

TRENDS IN YOUTH CRIME AND WELL-BEING SINCE THE ABOLITION OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SWEDEN

JOAN E. DURRANT
University of Manitoba

Trends in the well-being of Swedish youth were examined to determine whether they have shown improvement or deterioration since the passage of the 1979 corporal punishment ban. Rates of youth involvement in crime, alcohol and drug use, rape, and suicide have decreased. Trends in rates of nonsexual assault are equivocal due to shifts in enforcement. Legal sanctioning of corporal punishment appears to be unnecessary to improve youth well-being.

The role of corporal punishment in the socialization process has been the subject of much debate in recent years. This debate has centered around two lines of argument. The first relates to the short- and long-term effects of corporal punishment. Some researchers (e.g., Larzelere, 1996) have suggested that this practice may benefit children, as some studies have found that it can result in increased short-term compliance in a laboratory situation (Bean & Roberts, 1981; Day & Roberts, 1983; Roberts, 1988; Roberts & Powers, 1990).

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Others (e.g., Straus, 1994) have argued that corporal punishment is harmful for children, as studies of its long-term correlates have demonstrated that it predicts higher levels of aggression and antisocial behavior in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (e.g., Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Straus, 1994; Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997; Travillion & Snyder, 1993), as well as depression and suicide (DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994; Straus, 1994; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996).

The second area of debate has centered on legal issues and questions of rights. Some writers hold that corporal punishment should have a place in the parental repertoire of disciplinary responses and that legal prohibition of its use constitutes an infringement on parental rights (Larzelere, Silver, & Polite, 1997; Thompson, 1993). Others argue that corporal punishment violates children's fundamental rights to physical integrity, and that the best interests of the child should prevail whenever parents' and children's rights conflict (e.g., McGillivray, 1993).

Internationally, governments and justice systems have approached these issues in a variety of ways. In Canada, for example, Section 43 of the Criminal Code states that parents are "justified in using physical force . . . if the force does not exceed what is reasonable in the circumstances." These laws reflect a belief that corporal punishment is not harmful for children, as parents' rights to use it are not seen as violating the concept of the best interests of the child.

Over the past two decades, European courts and governments increasingly have taken a different view. In 1979, Sweden became the first nation to legally abolish all forms of corporal punishment by all caretakers. This ban was the culmination of 50 years of legislative reforms aimed at making the rejection of this practice increasingly explicit in law. (For details on its history, see Durrant, 1996; Durrant & Olsen, 1997; Newell, 1992). The Swedish law states that, "children are entitled to care, security, and a good upbringing. Children are to be treated with respect for their person and individuality, and may not be subjected to physical punishment or other injurious or humiliating treatment" (Chapter 6, Section 1, *Föräldrabalken*).

Clearly, this law reflects a belief that corporal punishment is harmful to children, and that its use violates their rights to dignity and physical integrity.

Since the Swedish law was passed, seven other countries have implemented similar bans—Finland in 1984, Denmark in 1986 (made more explicit in 1997), Norway in 1987, Austria in 1989, Cyprus in 1994, Latvia in 1998, and Croatia in 1999. In addition, in 1996, the highest court in Italy ruled that physical punishment of children is no longer permitted by law, declaring it “anachronistic and legally unsustainable.” Other European nations are moving in a similar direction; in 1998, the new German government announced its commitment to prohibiting corporal punishment, and a proposal to prohibit this practice in the family currently is before the Belgian Senate.

Despite their international significance, these legislative changes have received surprisingly little research attention. In the popular debate, questions that have been raised with regard to such laws have focused on the two areas highlighted above: (a) implications for youth well-being (i.e., have the laws led to a general lack of discipline, and, therefore, higher levels of social unrest among youth?), and (b) implications for individual rights (i.e., have the laws resulted in higher rates of parental prosecutions or child apprehensions?). As Sweden’s law was the first of its kind, data relevant to these questions, which span an adequate period of time for analysis, are available in that country. A recent study (Durrant, 1999) addressed the second question and found that, in fact, the prosecution rate has not increased, and out-of-home placements of children have shown a steady and substantial decline since the ban was passed.

