beating). In 1973, my colleagues and I began planning a study to help fill that gap. It came to fruition in 1975 in the form of the first National Family Violence Survey (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). The 2,143 couples in that survey were a nationally representative sample of American families.

A second national survey was conducted in 1985, this time with a sample of 6,002 couples. The large sample size was needed to have enough cases so that an increase between 1975 and 1985 of 20 percent, or a decrease of 20 percent, would be statistically significant. The 1985 survey also corrected certain omissions. It included single parents, and separated or divorced people if the marriage had ended within the previous two years.

Detailed information on how the 1985 study was conducted is given in Straus and Gelles (1990), including information which shows that the sample accurately represents the US adult population. However, a word of caution is also needed. Although the study has a sampling error of less than plus or minus one percent, this does not say anything about how

accurately people provided the information. One can have a representative sample in which everyone "lied through their teeth", or just did not remember all or even most of the incidents. In the case of the National Family Violence Surveys, both problems occurred. Some respondents withheld information about violent incidents, and even more respondents did not recall incidents. Thus, the figures to be given below are "lower bound" estimates in the sense that these are the minimum rates, and the true rates are higher by some unknown amount.

### The Conflict Tactics Scales

Both the 1975 and the 1985 National Family Violence Surveys used the Conflict Tactics Scales or CTS (Straus, 1979, 1990a) to measure violence, including sub-scales for "minor violence and "severe" violence.\*<sup>2</sup> The items in the Minor Violence scale are pushed, grabbed, shoved, threw something, and slapped or spanked the spouse or child. The severe violence scale consists of violent act that are more likely to cause an injury which needs medical treatment: kicked, bit, punched, beat up, choked, burned, threatened with a knife or gun, used a knife or gun.

### Incidence Rates

(Table 1 about here)

Table 1 shows the violence rates from the 1985 National Family Violence Survey. These rates are discussed in detail elsewhere (Straus and Gelles, 1986, 1990) and only a few key figures will be commented on in this chapter.

Marital Violence. The rates for physical assaults between partners in a married or cohabiting relationship are given in part A of Table 1.\*<sup>3</sup> The top of the first column shows that 16 out of every hundred couples reported a violent incident during the year of the survey. If this rate is correct, the "Estimated Number" column shows that 8.7 million couples experienced violence that year. However, as indicated earlier, these are "lower bound" estimates, and the true figure is much greater -- perhaps double, which would make it one third of American couples in any one year (see Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980:34-36 for an explanation).

On the other hand, 16 per 100 and 8.7 million may overstate the situation, at least from a certain perspective. This is because the second row of Table 1 shows that "only" 3.4 million of those 8.7 million assaults were "severe" assaults in the sense that the attack included acts which carry a high risk of causing an injury, such as kicking, punching, choking, and use of weapons.

Prevalence Rate. In contrast to the one year "incidence" rates just presented, "prevalence" will be used to indicate the proportion of couples who, over the course of the marriage, experienced a violent altercation. The exact figure from the 1985 survey is 30%. However, that is probably even more of an underestimate than the 50% suggested for the one year incidence rates because violent incidents are often forgotten, particularly if they occurred only once and a long time ago. But sticking

with the estimate that the true rate is probably double, the 30% prevalence rate means that perhaps 60% of American couples experienced at least one physical assault over the course of the marriage.

Gender Differences In Marital Assaults. Wife-beating has been the aspect of marital violence of most public concern, as it should be because women are the main victims when the criterion is physical, economic, and psychological injury (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980; Stets and Straus, 1990). Nevertheless, the next two rows of Table 1 show that women engage in assaults against their partners as often as men assault their wives. Moreover, as noted earlier, women initiate this violence about as often as men do. This is a serious problem not only because violence is morally wrong when committed by women, just as it is when committed by men, but also because it vastly increases the risk of women being attacked in retaliation by their partners (Straus, 1989).

Chronicity of Assaults On Women. The annual incidence rates and the marital prevalence rates given previously indicate how many couples are experience an assault. The "chronicity" of violence -- how often the violent acts occur is also important. Among those who reported an incident involving a severe assault by the husband, about a third reported only one incident. However, the distribution is very skewed, and the average was five times during year. Those are very violent couples. On the other hand, the chronicity of violence in these survey couples, high as it is, is much less than for couples where the wife has sought help from a battered women's shelter. Two studies of shelter population women also used the CTS (Giles-Sims 1983; Okun, 1986) and both found about 60 assaults during the year.

Community Samples and Clinical Samples. The difference between an assault every few months and more than one assault per week is so great that it raises a question about the whether information based on the experience of women in samples drawn from shelters is generalizable to women in the general population who are assaulted by their partners, but on the average far less often and less severely. In the introduction to this chapter the hazard of attempting to generalize findings from a clinical sample to the population in general was identified as the "clinical fallacy". The huge difference in the chronicity of violence between the violent couples in the National Family Violence Survey and the frequency of violence to which women in shelters have been exposed, suggests that there is probably also a "representative sample fallacy" (Straus, 1990b). The "battered women" in this sample, are not nearly as battered as the women in shelters, many of whom experienced an attack every week. The average of "only" 5 per year (less than one a month) among the cross-section of battered women in the National Family Violence Survey suggests that it is equally hazardous to generalize from a representative sample to a clinical population.

Child Abuse. Part B of Table 1 gives the rates for physical abuse of children, using two related measures of child abuse. "Child Abuse 1" (Very Severe Violence) includes only acts that are undeniably abusive: kicking, biting, punching, beating up, choking, attacking a child with a knife or gun. The rate in the second row of Part B of Table 1 uses this measure. It shows that 2.3 percent of American children were physically abused in 1985, which produces a lower bound estimate of 1,500,000



severely assaulted children that year. Moreover, these attacks occurred an average of seven times (median = 3.5 times).

"Child Abuse 2" (Severe Violence) includes the same acts as Child Abuse 1, and in addition, includes "hitting with an object." The incidence of child abuse using this measure is 11 out of every hundred children, which produces a lower bound estimate of 6.9 million abused children. This is almost five times greater than the estimate without the additional item. Which measure is correct?

