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9th World Congress of Sociology
Uppsala, Sweden, August 14-19, 1978

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE IN A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE

OF AMERICAN FAMILIES*

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Acts of physical violence between members of the same family are an age old phenomenon. No one knows if such violence is more frequent now than in the recent past, or less frequent. Plausible arguments can be made for both trends. What is new is the fact that a number of factors have come together to create a new awareness and a new social concern about violence within the family. These factors include the heightened sensitivity to violence as a social problem brought about by the Viet Nam war, assassinations, the urban riots of the 1960's and early 1970's, the revival of the feminist movement, child-abuse reporting laws, and in the past few years, an increasing body of research on family violence. Despite the growth of such research, there has never been a systematic study of violence based on a representative sample of even a single state or city, much less one that is representative of the whole country. The research on which this paper is based is such a study. The paper summarizes the violence rates derived from the first comprehensive national study of violence in the American family.

STUDYING FAMILY VIOLENCE

It is one thing to state that there is a need for a comprehensive study of violence in the home. It is quite another thing to actually conduct such a study. First there is the difficult task of defining violence. Second, there is the even more difficult task of developing a dependable method of getting data on family violence.

Definition of Violence

For the purpose of this paper, violence is defined as "an act carried out with the intention of, or perceived as having the intention of, physically hurting another person" (Gelles and Straus, 1978). The "physical hurt" can range from slight pain, as in a slap, to murder. Although this is the basic definition of violence, it is usually also necessary to take into account a number of other characteristics of these violent acts, such as whether it is "instrumental" to some other purpose or "expressive," i.e., an end in itself; and whether it is a culturally permitted or required act versus one which runs counter to cultural norms (legitimate versus illegitimate violence). Thus, the basis for the "intent to hurt" may range from a concern for a child's safety (as when a child is spanked for going into the street) to hostility so intense that the death of the other is desired. The former would be an example of "legitimate instrumental violence" and the latter of "illegitimate expressive violence."

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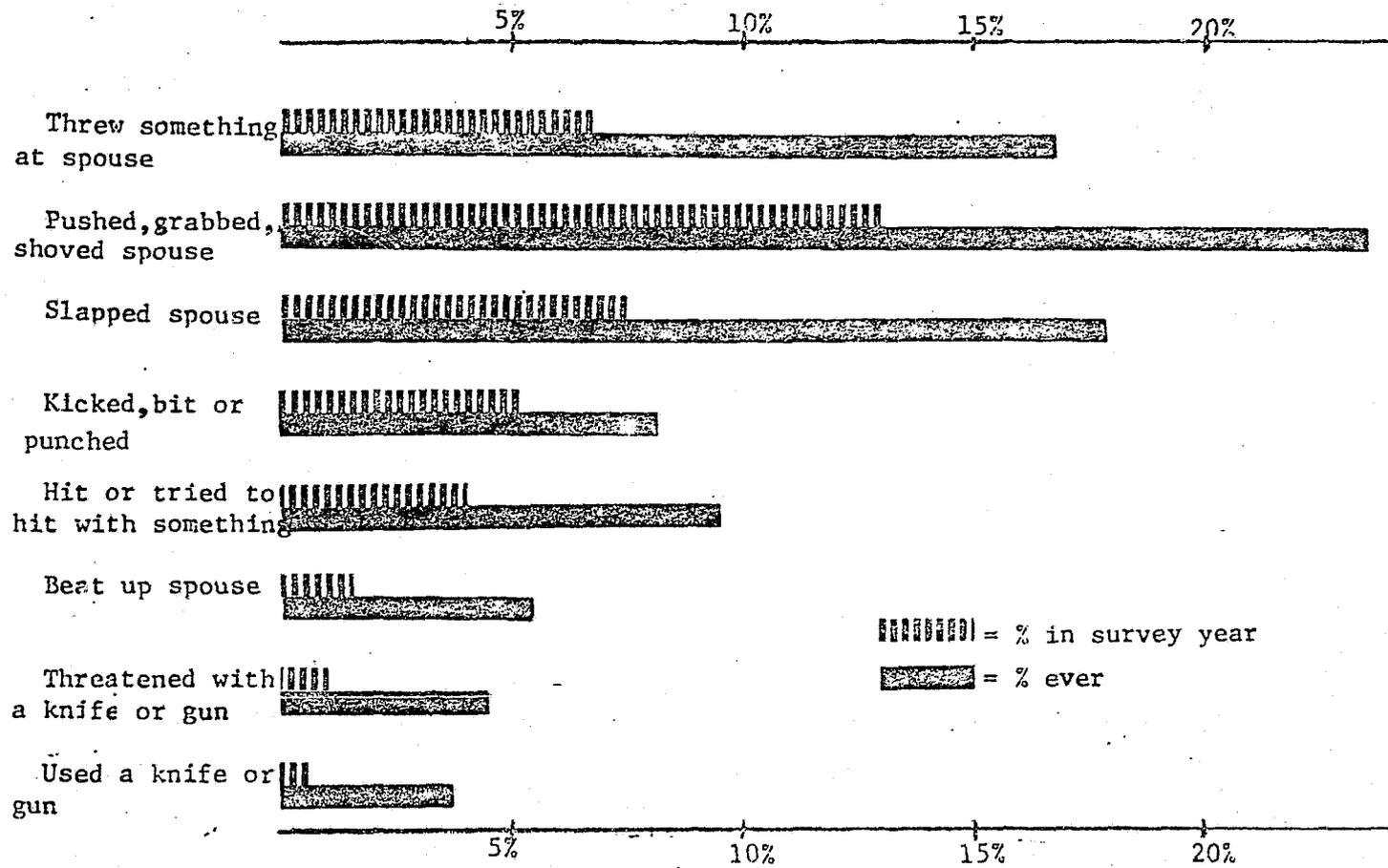