The first question has yet to be answered. The purpose of the present study is to address this question by evaluating social trends among youth in Sweden over the past 20 to 30 years to determine whether the corporal punishment ban has been followed by positive or negative shifts in the well-being of Swedish youth.

Of course, it cannot be assumed that any change in youth well-being is a direct result of any given legislative change. The factors contributing to such phenomena are highly complex and exist within a cultural context of intricately interrelated policies, laws, values, beliefs, demographic trends, and historical events. The purpose here is not to establish a causal relation between the corporal punishment ban and trends in youth well-being. Rather, it is to address the question of whether legal sanctioning of corporal punishment is necessary to socialize children and youth effectively.

For the purpose of the present study, youth well-being was measured on two broad categories of socialization outcomes—externalizing behavior and internalizing behavior. Each of these categories was measured on two dimensions. Externalizing, or antisocial behavior was operationalized as rates of crime and violence. Internalizing behavior was operationalized as rates of alcohol and drug use and suicide.

HYPOTHESES

On the basis of studies demonstrating a positive relationship between the experience of corporal punishment and antisocial behavior (Bryan & Freed, 1982; Straus et al., 1997), aggression (Strassberg et al., 1994; Travillion & Snyder, 1993), alcohol abuse (Straus & Kaufman Kantor, 1994), and depression (DuRant et al., 1994; Straus, 1994; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996), youth well-being was not expected to worsen following its abolition. Rather, it was predicted that rates of youth antisocial behavior, violence, alcohol and drug use, and suicide would be found to have remained steady or declined in Sweden since the 1970s.

METHOD

During the spring of 1997, primary data were collected in Sweden from: (a) Statistics Sweden (*Statistiska Centralbyrån* [SCB]), (b) the National Crime Prevention Council (*Brottsförebyggande rådet* [BRÅ]), (c) the Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (*Centralförbundet för alkohol- och narkotikaupplysning* [CAN]), (d) the National Institute of Public Health (*Folkhälsoinstitutet* [FHI]), and (e) the National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*). Data were obtained from the early or mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, permitting the documentation of trends from the period before the corporal punishment ban was passed until the present time. To ensure the accuracy of translations and interpretations of the most complex data, personal interviews were conducted with the principal research officer at BRÅ and a criminologist at Stockholm University.

MEASURES

YOUTH CRIME

Rates of youth crime were estimated through an examination of youth involvement in theft and narcotics trafficking. These crime categories were selected because they are the types of crime most likely to involve youth and because they vary in their sensitivity to reporting biases (virtually all thefts are reported, whereas narcotics trafficking is much more difficult to detect). Crime rates were defined as conviction rates because they provide the closest approximation to substantiation rates. To control for the effects of population growth, and to assess the validity of concluding that any change is a youth-specific phenomenon, the analyses were conducted on the proportions of total convictions that were composed of youth.

Theft. Theft rates between 1975 and 1996 were examined (BRÅ, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998; SCB, years 1976 through 1993). The following four types of theft were examined: (a) petty theft (value of less than Swedish Kronor [SEK] 200/U.S. \$58), common theft (value of more than SEK 200/U.S. \$58), major theft (aggravated, including breaking and entering), and motor vehicle theft. Each of these crime rates was measured as the proportion of total convictions of each type that was composed of youth age 15 to 17.

Narcotics trafficking. Rates of youth involvement in narcotics trafficking between 1975 and 1996 were examined. This variable was measured as the proportion of total narcotics trafficking convictions that was composed of youth age 15 to 17 (BRÅ, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998; SCB, years 1976 through 1993).

YOUTH VIOLENCE

Violence was measured as rates of assault and rape. To control for the effects of population growth, and to determine whether any trends were youth-specific, the analyses were conducted on the proportions of total convictions that were composed of youth.

Assault. Assault rates from 1975 to 1996 were analyzed. The youth assault rate was defined as the proportion of total assault convictions that was composed of youth age 15 to 17 (BRÅ, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998; SCB, years 1976 through 1993).