Many people object to Child Abuse 2 because "hitting with an object" includes traditionally approved objects such as a paddle, hairbrush, or belt. If "child abuse" is the use of force beyond what is normatively permitted, then this is not child abuse. On the other hand, although that may have been permissible in the past, it can be argued it is no longer the case. Sweden and some other European countries have made any use of physical punishment illegal. In the United States, a national committee with that goal was formed in January 1989. For the present, it seems that the resolution of this issue depends on research which can identify what the norms really are.

Summary. The statistics just presented, which are based on a study of a large and nationally representative sample of American families, provide evidence that the family is pre-eminent in violence. The risk of assault within the family is many times greater than of being assaulted by someone who is not a member of the victim's family. This is particularly true for women, who contrary to the public image, have very little risk of being assaulted outside the family. Using the figures on assaults per 100,000 from the FBI, I estimate that the rate of non-family physical assault on women is less than 20 per 100,000 women, but the rate of intra-family assaults on women is about 4,000 per 100,000 women. Thus, women have a 200 times greater risk of being assaulted within the family than outside the family. Moreover, these statistics are for severe assaults. If one were to count all the instances in which he "only slapped her" the figure would be much higher. This brings us back to the puzzle of how the family can be both such a loving and supportive group and at the same time also such a violent group.

#### THE SOCIAL CAUSES OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

In the space of this chapter, only a few of the multiple causes can be examined. Moreover, since I am a sociologist, my research has investigated the social causes. This is not because other types of causes, especially psychological causes, are unimportant. It is just that in the division of labor in science, my assignment is to find out about the social causes. Of necessity, I leave it to psychologists to investigate the psychological causes, and other chapters in this book do that.

#### High Level Of Conflict Is Inherent In Families

The first of the social causes of family violence is the inherently high level of conflict that is characteristic of families. Conflict is

a characteristic of all human groups, but it is especially prevalent in certain types of groups and the family is one of these kinds of groups. Professors will think of another kind of group where conflict is also prevalent -- university departments. But the frequency and intensity of intra-family conflict is considerably greater than the frequency and intensity of conflict in academic departments. There are several reasons.

Wide Range Of Activities. First, the family is concerned with the entire range of activities and interests of its members -- the "whole person" as the phrase goes. That, of course, is what most people want and value in family relationships. The difficulty is that it means there is nothing that is off limits, and therefore nothing that cannot be the focus of a conflict. The more things there are of mutual concern, the greater the probability there will be a conflict. While I might get into an argument with my colleagues about what courses to teach next semester, it is extremely unlikely that one of them will argue about the color or pattern of my necktie. However, the color of a tie or of a dress is something that can be a source of argument with a spouse. This is because spouses are concerned with the "whole person," not just limited aspects such as teaching or research productivity. As already noted, within the family, almost nothing is off limits, and this means there is more opportunity for conflict.

Gender And Age Differences. The family usually consists of both men and women and young and old. The differences between them, which are rooted in traditional cultural orientations as well as differences in the historical experience of each generation, are a potent source of conflict. To a certain extent men and women have different values and cognitive orientations (Gilligan, 1982), different conceptions of power (Miller, 1986), and different worldviews (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986). The "battle of the sexes" is built into the family and it is in its most acute form within the family.

The generation gap is also most acute within the family. It expresses itself in many ways, for example, in clothing styles and whether rock or Bach is going to be played on the family stereo.

Shared Identity. The necktie/dress color example, and the rock music example also illustrate another of the reasons why conflict is so frequent and so severe within the family -- the shared identity of family members and the resulting intensity of involvement. In addition, there is a presumed right to influence other family members. If a spouse comments that the colors do not go well together, he or she usually does it out of concern for the other and because they have a "shared fate." Moreover, the comment about the color of the tie or dress is not just an abstract aesthetic judgment. Rather, there is an implicit expectation that a different color tie or dress will be chosen.

In the case of rock music, I live two houses from a student rooming house. In the spring and fall windows will be thrown open and rock music blasted out as loud as possible. That does not bother me. But when my children were still at home, and the rock music was in my own house, that did bother me. It was the identical music. The difference is that the type of music played by the students down the block was none of my business. But the music played by my own children was my business as a

father. I remember saying to myself in desperation, "What have I done wrong as a father? These are such wonderful kids, but somehow I failed to transmit the heritage of our civilization."

Involuntary membership. Membership in the family is, to a considerable extent, not a matter of choice. A parent cannot throw children out, even though most parents have probably thought about that at one time or another. And children cannot leave, even though most children have probably thought about that at one time or another. The involuntary membership therefore blocks using one of the most frequent solutions for human conflicts -- leaving.

Leaving is also difficult for spouses, even in this day of a high divorce rate. It is expensive, there is guilt, there are the good things about the marriage, there is having to tell ones parents, friends and other relatives, and there is concern for the well being of the children. So even when the conflict seems to be unresolvable, people stay and put up with conflicts that they would otherwise stop by leaving.

Family Privacy. Another characteristic of the family which accounts for the high level of conflict is family privacy. This insulates conflicts within the family from both social controls and social supports that might serve to reduce or resolve the conflict. For example, family members say nasty things to each other in private that they would never say in public.

Conflict And Violence. Hotaling and Straus (1980) describe a number of other characteristics of the family which engender a high level of conflict. All of these things add up, and the high level of conflict in turn, increases the risk that one or another member of the family will try to win the conflict by hitting, or will just hit out of anger over the conflict. This relationship is shown in Figure 1 (from Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980).

(Figure 1 about here)

The amount of conflict is on the horizontal axis and the assault rate is on the vertical axis. The plot line shows that, as the amount of conflict goes up, the assault rate also goes up dramatically.

One reaction to the findings in Figure 1 might be: "That's just demonstrating the obvious. Everyone knows that the more conflict, the more violence there will be." That was my first reaction. But the assumption underlying this "obvious" fact is not correct, as I will show later in this chapter.

### Gender Inequality

A second major cause of family violence is inequality, and particularly male dominance (Straus, 1977, Coleman and Straus, 1986). Male dominance occurs in many subtle ways such as the fact that men earn more than women in the United States, and that the husband is usually considered to be the "head of the household."