Figure 1. Percent of Couples who Engaged in each of Eight Types of Violence.

SAMPLE AND METHOD

Sample

The data are based on interviews with a nationally representative sample of 2,143 American couples, of whom 1,146 had one or more children at home. Interviews were conducted with the husband in a randomly selected half of the families and with the wife in the other half. Remarkably similar violence rates were found irrespective of which partner was the respondent.*1 More detailed information on the sampling method and the characteristics of the sample are given in Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1979.

Measuring Violence

We measured the level and incidence of violence in American families by using a series of questions called the "Conflict Tactics Scales" (CTS). The CTS were first developed at the University of New Hampshire in 1971. They have been used and modified over the past six years in numerous studies of family violence in the United States and in other countries such as Canada, Israel, Japan, Finland, Great Britain, and British Honduras. Data on validity and reliability is given in Straus, 1979.

Of the 18 items in the Scales, eight involve the use of force and violence. The eight violence questions range from pushing or shoving someone to the use of potentially lethal weapons such as guns or knives.

Each person was asked to consider two time frames. First, we asked them to consider conflicts which took place in the previous 12 months. Then we asked them to think back over the duration of the marriage or the lifetime of their children. The first time frame is used to compute annual incidence rates. Because we interviewed our subjects from January to April, 1976 these can be thought of as rates for 1975. There is also more limited information on the violence which occurred over the entire marriage or the duration of the parent-child relationship.

HUSBAND-WIFE VIOLENCE

A first approach to getting a picture of the amount of violence between the 2,143 couples in this study is to find out how many had engaged in any of the eight violent acts. For the survey year this works out to be 16 percent. In other words, every year about one out of every six couples in the USA commits at least one violent act against their partner.

If the period considered is the entire length of the marriage (rather than just the previous year), the result is 28 percent, or between one out of four and one out of three American couples. In short, for the average American couple the chances are almost one out of three that there will be at least one instance of violence.

When we began this study of violence in the family, we would have considered such a rate of husbands and wives hitting each other very high. In terms of our values--and probably the values of most other Americans--it is still very high. But in terms of what we have come to expect on the basis of the pilot studies, this is a low figure. For the reasons outlined in Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1979), it is very likely a substantial underestimate.

The figures could easily be twice as large as those revealed by the survey. In fact, based on the pilot studies and informal evidence (where some of the factors leading to underreporting were less), it seems likely that the true rate is closer to 50 or 60 percent of all couples than it is to the 28 percent who were willing to describe violent acts to our interviewers.

Slaps, Beatings, and Guns

Let us examine the violent acts one by one. This is important to get a realistic picture of the meaning of the overall rates of 16 and 28 percent. One needs to know how much of the violence was slaps and how much was kicking and beating up.

(Figure 1 about here)

The first figure shows that almost seven of every hundred couples had thrown something at a spouse in the previous year, and about one out of six (16 percent) had done this at some point in their marriage.

The statistics for slapping a spouse are about the same: seven percent in the previous year and 18 percent at some time.