An estimate of youth violence against peers between 1984 and 1994 also was obtained. As conviction rates are not broken down by age of victim, data on suspects were used to examine peer-related assault. "Suspects" are individuals alleged to have perpetrated a crime whose cases are legally pursued. The decision to pursue a case primarily depends on whether (a) the alleged perpetrator is at least 15 years of age, (b) adequate evidence exists, and (c) the alleged act constitutes a crime. The following four outcomes are possible: prosecution in court, summary punishment (generally a fine levied by the prosecuting attorney), waiver of prosecution, or no measures taken. To estimate rates of peer-related violence, an analysis was conducted of the proportion of total suspects composed of youth age 15 to 19 in cases of reported assaults against child victims (SCB, 1995).

Rape. Rates of youth involvement in rape between 1975 and 1996 were examined. This variable was measured as the proportion of total rape convictions composed of youth age 15 to 17 (BRÅ, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998; SCB, years 1976 through 1993).

ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE

Alcohol and drug use was measured as (a) alcohol consumption, (b) experimentation with drugs, and (c) ongoing drug use.

Alcohol consumption. Two measures of youth alcohol consumption were examined. The first was the proportion of young people ages 15 and 16 who are classified as "consumers" of alcohol (consumption of at least one glass of beer, 2 centilitres of wine, or 2 centilitres of spirits during the past year). The second was the average yearly consumption of alcohol among 12- to 15-year-olds and 16- to 19-year-olds. These data were obtained from annual school surveys collected between 1971 and 1996 (FHI & CAN, 1997, 1998).

Drug experimentation and ongoing drug use. The rate of drug experimentation was measured as the proportion of 15- and 16-year-olds who have ever tried drugs. Ongoing drug use was measured as the proportion of individuals in this age group who continued to use drugs. These data were obtained from questionnaire surveys conducted between 1971 and 1997 (FHI & CAN, 1997, 1998).

SUICIDE

Suicide was measured as the number of deaths of individuals age 15 to 19, per 100,000 in this age group, for which the causes and intent clearly indicated suicide. Data were available for the years between 1970 and 1996 (Socialstyrelsen, 1970-1996).

ANALYSIS

Data were plotted for each variable across the years under study. A line of *best fit* was generated for each variable; one-tailed Cox and Stuart tests for trends (Conover, 1980) were conducted to determine whether their slopes were statistically significant.

In addition, cohort analyses were conducted to compare the behavior of young people raised following the ban's passage to that of youth raised prior to it. The mean proportions of (a) youth convicted of theft and narcotics trafficking; (b) youth convicted of assault and rape; (c) youth who consumed alcohol, experimented with drugs, and continued to use drugs; and (d) youth who committed suicide were compared across two 5-year periods. The first period was 1975 to 1979. Individuals who were 15 to 17 years of age during this period were raised to adolescence prior to the passage of the corporal punishment ban. The second period was 1992 to 1996. Individuals who were 15 to 17 years of age during this period were born between 1975 and 1981. As they were 4 years of age or younger when the corporal punishment ban was passed, they were raised largely following its passage.

TABLE 1

Annual Means of Two Youth Cohorts on Well-Being Measures

Measure	Cohort		% change
	1975 to 1979	1992 to 1996	
Convicted of theft (% of total convictions)	26.16	20.80	-20.49
Petty (%)	19.69	18.90	-4.01
Common (%)	28.88	22.70	-21.40
Major (%)	21.06	14.70	-30.20
Motor vehicle (%)	37.88	31.90	-15.79
Convicted of narcotics trafficking (% of total convictions) ^a	5.96	2.90	-51.34
Convicted of assault/aggravated assault (% of total convictions) ^a	10.36	16.00	+54.44
Convicted of rape (% of total convictions) ^a	8.06	4.16	-48.39
Consumer of alcohol (% of age group) ^b	89.10	77.90	-12.57
Ever tried drugs (% of age group) ^b	7.48	5.40	-27.81
Continue to use drugs (% of age group) ^b	2.00	0.83	-58.50
Suicide rate (per 100,000) ^c	7.74	6.21	-19.77

SOURCE: Brottsförebyggande rådet, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998; Folkhälsoinstitutet and Centralförbundet för alkohol-och narkotikaupplysning, 1997, 1998; Statistiska Centralbyån, years 1976 through 1993; Socialstyrelsen, 1970-1996.

a. 15- to 17-year-old youth.

b. 15- to 16-year-old youth.

c. 15- to 19-year-old youth.