The idea of the husband as the head of the household is at the root of a great many assaults on wives. To understand this, we need to examine what "head of the household" means? It frequently means that if the couple cannot agree the husband has the right to have the final say. There are millions of women who believe in that in principle. Remember that more women opposed the Equal Rights Amendment than men. The difficulty occurs because, sooner or later there will be an issue that, principle or not, is so important for the wife that it has to be her way if they can't otherwise agree. Moreover, when that happens, there is double trouble. First there is whatever they were arguing about. Second, she is going back on the implicit marriage contract.

The issue then becomes transformed into a moral issue as men tend to see it, because she has failed to fulfill the implicit marriage agreement. This is the kind of issue which produces a high level of moral indignation on the part of men. The fact that the problem has been transformed from a focus on a specific issue to one of moral right and wrong is extremely important because moral indignation provides a powerful justification for violence. In fact, most violence, whether in the family or elsewhere, is carried out for what the violent person thinks is a morally right purpose. One can see this almost every day in the TV western where someone "insults my girl" and gets hit on the head with a bottle, or in the TV soap opera where her husband says something outrageous and she "slaps the cad." One can also see it in the actions of an American president who authorizes ships to be blown up in the harbor of a tiny Central American country in order to defend America from communism.

(Figure 2 about here)

Figure 2 shows the relationship between inequality and violence (from the National Family Violence Survey, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980:192). The general principle shown by the data plotted in Figure 2 is that the greater the departure from equality, the greater the risk that physical force will be used to maintain the power of the dominant person.

The rate of assaults by husbands is the solid line in Figure 2, and the rate of assaults by women on their husbands is the dashed line. The equalitarian couples are in the middle of Figure 2. It can be seen that equalitarian couples have the lowest rates of violence. The husband-dominated couples are on the right side, and they have the highest rate of spouse abuse. The wife-dominated couples are on the left side. The violence rates in wife-dominant couples are also higher than the rate in equalitarian couples, but not as much higher.\*<sup>4</sup> In addition, one has to keep in mind that there are fewer wife-dominant than husband-dominant couples.

Coleman and Straus (1986) have shown that the male dominance is related to violence even when the wife believes -- sometimes fervently -- that the husband should be the head of the family.

#### Norms Which Permit Intra-Family Violence

Almost all human behavior is influenced by the rules of society which specify appropriate behavior in specific situations -- what

anthropologists and sociologists call "cultural norms." This is also the case for violence. Every society has rules about violence. Moreover, as with other rules, the rules about violence vary from situation to situation.

Violence By Parents. In American society violence by parents is permitted and to a certain extent required (Carson, 1986). Parents not only have the legal right to hit, but they are expected to do so if the child persistently misbehaves and they have tried other approaches without success. That right was reaffirmed when a number of states passed child abuse laws. Those statutes say that nothing in the law should be taken as denying the right of parents to use ordinary physical punishment. So there is a certain irony in the fact that legislation, which was passed to protect children from assault, simultaneously put the weight of the state on the side of hitting children "when necessary."

The laws just mentioned are not merely obsolete statutes. Almost all American parents support the use of physical punishment and almost all do it, at least with small children. Ninety percent of the parents in the National Family Violence Survey approved of physical punishment, and this is consistent with many other studies, for example two recent national surveys (Lehman, 1989).

Violence By Spouses. Just as parenthood confers a license to hit, the marriage license is also a hitting license. This right was a formal part of the common law until just after the Civil War in the United States (Galvert, 1974). Blackstone's definitive codification of the English common law gave husbands the right "to physically chastise an errant wife." Even though this rule has not been recognized by the courts for more than a century, it has lived on de facto in the actions (and failures to act) of the police, prosecutors, and victims. Until it was changed in the 1977 edition, the training manual for domestic disturbance calls published by the International Association Of Chiefs of Police, essentially recommended that it be treated as a private matter and that arrests should be avoided (International Association Of Chiefs of Police, 1977).

The "hitting license" implicit in the marriage license has been so powerful that merely rescinding the old common law rule was not sufficient. Nor was it sufficient that the statutes on assault, unlike those on rape, did not contain a "marital exemption." In state after state, new laws had to be passed in the 1980's which, in effect, said "yes, we really do mean it, if a husband hits his wife, it is a crime." Despite the new laws, despite increased police action, the implicit hitting license remains. The main change has been a reduction in the severity of violence that is tolerated.

Although the formal legal norms have changed, the informal norms have changed much less. We found that almost a third of American men and a quarter of American women said they it is normal for a husband or wife to slap the other on occasion (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980: 47). That is very general. If we had specified the occasion and asked whether it would be ok to slap her if the dinner wasn't cooked right, the percentage would probably have dropped to near zero. Conversely, if we had asked men

about slapping a wife "if you came home and found her in bed with another man," it would probably go up to 60-70 percent.

Since everyone is against violence in principle, it is often hard to perceive that there are norms which permit violence between a couple. One's thinking has to be jarred to see it. Here are two examples. At a lecture at a leading American University, a prominent sociologist objected to the claim that the family was an extremely violent group. He said "Look at your own figures, they show a 16 percent violence rate. That means that 84 percent are not violent. Your own figures show that the family is not a violent institution. You're vastly overstating the case."

I responded by saying "Suppose instead of having studied families, I had studied faculty and students at this university. Suppose I came up with a rate which showed that only 16 percent of the faculty had hit another faculty member or student that year. Would you take that as evidence that there is not much violence on your campus?" I never got a clear reply, but I doubt that the questioner would have accepted that conclusion. He was implicitly using a different set of norms for families than for universities. In neither setting is hitting regarded as good, but the norms of American society prohibit it absolutely in one setting and tolerate it in the other. This is extremely important because violence, like other crimes, is more likely to occur when the offender believes he or she can get away with it (Gelles, 1983; Gelles and Straus, 1988).

The existence of a cultural norm making the marriage license a hitting license is also revealed by the reaction to the finding that the more conflict, the more violence (see Figure 1), as just showing the obvious. This can be seen by supposing that Figure 1 was based on a study of university departments rather than families. There is a huge amount of conflict in academic departments -- novels have been written about it -- but neither in those novels nor in real life is there physical violence. There are some very rare exceptions, but physical violence does not occur in 45% percent of high conflict departments; whereas Figure 2 shows that it happens in 45% of high conflict families. A major part of the reason is that "an occasional slap" would simply not be tolerated. Everyone knows that. Everyone also knows that an occasional slap within the family is likely to be tolerated, and this is part of the reason why it occurs.