The figures for pushing, shoving, or grabbing during an argument are the highest of any of the eight things we asked about: 13 percent had done this during the year, and almost one out of four at some time in the marriage.

At the other extreme, "only" one or two out of every hundred couples (1.5%) experienced a beating up incident in the previous year.*2 But a "beating up" had occurred at some time in the marriages of one out of every 20 of the couples we interviewed.

The rates for actually using a knife or gun on one's spouse are one out of every 200 couples per year, and almost one out of twenty-seven couples at some point in the marriage.*3

The statistics on the number of couples who had ever "beaten up" their spouse or actually used a knife or gun are astoundingly high. The human meaning of these most extreme form of violence in the family can be understood better if we translate the percentages into the total number of marriages affected. Since there were about 47 million couples living together in the United States in 1975, the rates just given mean that over 1.7 million Americans had at some time faced a husband or wife wielding a knife or gun, and well over two million had been beaten-up by their spouse.

Husbands and Wives

Traditionally, men have been considered more aggressive and violent than women. Like other stereotypes, there is no doubt a kernel of truth to this. But it is far from the clear cut difference which exists in the thinking of most people (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Frodi, Macaulay and Thome, 1977). This is also the case with our survey. About one out of eight husbands had carried out at least one violent act during the course of a conflict in the year covered by the survey, and about the same number of wives had attacked their husband (12.1 percent of the husbands versus 11.6 percent of the wives).

Mutual Violence. One way of looking at this issue is to ask what percentage of the sample are couples in which the husband was the only one to use violence? What percent were couples in which the only violence was by the wife? And in what percentage did both use violence?

The most common situation was that both had used violence. Of those couples reporting any violence, 49 percent were situations of this type where both were violent. As between couples in which only the husband was violent as compared to those in which only the wife was violent that year, the figures are very close: 27 percent violent husbands and 24 percent violent wives. So, as in the case of the violence rates, there is little difference between the husbands and wives in this study.

Wife-Beating. At what point does one exceed the bounds of "normal" family violence? When does it become "wife-beating?" For our purposes, the wife-beating index consists of the extent to which the husband went beyond throwing things, pushing, grabbing and slapping and attacked his wife by kicking, biting, punching, hitting with some object, beat her up, or used a knife or gun (the last five

behaviors in Figure 1). The basis for choosing these items for the wife-beating index is simply the fact that these are all acts which carry with them a high risk of serious physical injury.

How many husbands and wives experience the kind of attack which was serious enough to be included in the wife-beating and husband-beating indexes? A remarkably large number: almost 4 out of every hundred (3.8%) American wives are beaten by their husbands every year. This comes to a total of almost 1.8 million per year.

Husband-Beating. Staggering as are these figures, the real surprise lies in the statistics on husband-beating. These rates are slightly higher than those for wife-beating!

Some 4.6 percent of the wives in the sample admitted to or were reported by their husband as having engaged in an act which is included in the husband-beating index. That is over two million very violent wives. Since three other studies of this issue also found high rates of husband-beating (Gelles, 1974; Steinmetz, 1977a, b; Straus, 1974), some revision of the traditional view about female violence seems to be needed.*4

Was There Ever A Beating? A final question about how many beatings took place can be answered by looking at what happened over the entire length of the marriage. Did something that can be called a beating ever happen in the marriage?

There are several reasons why even a single beating is important. First, even one such event debases human life. Second, there is the physical danger involved. Third is the fact that many, if not most, such beatings are part of a struggle for power in the family. It often takes only one such event to fix the balance of power for many years--or perhaps for a lifetime.

Physical force is the ultimate resource which most of us learn as children to rely on if all else fails and the issue is crucial. As a husband in one of the families interviewed by LaRossa (1977) said when asked why he hit his wife during an argument:

...She more or less tried to run me and I said no, and she got hysterical and said, "I could kill you!" And I got rather angry and slapped her in the face three or four times and I said "Don't you ever say that to me again!" And we haven't had any problem since.

Since greater size and strength gives the advantage to men in such situations, the single beating may be an extremely important factor in maintaining male dominance in the family system.

We found that one out of eight couples (12.6 percent) experienced at least one beating incident in the course of marriage. That is approximately a total of six million beatings. However, as high as that figure is, the actual statistics are probably higher. This is because things are forgotten over the years, and also because the violent acts in question are only about the current marriage. They leave out the many marriages which ended in divorce, a large part of which were marked by beatings.