#### Family Training In Violence

A limitation of the theory presented so far is that it does not explain why the norms for families permit violence, whereas the norms for other groups prohibit violence. The rules permitting hitting within the family are also a puzzle because violence seems to be contrary to other rules about the family which impose an obligation to be loving and supportive. So, it is important to understand how family norms about violence arose and what has maintained them for so many centuries.

(Figure 3 about here)

Part of the explanation lies in the fact that there is a "hidden curriculum" in the family which teaches violence. It starts in infancy

with physical punishment. Figure 3 (from Wauchope and Straus, 1990) shows that over 90 percent of parents hit toddlers in the 3-4 year age group. Over a fifth reported hitting an infant, and about a third continue hitting even when the children are 15-17. Moreover, these are "lower bound" estimates. So, it is clear that being hit by a parent -- that is, violence -- is an almost universal experience of children in the United States.

Most of this violence is ordinary physical punishment carried out by a loving and concerned parent. Imagine a 10 month old infant crawling on the ground. The child picks up a stick and puts it in his mouth. The parent takes it away and says "No no, don't do that. You'll get sick. Don't put dirty stuff in your mouth." Unfortunately, children crawling on the ground are almost certain to do it again. By about the third time, the parent is likely to come over and gently slap the child's hand and again say "No don't do that."

The problem is that these actions also teach the child the principle that "those who love you are those who hit you." This lesson starts in infancy, when the deepest layers of personality are presumably being formed. It continues for half of all American children until they physically leave home. Moreover, the principle is easily reversed to be "those you love are those you can hit." Ironically, the fact that hitting is done by a loving careful parent makes it worse. That aspect teaches, not only that those who love you, hit you; but that it is morally right that they do so. In one pilot study of toddlers we found they have a clear conception of the moral rightness of hitting. The children were shown pictures of an adult hitting a child and were asked to say what was happening. Without exception, they said it was because the child in the picture had done something wrong.

The important point for understanding family violence is that this principle extends into adult life. Most adults when asked about violent acts between the spouses give a version of "Johnny I've told you ten times" such as "I reached the end of my rope" etc. It is a direct transfer from the script learned early in life through physical punishment. The result of an empirical study of this principle (Straus, 1983) is given in Figure 4.

(Figure 4 about here)

Figure 4 tests the hypothesis that the more physical punishment experienced as a child, the greater the probability of hitting one's spouse. The horizontal axis of Figure 4 indicates how often each respondent in the National Family Violence Survey was physically punished about age 12 or 13. The solid line in Figure 4 represents the percentage of husbands who hit their wife during the year of the survey and the dashed line represents the percentage of wives who hit their husband that year. The results support the hypothesis because they show that the more a husband was physically punished as a child, the greater the probability of an assault on a wife as adults. The same effect of physical punishment is also shown for wives. Figure 5 shows the same principle as Figure 4, but in more everyday terms.

(Figure 5 about here)

## Violence Has Multiple Causes

The theory as developed up to this point has pointed to the high level of conflict in families, inequality between men and women, cultural norms which permit intra-family violence, and family training in violence, as "risk factors" which increase the probability of violence. If space permitted, a number of other risk factors would need to be included. For example, alcoholism (Kaufman Kantor and Straus, 1987), poverty, and other types of stress (Straus, 1980). The level of violence in the larger society also has a potent influence (Baron, Straus, and Jaffee, 1988).

Although there is insufficient space to include analyses of these other risk factors, they are included in the concluding statistical analysis. This analysis is also important because it points up the multitude of factors that influence the probability of violence.

It may be even more important to put the idea of multiple causation the other way around -- no single factor by itself puts a family at high risk of violence. The weakness of any single risk factor is illustrated by the data in Figure 4. It shows that people who experienced frequent physical punishment as a child have more than double the rate of assault on their spouse (11%) than those who did not (5%). This is a well replicated finding (Hotaling and Sugarman, 1986). At the same time, the 11% figure also indicates that 91% of spouses who experienced a great deal of physical punishment at age 13 did not assault their spouse during the year of the survey. The same type of interpretation applies to each of the other risk factors, for example, male-dominance. Although more violence occurs in male-dominant marriages, most male-dominant marriages are not physically violent.

More generally, none of the elements in this theory, or in anyone else's theory, is by itself determinative. It takes the combined effect to produce a high probability of violence. This can be illustrated by going back over some of the risk factors discussed previously. Let us envision a family in which the husband grew up experiencing a lot of physical punishment. That is one risk factor. If the wife had a similar experience, it is another risk factor. If the husband observed his parents engaging in physical fights, that adds to the risk. If he believes he ought to have the final say in family decisions, that further adds to the risk. Suppose on top of that he also drinks and is unemployed and therefore under stress. All of that adds up to a prescription for violence.

(Figure 6 about here)

The statistical analysis demonstrating this principle was done by creating a simple checklist score for each of the 2,143 couples in the 1975 National Family Violence Survey. One point was assigned for the presence of any of the six risk factors in the above example, and also for the presence of 13 other risk factors for a total of 19. Figure 6 (from Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980:204) shows the percentage of couples who reported a violent incident during the year for each risk factor score



group. The horizontal axis is the checklist or risk factor score, the vertical axis is the rate of couple violence.

At the left of Figure 6 are couples with low risk factor checklist scores. Their violence rate is nearly zero. Thereafter as the checklist scores increase, the rate of violence increases exponentially. About 70 percent for couples in the highest risk categories reported a violent incident during the year. Similar results were obtained using a checklist of risk factors found to be associated with physical abuse of children (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980:212). These are truly striking results.\*5

Figure 6 provides evidence that a great deal has been learned about the causes of family violence since intensive research began about 15 years ago. To a considerable extent, we have unraveled the paradox of family violence and we understand why the family is both the most loving and supportive group and also the most violent group in civilian society.

#### TRENDS IN FAMILY VIOLENCE

One of the fortunate aspects of the results of the last 15 years of research on family violence is that it has revealed causal factors which, for the most part, can be changed if society is so inclined. The United States is making many of the needed changes, although the pace is unconscionably slow.

#### The Campaign Against Child Abuse and Wife Beating

On the remedial side of the change effort, we have created a vast network of child protective services. These services are not nearly enough to be sure, but they are far more than existed in 1960 when state funded "Child Protective Services" departments did not even exist as a separate entity. As for wife-beating, there are now about a thousand shelters for battered women in the United States. As in the case of Child Protective Services, most shelters are under funded and inadequately staffed. But that is better than 1973 when none existed. Arrest and prosecution of wife-beaters is now common, even though most such cases are still ignored (Kaufman Kantor and Straus, 1990).

#### Changes That Help Prevent Family Violence

On the "primary prevention" side of the effort (Straus and Smith, 1990), parent education programs have continued to grow, even though at the snail-like pace of the last 50 years. Gender inequality is being reduced, but the pace can be gauged by the fact that the wages of women with full time employment has moved up from 59% of what men earn to 68%, i.e., despite years of affirmative action, women on average earn almost a third less than men. There has been a tremendous growth in family counseling and therapy. This has no doubt aided couples in resolving the inevitable conflicts of married life, but these services still reach only a fraction of the population, and hardly any of the low income population where the incidence of wife-beating is greatest. Segregation is now

legally dead, informal discrimination has been reduced, and there is a growing Afro-American middle class; but there is also a growing Afro-American underclass whose situation is worse than ever. Contraception is now widespread so there are fewer unwanted children who are, for that reason, at risk of abuse; but the US still has the highest teen pregnancy rate of any industrial country. These and other examples of changes with implications for violence-reduction are discussed in Straus and Gelles (1986; 1990).

#### Change In Six Measures Of Violence

Clearly, the existing treatment and prevention programs leave much to be desired. But there is also much that has been accomplished. The efforts have been inadequate if one considers them one by one. Nevertheless, writing in 1981, I suggested that the cumulative effect of the changes listed above was likely to be a reduction in the incidence of child abuse and wife beating (Straus, 1981). In 1985 the second National Family Violence Survey provided an opportunity to test that idea. Somewhat to our surprise, it revealed evidence consistent with the hypothesized decrease (Straus and Gelles, 1986).

(Figure 7 about here)

Figure 7 shows the percentage change in six measures of violence from the National Family Violence Survey, and changes in two other measures of violence that occurred between 1975 and 1985. It is best to read this chart from the lower right corner on up.

The line for Child Abuse, which ends in the lower right corner, shows that the rate of physical abuse of children decreased by 47% between 1975 and 1985. That decrease is exactly opposite to what has been happening to the number of cases of child abuse reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) during this same period. CPS cases increased by three fold between 1976 and 1985. The two figures do not contradict each other. The increased rate of cases reported to CPS is a measure of public intervention intended to help children. It does not indicate that three times as many parents abused their child in 1985 than in 1976. Rather, it means that three times as many Americans took the major step of reporting a suspected case of child abuse. This is a sign that more and more Americans are starting to do something to reduce child abuse. To the extent that those efforts are successful, it should help to reduce the rate of child abuse, and this could be one of the factors which accounts for the lower rate of child abuse found in the 1975 National Family Violence Survey.

Intra-family homicides are plotted in the next line up (from Straus, 1986), and also shows a decrease during this period. This consistency with the decrease in child abuse is important because homicides are the most accurate of all statistics on violence. Very few cases go unreported. Consequently, it suggests that the decrease measured by the two National Family Violence Surveys is not just an artifact of the way those surveys were conducted.

The third largest decrease was in severe assaults by husbands on wives -- what is often called wife-beating.

Next in the size of the decrease was the rate of violent crime as measured by the National Crime Survey conducted each year by the US Department of Justice.

None of the trend lines for other types of violence show changes that are large enough to be statistically significant. However, the very fact that they did not change much is extremely important. I have suggested elsewhere (Straus and Gelles, 1986) that part of the reason for lack of change is that none of those forms of evidence have been the object of the extensive and sustained effort that has been focused on child abuse and wife-beating. The campaign against child abuse has been in place longest (since the mid 1960's) and has had the most resources. The campaign against wife-beating started a decade later, and has had fewer resources. Consistent with this, the rate of wife-beating has declined, but not as much as the rate of child abuse. At the top end of the scale in Figure 7 is the rate of assault by wives on husbands and the rate of physical punishment of children ("Any Hitting of Child"). Neither of these types of violence has been the object of an extensive public campaign and, consistent with that, neither has declined.\*<sup>6</sup>

Figure 7 documents impressive gains, and also many aspects of family violence on which no progress has been made. Moreover, even child abuse and wife beating -- two aspects where large reductions seem to have occurred -- remain tremendous problems. The rates for 1985 in Table 1, i.e., the rates after the presumed decrease, show that more than one out of six American couples engaged in a physical assault during the year of that survey, or an estimated total of 8.7 million couples, of which 3.4 million were severe assaults involving kicking, punching, choking, attacks with weapons, etc. As for child abuse, despite the large decrease, more than one out of ten children were severely assaulted by a parent that year, or a total of 6.9 million children. Clearly violence is still endemic in the American family. The task ahead remains formidable.

## FOOTNOTES

1. These estimates are based on comparing the National Family Violence Survey rate with the National Crime Survey Rate. They probably exaggerate the greater risk of intra-family assault for men because the National Crime Survey vastly underestimates assaults by intimates, but inside the family and friends and acquaintances outside the family. For example, most barroom brawls and street fights that young men get into are not picked up by the National Crime survey.

2. The CTS is also reproduced in Intimate Violence (Gelles and Straus, 1988). This book was written for the general public and as a supplementary text for undergraduate courses.

3. Table 1 combines married and unmarried cohabiting couples. The rates for the latter are much higher (Yllo and Straus, 1981; Stets and Straus, 1989). However, since the cohabitators are only a small part of the total, it does not importantly affect the rates shown in this table.