PARENT-CHILD VIOLENCE

It would have been too time consuming to ask each respondent about the use of violence on each of the children who were at home (in families with six or more children the interview might have gone on for hours). Instead, we randomly selected one "referent" child in each family.

As was the case for husband-wife violence, we asked about a range of acts, starting with the "normal violence" of physical punishment. This is based on the belief that "ordinary" physical punishment and "child-abuse" are but two ends of a single continuum of violence towards children. In between are millions of parents whose use of physical force goes beyond mild punishment, but which, for various reasons, does not get identified and labeled as "child-abuse."

"Normal Violence." The milder forms of violence were of course, the most common. The minimum estimates (because of under-reporting) are that over half of all American children (58%) are spanked in any one year. At least 71% have been slapped or spanked at some time. Hitting with an object is done to 13 out of every hundred children per year and is the fate of at least one out of five children at some point in their life. Throwing with an object was less common. Approximately five out of every hundred children per year have something thrown at them by their parent, and double this at some time in their life.

Abusive Violence. The more dangerous types of violence were the least likely to occur. But even the figures for these extreme forms of violence yield an astoundingly high number of American children who were kicked, punched, bit, beat up, threatened with a gun or a knife, or had a gun or a knife used on them:

*Approximately three children in 100 are kicked, bitten, or punched by their parents each year. Many more (8 out of 100) have a parent do this to them at one time or another.

*Slightly more than one out of a hundred children are beaten up by a parent each year, and four percent in some previous year.

*One child in 1,000 each year faces a parent who threatens to use a gun or knife, while nearly three children in 100 have grown up facing a parent who at least once threatened them with guns or knives. The same proportions hold for children who had guns and knives actually used on them.

Frequency of Violence

With the exception of being threatened with a knife or gun or having a knife or gun on them, children whose parents were violent to them experienced it more than once. Children who had something thrown at them had it happen an average 4.5 times that one year. Children who were pushed or grabbed or shoved experienced that 6.6 times over a twelve month period. As expected, spankings and slappings were the most frequent--an average of 9.6 times a year. The average for kicks, bites, and punches was 8.9 times a year, while children were hit with objects 8.6 times. For those who were beaten, this was repeated almost once every two months--an average of 5.9 times over the year. If a gun or knife was used, it happened "only" once in the survey year.

The figures on how often a form of violence was used must be interpreted with care. For some items these frequencies seem to be low. Many people would expect that if a child is spanked by a parent, this would occur more frequently than once a month. But our data are based on children aged 3 to 17. Thus, the frequencies are the average for all children, 3 to 17, who are spanked by their parents. Obviously, older children might be spanked less often than once a month, while some younger children might be spanked weekly, daily, or in some families, hourly. In fact, 82 percent of the three and four year olds had some mode of violence used on them, 82 percent of the children from 5 years old to 9 had been hit, two thirds (66 percent) of the pre-teens and early teenage children (10 to 14 years old) were struck, and "only" a little more than one third (34 percent) of the children 15 to 17 years old were hit by their parents.

Child-Abuse

We were surprised--although perhaps we should not have been--to find that the extreme forms of parental violence are not rare, one shot events. They occur periodically and even regularly in the families where these types of violence are used. If a beating is considered an element of "child-abuse," then our findings show that child-abuse is chronic condition for many children, not a once in a lifetime experience for a rare few.

We estimated how many American children were "at risk" of being physically injured by means of a Child-Abuse Index. This combines all the items which have the highest probability of injuring or damaging a child (kicks, bites, punches, beatings, threats with a gun or knife, use of a gun or knife). Almost four out of every hundred children (3.6%) are at risk of serious injury each year because of their parents using at least one of these dangerous forms of violence. Assuming that any of these acts has a high probability of causing harm to a child victim, between 1.4 and 1.9 million children were vulnerable to physical injury from their parents the year of our study.

Being at risk of being injured is not the same as being a victim of child-abuse. Many is the child who has been slammed against a wall, or punched and kicked by his or her parents, and who did not end up with a concussion or broken bones. However, these figures may still be the best available for estimating how many children might be abused each year in the United States. This is because they are the only statistics ever generated from a nationally representative sample using consistent measurement procedures. If they are a reasonable estimate of child-abuse, then they offer new and surprising information:

*First, the estimates are at least 1.2 million children higher than previous estimates of the incidence of physical abuse (150,000 to 250,000).