4. The tendency of men in male-dominant relationships to use violence even more than do women in female-dominant relationships results from the combination of several factors. First, it is more practical for men to use physical force to back up their position because of their greater average physical size and strength. Second, male-dominance is often a normatively approved type of couple relationship (Coleman and Straus, 1986), whereas female-dominance is rarely held to be the desirable state of affairs. Thus, when a man is challenged, he is more likely to be not only frustrated, but as noted above, also to have the moral indignation that typically justified violence. Third, male values in American society make men more amenable to use of force to achieve some desirable end.

5. However, the 70% violent figure also means that even those with 30% of these with a large number of risk factors were not violent. This partly because of the inevitability of measurement error, and partly because the risk factors included in Figure 6 represent a test of a theory concerning the social causes of family violence. If psychological factors had also been included in the risk factors, the "prediction" of violence might have been even greater.

6. In addition to the public campaigns and provision of services for children and battered women, many other changes in American society between 1975 and 1985 probably also contributed to the decrease in child abuse and wife-beating. These are discussed in Straus and Gelles (1986).

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**TABLE 1**  
**Annual Incidence Rates for Family Violence and Estimated Number of Cases Based on These Rates. Data from the 1985 National Family Violence Resurvey**

Type of Intra-Family Violence <sup>1</sup>	Rate per 1,000 Couples or Children	Number Assaulted <sup>2</sup>
<b>A. VIOLENCE BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE</b>		
ANY violence during the yr (slap, push, etc)	161	8,700,000
SEVERE violence (kick, punch, stab, etc)	63	3,400,000
ANY violence by the HUSBAND	116	6,250,000
SEVERE violence by the HUSBAND ("wife beating")	34	1,800,000
ANY violence by the WIFE	124	6,800,000
SEVERE violence by the WIFE	48	2,600,000
<b>B. VIOLENCE BY PARENTS - CHILD AGE 0-17</b>		
ANY hitting of child during the year	Near 100% for young child <sup>3</sup>	
VERY SEVERE violence ("Child Abuse-1") <sup>4</sup>	23	1,500,000
SEVERE violence ("Child Abuse-2")	110	6,900,000
<b>C. VIOLENCE BY PARENTS - CHILD AGE 15-17</b>		
ANY violence against 15-17 year olds	340	3,800,000
SEVERE violence against 15-17 year olds	70	800,000
VERY SEVERE violence against 15-17 year olds	21	235,000
<b>D. VIOLENCE BY CHILDREN AGE 3-17 (1975-76 sample)</b>		
ANY violence against a BROTHER OR SISTER	800	50,400,000
SEVERE violence against a BROTHER OR SISTER	530	33,300,000
ANY violence against a PARENT	180	9,700,000
SEVERE violence against a PARENT	90	4,800,000
<b>E. VIOLENCE BY CHILDREN AGE 15-17 (1975-76 sample)</b>		
ANY violence against a BROTHER OR SISTER	640	7,200,000
SEVERE violence against a BROTHER OR SISTER	360	4,000,000
ANY violence against a PARENT	100	1,100,000
SEVERE violence against a PARENT	35	400,000

Footnotes for Table 1

*Straus and Gelles (1986)*

1. Section A rates are based on the entire sample of 6,002 currently married or cohabiting couples interviewed in 1985. Note: The rates in Section A differ from those in ~~Chapter 22~~ because the rates in ~~that chapter~~ are computed in a way which enabled the 1985 rates to be compared with the more restricted sample and more restricted version of the Conflict Tactics Scale used in the 1975 study.

Section B rates are based on the 1985 sample of 3,232 households with a child age 17 and under. Note: The rates shown in section B differ from those in Straus and Gelles (1986) for the reasons given in ~~Footnote 1~~ above.

Section C and D rates are based on the 1975-76 study because data on violence by children was not collected in the 1985 survey.

2. The column giving the "Number Assaulted" was computed by multiplying the rates in this table by the 1984 population figures as given in the 1986 Statistical Abstract of the United States. The population figures (rounded to millions) are 54 million couples, and 63 million children age 0-17. The number of children 15-17 was estimated as 11.23 million. This was done by taking .75 of the number age 14-17, as given in Statistical Abstract Table 29.

3. The rate for 3 year old children in the 1975 survey was 97%. See Chapter 22, Figure 4, for age-specific rates from age 3 through 17.

4. See "Definition and measurement" section for an explanation of the difference between Child Abuse-1 and Child "Abuse 2."