*Second, even these figures underestimate the true level of abuse for five important reasons. (1) They are based on self-reports of the parents. Underreporting is quite possible when sensitive questions such as "did you beat up your child?" are asked. (2) The survey deals with only seven specific forms of violence. Omitted are such things as burning a child, torturing a child, sexual abuse, and other acts which are considered "child-abuse." (3) The data on violence towards children refers to violent acts of only one of the two parents. (4) The children we studied were only between the ages of 3 and 17. Previous research suggests a large amount of child-abuse is directed towards children between three months and three years of age, and these children are not covered in our survey. Had they been included, our figures would certainly be higher. (5) We studied only "intact" families (husbands and wives who were living together). The literature on child-abuse suggests that abuse may be more common in families where only one parent lives with the child. Had we studied single parent families, we may also have uncovered a higher rate of extreme violence towards children.

All of the above suggests that the actual violence children experience is probably much higher than the figures we report here. Thus, while our figures are accurate (in terms of the parent-child relations we investigated) they

only hint at a much more extensive incidence of the abuse of children in the United States.

CHILD-TO-PARENT VIOLENCE

One of the theoretical assumptions used in planning this research was that violence in any one sphere of life tends to be associated with violence in other spheres or roles. This assumption is in contrast to "drive" theories and "catharsis" theories of violence which assume that if violence is expressed in one sphere, it will have been "discharged" or "ventilated" and therefore be less likely in another sphere or role. There is also the idea that victims of violence typically learn to fear and therefore avoid violence.

Our view on both these issues is the opposite. The evidence is given in previous papers (Gelles and Straus, 1975; Owens and Straus, 1975; Straus, 1974), and in the book from which this paper is drawn. In the limited space of this paper we can only document the high level of violence carried out by children against their brothers and sisters and against their parents. We think these high rates of violence by children reflect the role-learning which comes from being the victim of the violence by parents described in the previous section.

Table 1. Child-to-Parent Violence Rates

Violent Act	% per year
Threw something at a parent	7.4
Pushed, grabbed, shoved	10.2
Slapped	8.6
Kicked, bit, punched	7.4
Hit with an object	7.2
Beat up	0.9
Threatened to use knife or gun	0.2
Used knife or gun	0.4

Table 1 gives the incidence rates on which we based the statements concerning the high frequency of violence by children against parents. One can see that not only do seven out of every hundred children throw something at a parent, and somewhat more push and shove and slap, but also that there is a considerable incidence of severe violence. Taking these eight violent acts together, 18 percent, or almost one out of five American children engage in one or more such acts each year. Moreover, as just noted, not all of this is pushing, slapping, or throwing things. The parent-abuse index, which is limited to the more severe acts of violence, shows a rate of 9.4 percent, i.e. almost one out of ten American children severely attack a parent each year.

VIOLENCE BETWEEN CHILDREN

Of the 2,143 families interviewed, 733 had two or more children between 3 and 17 years of age who were living at home. We asked the parents our standard series of questions, but this time about conflicts between the children.

Some of the specific details are summarized in Table 2. Those figures confirm and document the impression from historical sources and from our earlier small sample studies: that almost all American children are violent towards their brothers and sisters.

Table 2. Percent of Children Who Were Violent to a Sibling

Violent Act	Percent
Any violence	82
Pushing and shoving	74
Slapping	48
Throw things	43
Kicking, biting, punching	42
Hitting with an object	40
Beating up	16
Threatened to use a knife or gun	0.8
Actually used a knife or gun	0.3

The first row of the table shows that over four out of every five American children between the ages of 3 and 17 who have a brother or sister at home carry out at least one violent act towards a sibling during a typical year. Of course, the percentage hitting a brother or sister is greater for the very youngest children. But, as we will see later the rates are very high even for children as old as the late teen ages.

The violence rates may be more meaningful when they are applied to the estimated 36.3 million children between 3-17 with siblings at home during the year of our survey. Over 29 million of these children engaged in one or more acts of physical violence toward a sibling.

It might be claimed that this overstates the case because so much of it was pushing, slapping, shoving and throwing things. But a glance at the table shows that kicking, biting, punching, hitting with objects, and "beating up" are also very common. In fact, 53 out of every hundred children per year attack a brother or sister this severely. This comes to well over 19 million attacks, most of which would be considered an assault if they occurred outside the family.

Although "only" three children in 1,000 used a knife or gun on a brother or sister, when one applies this rate to the 36.3 million children it suggests that about 109,000 had actually used a knife or gun on their brother or sister during the survey year.