Figure 1

## Husband / Wife Violence by Amount of Family Conflict

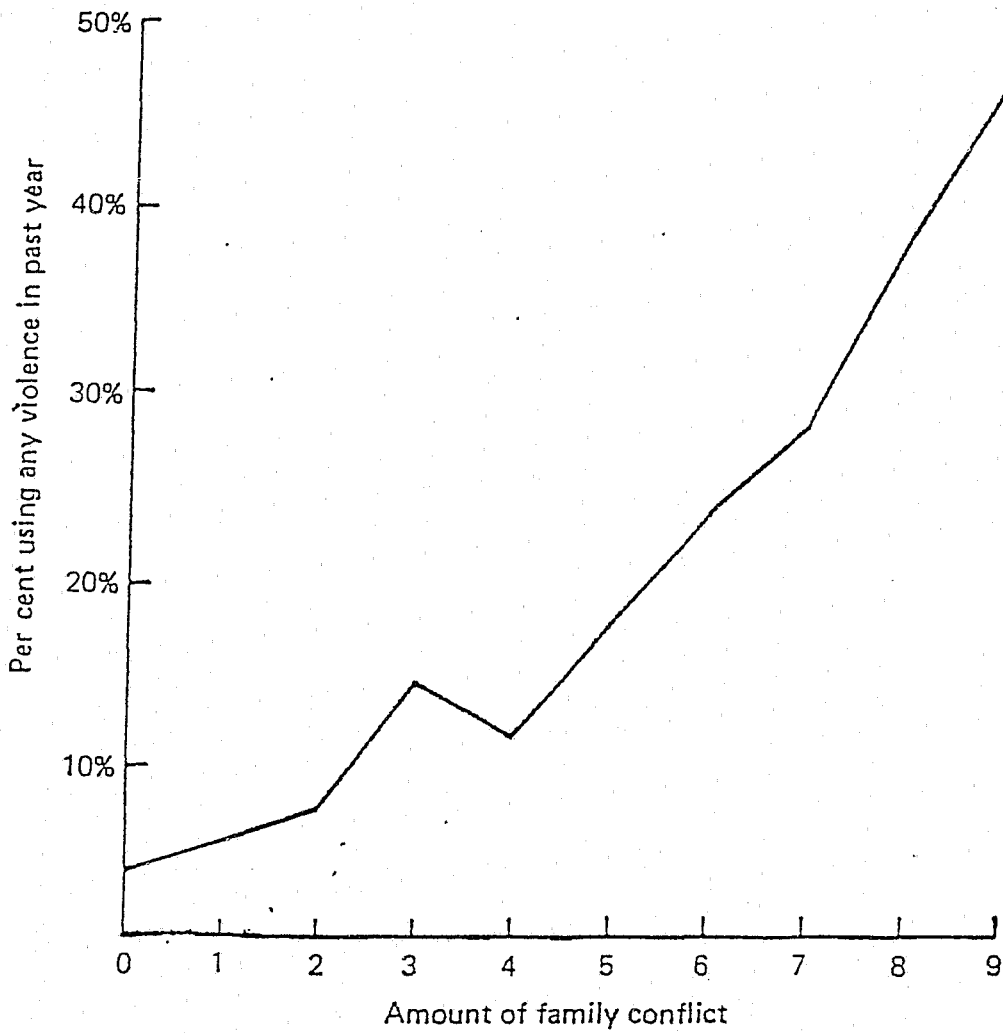


Figure 2

# Marital Violence by Marital Power

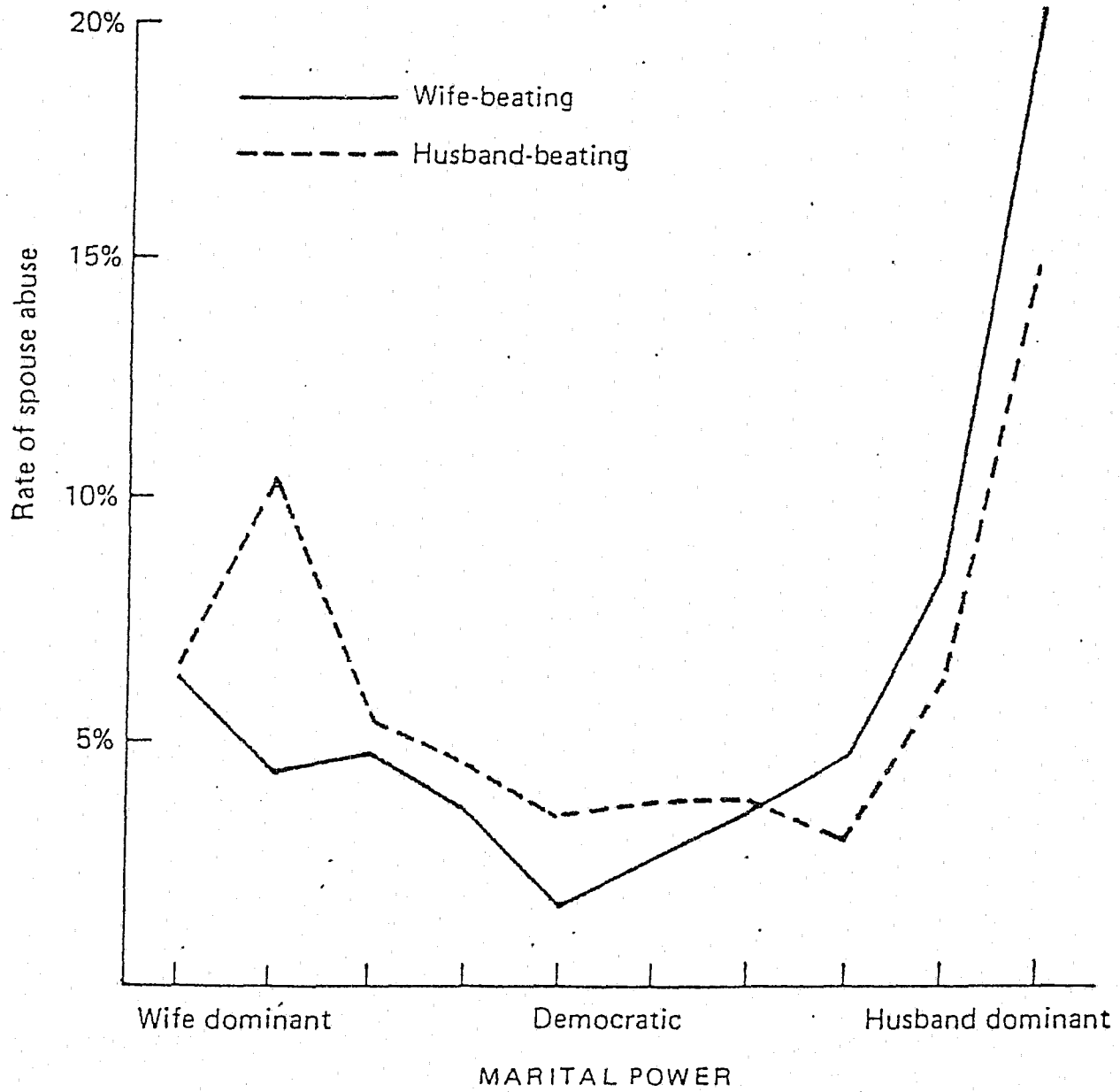
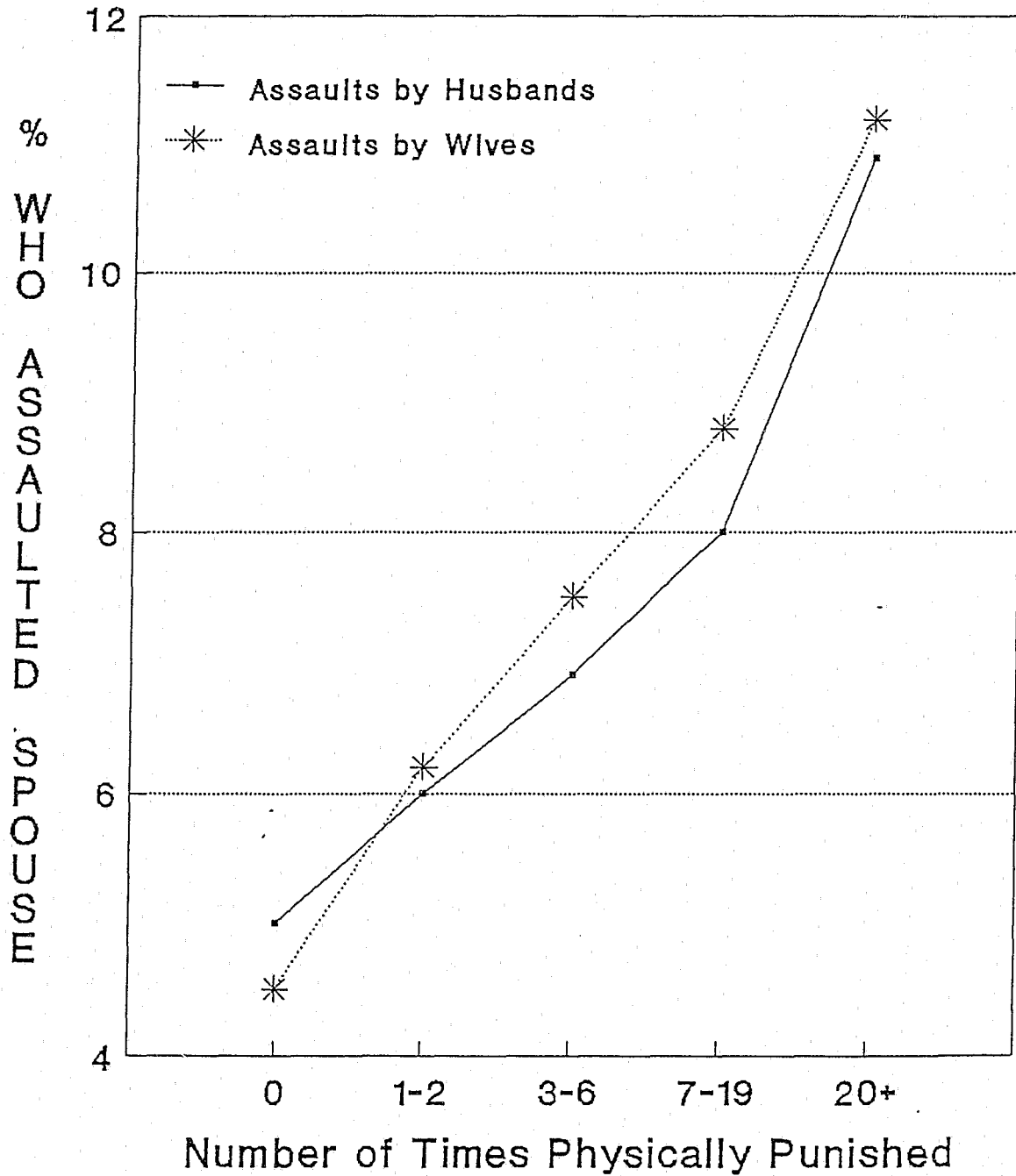


Figure 3

Almost all parents do use physical punishment with young children. One of five with infants.



Figure 4. Assaults On Spouses By Amount of Physical Punishment As A Child





RETURNING THE FAVOR — In Houghton, Mich., one good kick deserves another.

(AP photo)

FIGURE 6  
Couple Violence Rate by Checklist Score

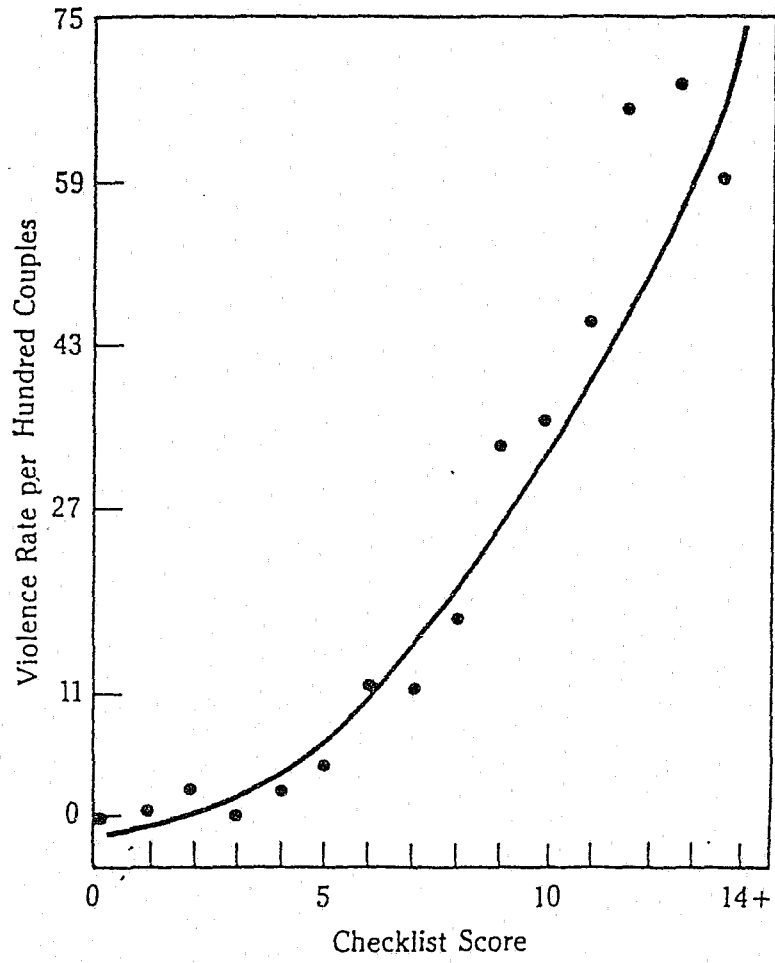


Figure 7. Percent Increase or Decrease  
In Violence Rates From 1975 to 1985