Of course, it is very hazardous to make estimates like this from the 3 per 1,000 rate in our survey because that turns out to be only two children who actually got out a knife or gun during a conflict with a brother or sister. However, we also asked if this had ever happened. This revealed 32 cases! That makes a rate of 4.7 per hundred children. Or extrapolating that into actual numbers, over a million and a half American children have at some point faced an angry brother or sister with a knife or gun in hand.

How accurate are these estimates of violence between children in American families? There are several reasons to think that they too are underestimates (and also one factor which might make the true rates somewhat lower).

First, parents probably do not know about all the physical fights their children get into.

Second, since such fights are a taken-for-granted part of family life, many of the less severe acts of violence are likely to have been forgotten.

Third, we studied only two-parent households. The amount of sibling violence in one-parent households might be even greater than in two-parent families (see Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1979:Chapter 4)

Age Differences

As expected, the violence rates go down steadily from 90 percent for children ages 3 and 4, to 87 percent for the five to nine year olds, 76 percent for the 10 to 14 years olds, and 64 percent for the 15 to 17 years olds. But even more important than the steady decline is the fact that even at age 15 to 17, almost two out of three American children hit a brother or sister at least once during the year. Moreover, for many it is not just an isolated incident. In fact, among those 15 to 17 year olds who have been violent to a sibling, it tends to happen on the average of 19 times a year.

Sex Differences

It is widely believed that girls do more of their fighting verbally, whereas boys tend toward physical fights. Our data support this view--but just barely. Although the expected difference between boys and girls is certainly there, the difference is much smaller than we expected. Eighty three percent of the boys attacked a brother or sister during the survey year, but so did 74 percent of the girls. Perhaps the small difference is due to the presence of so many young children in the sample? To check on this we compared boys and girls at four ages (3-4, 5-9, 10-14, and 15-17). At all ages, the girls are less violent than the boys, but only slightly so. So the nearly equal rates of violence which we found for husbands and wives seems to be a continuation of a pattern which exists in the families children grow up in.

Age and Sex Differences in Serious Assaults

Up to this point we have compared boys and girls and children of different ages using an overall measure of violence. Most of this is "petty violence." Perhaps that is why there is not much difference in the overall violence rates for boys and girls? Would the differences be greater

when we consider "serious violence" like punching and beating up a brother or sister? We therefore computed a sibling-abuse index consisting of all acts of violence in our list that are more serious than pushing, slapping, shoving, and throwing things.

Comparing boys and girls using this sibling-abuse index produced results which are very similar to those with the overall violence index, more boys are severely violent than girls, (59 percent compared to 46 percent). But even for serious violence, the difference is not as great as stereotypes about girls and boys might suggest.

As for age differences, using the overall violence index we found that younger children are more often violent. But what about the severity of their violence? Perhaps the violence of the younger children is confined to pushing, shoving, and slapping? Are older children the perpetrators of "beating up" or using a gun or knife on a brother or sister? Differences like these are what we might expect for children of different ages.

Contrary to this expectation, virtually all acts of violence decreased as the children grew up. Even "beating up" showed a consistent decrease for each older age group. The only exception to the decrease in violence with age is in the use of a knife or gun. This went from 2.6 percent of preschoolers to 6.5 percent of high schoolers who had ever done this.

Using the sibling-abuse index, the rates decline sharply with age (the percentage using a knife or gun is too small to importantly influence the sibling-abuse index). But even at age 15 through 17, over a third (35.5 percent) of the children had severely assaulted a sibling during the survey year.

Obviously, a large number of children are perpetrators and victims of violence between siblings. In fact, sibling violence occurs more often than violence by parents on children or violence by spouses on each other. For example, each year three out of every hundred children are kicked, bitten, or punched by a parent, and two out of every hundred spouses kick, bite, or punch each other. But a whopping 42 out of every 100 children age 3 to 17 kick, bite, or punch a brother or sister each year. The pattern is continued when we consider "beating up." Although one percent of the children were "beat up" by their parents and one percent of their parents "beat up" each other, 16 percent of the children "beat up" a brother or sister. The only act of severe violence to occur less frequently among siblings was the use of a gun or knife, and that is probably the only reason why there are more husband-wife and parent-child homicides than siblings who kill each other.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Every role relationship in American nuclear families is characterized by rates of violence which make the problem of "violence in the streets" pale by comparison. Whereas the Uniform Crime Reports for assaults are reported in rates per hundred thousand, we found it more meaningful to report rates per 100.

The survey distinguished between "ordinary" or "normal" violence within the family and severe or "abusive" violence. The latter are acts which, carry a high risk of serious injury and which, if carried out between persons who are not members of the same family would be considered a criminal assault. Such assaults between husbands and wives occur at an annual rate of at least six per hundred couples, and with allowance for underreporting, the true incidence may be double that figure.

Assault by parents on their children occur at even higher rates. Our index of child-abuse reveals that 14.2 out of every hundred American children are physically abused by their parents each year.

The same pattern is found for assaults by children on their parents. The parent-abuse rate found by this study is 9.4 per hundred parents.

Finally, the highest rates of assault are between children in the same family. Our index of sibling-abuse reveals that over half of all American children (53.2 percent) severely attack a brother or sister each year.

Overall, the violence rates uncovered by this survey support the idea that the family is truly most violent civilian institution in American society. This situation probably characterizes families in many other societies (Straus, 1977a). It reflects the cumulative effect of a number of factors, some of which have been analyzed in previous papers. Examples of such factors include:

(1) The unintended training in violence which comes from reliance on physical punishment (Gelles and Straus, 1975; Owens and Straus, 1975; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1979).

(2) The use of force to maintain male dominance in the family (Allen and Straus, 1979; Straus, 1977b, c).

(3) The high level of violence in the society (Huggins and Straus, 1979).

(4) The conflicts which are inherent in intimate groups such as the family (Gelles and Straus, 1978; Hotaling and Straus, 1979).

(5) The fact that, as children, millions of husbands and wives observed violence by their own parents toward each other. This serves as a powerful role-model for their own behavior as adults (Steinmetz, 1977a, b; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1979:Chapter 5).

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FOOTNOTES

*This paper reports part of the data on rates of violence from chapters 1 through 4 of our forthcoming book VIOLENCE IN THE AMERICAN FAMILY. New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1979, Copyright 1979 by Doubleday Publishing Company. No part of this paper may be reprinted without written permission of the copyright holder.

The research was supported by NIMH grants MH27557 and T32 MH15161. The particular project is part of the University of New Hampshire Family Violence Research Program. A program bibliography and list of available papers will be sent on request to Straus.

1. The incidence rates obtained for husband's violence using the husband as the respondent (12.3 per hundred) are almost identical to the incidence rates obtained when asking the wives about the husband's violence (12.9). Similarly, the incidence of violence per hundred wives is 11.2 when the data are based on interviewing husbands, and 11.5 when they are based on interviewing wives. Of course, this similarity could come about in a number of ways, for example, the spouses might be reported only incidents in which both were violent. That this was not the case can be seen from the fact that violence was reported for only one of the two spouses in about half the couples where there was a violent incident during the survey year.

2. The term "beating up" was defined by its place in the list of violence items. Specifically it came after the items dealing with kicking, biting, hitting with a fist, and hitting with an object, and before the items dealing with a knife or gun. Thus, it is something more than just a single blow, but the precise meaning of the term undoubtedly varied from respondent to respondent.

3. We do not know exactly what is meant by "using a gun or a knife." In the case of the knife it could mean threw the knife or actually stabbed or attempted to stab. In respect to a gun, it could have been fired without anyone being wounded. However, the fact is that the respondent admitted employing the weapon, not just using it as a threat.

4. This study shows a high rate of violence by wives as well as husbands. But it would be a great mistake if that fact distracted us from giving first attention to wives as victims as the focus of social policy. There are a number of reasons for this:

(1) The data in Figure 1 shows that husbands have higher rates of the most dangerous and injurious forms of violence (beating up and using a knife or gun).

(2) Steinmetz (1977b) found that abuse by husbands does more damage. She suggests that the greater physical strength of men makes it more likely that a woman will be seriously injured when beaten up by her husband.

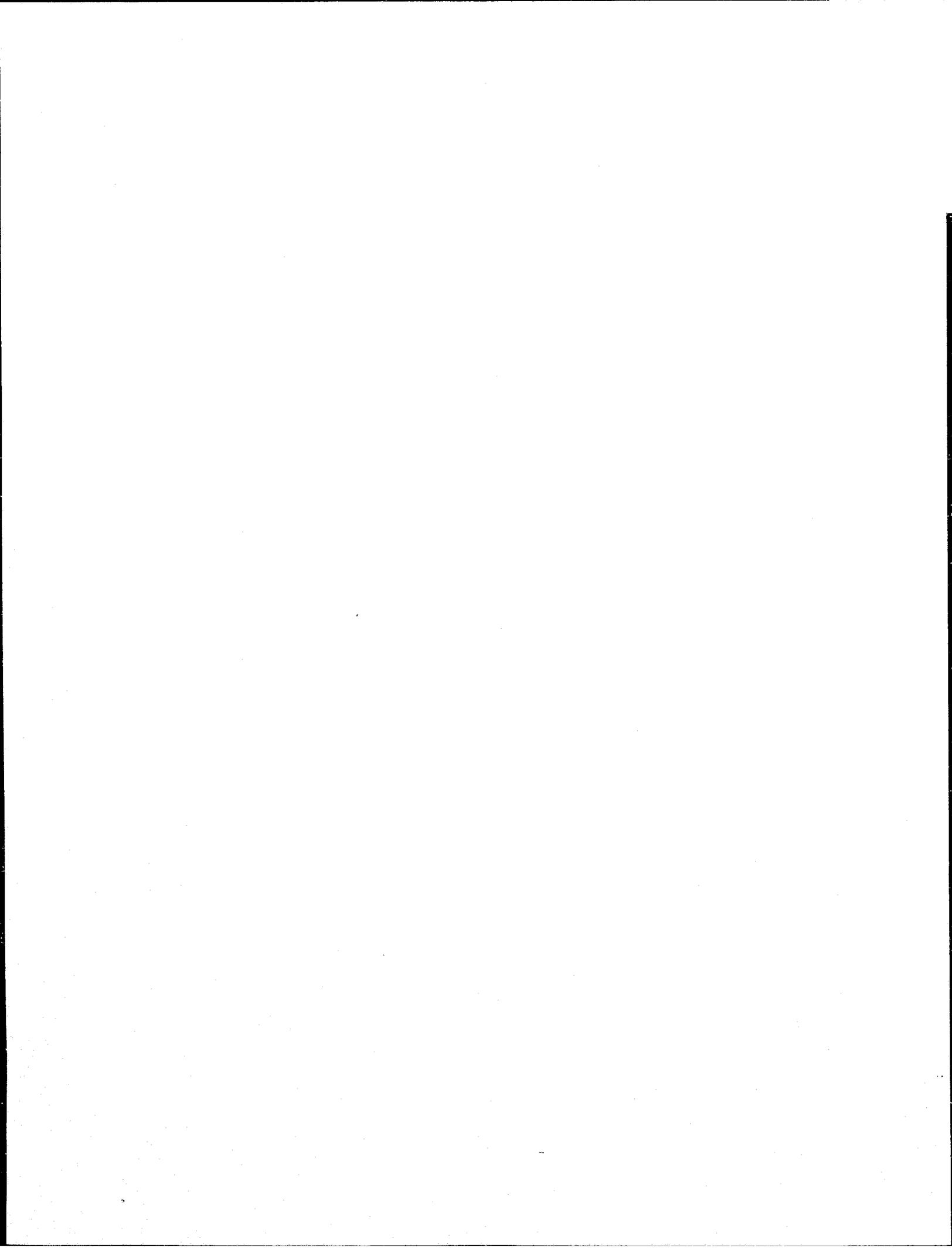
(3) Figure 1 also shows that when violent acts are committed by a husband, they are repeated more often than is the case for wives.

(4) This data does not tell us what proportion of the violent acts by wives were in self-defense or a response to blows initiated by husbands. Wolfgang's study of husband wife homicides (1957) suggests that this is an important factor.

(5) A large number of attacks by husbands seem to occur when the wife is pregnant (Gelles, 1975), thus posing a danger to the as yet unborn child.

(6) Women are locked into marriage to a much greater extent than men. Women are bound by many economic and social constraints, and they often have no alternative to putting up with beatings by their husband (Gelles, 1976; Martin, 1976; Straus, 1976, 1977b). The situation is similar to being married to an alcoholic. Nine out of ten men leave an alcoholic wife, but only one out of ten women leave an alcoholic husband (Good Housekeeping, September 1977).

Most people feel that social policy should be aimed at helping those who are in the weakest position. Even though wives are also violent, they are in the weaker, more vulnerable position in respect to violence in the family. This applies to both the physical, psychological, and economic aspects of things. That is the reason we give first priority to aiding wives who are the victims of beatings by their husbands.



END