RESULTS

THEFT

Trend analyses. The proportion of individuals between 15 and 17 years of age who were convicted of three categories of theft declined between 1975 and 1996. Declines occurred with regard to common theft ($n = 11$, $t = 10$, $p = .0005$; range = 20.9% to 33.3%, $M = 26.5\%$), major theft ($n = 11$, $t = 9$, $p = .0059$; range = 8.5% to 29.8%, $M = 15.0\%$), and motor vehicle theft ($n = 11$, $t = 9$, $p = .0059$; range = 28.3% to 40.0%, $M = 34.7\%$). The category of petty theft remained steady during this time period ($n = 11$, $t = 7$, $p = .1133$; range = 10.2% to 26.3%, $M = 18.9\%$).

Cohort analyses. As Table 1 indicates, the mean proportion of individuals convicted of theft who were in the postban youth cohort was

approximately 20% lower than the mean proportion of individuals convicted of theft who were in the preban youth cohort. A decrease is seen in all forms of theft, although the differences are greater with regard to the more serious offenses.

NARCOTICS TRAFFICKING

Trend analysis. The proportion of all persons convicted of narcotics trafficking who were 15 to 17 years of age declined between 1975 and 1996 ($n = 11, t = 9, p = .0059$; range = 2% to 8%, $M = 3.7\%$).

Cohort analysis. The mean proportion of those convicted of narcotics trafficking who were in the preban youth cohort was twice as great as the mean proportion of those convicted of such offenses who were in the postban youth cohort (see Table 1).

VIOLENCE

Trend analyses. Data on convictions for assault and aggravated assault for victims of all ages indicate that the proportion of convictions composed of individuals age 15 to 17 years remained steady between 1975 and 1996 ($n = 11, t = 7, p = .1133$; range = 8% to 20%, $M = 11.2\%$).

The proportion of suspects who were age 15 to 19 in cases of alleged assaults against young children (age 0 to 6) remained steady between 1984 and 1994 ($n = 5, t = 2, p = .5000$; range = 2% to 7%, $M = 4.2\%$) (SCB, 1995). It should be noted that the annual mean number of youth suspected of assaults against young children was 3, with a range of 0 to 5 over the decade. The proportion of suspects who were age 15 to 19 in cases of alleged assaults against older children (age 7 to 14) also remained steady between 1984 and 1994 ($n = 5, t = 2, p = .5000$; range = 34% to 48%, $M = 40.4\%$).

The percentage of individuals convicted of rape who were between the ages of 15 and 17 years declined between 1975 and 1996 ($n = 11, t = 10, p = .0005$; range = 2.9% to 14.1%, $M = 8.3\%$).

Cohort analyses. Data on convictions in cases of assault across all victim ages indicate that the proportion of such convictions that was

composed of 15- to 17-year-old youth was approximately 50% greater in the postban cohort than it was in the preban cohort (see Table 1). As data on ages of suspects in cases of assaults against children were not available prior to 1984, it was not possible to conduct appropriate cohort analyses for these variables. The proportion of rape convictions that was composed of 15- to 17-year-old youth was approximately twice as great in the preban cohort than it was in the postban cohort (see Table 1).

ALCOHOL USE

Trend analyses. The proportion of young people who are classified as “consumers” of alcohol (consumption of at least one glass of beer, 2 centilitres of wine, or 2 centilitres of spirits during the past year) declined between 1971 and 1997 ($n = 12, t = 12, p = .0000$; range = 75% to 91%, $M = 82.6\%$). Between 1979 and 1990, a decline also occurred in the amount of alcohol consumed annually (in liters) by 12- to 15-year-olds ($n = 5, t = 5, p = .0000$; range = 0.1 to 0.5, $M = 0.2$). The amount of alcohol consumed annually by 16- to 19-year-olds remained steady between 1979 and 1990 ($n = 5, t = 2, p = .5000$; range = 1.3 to 3.3, $M = 2.0$).

Cohort analyses. As Table 1 indicates, the percentage of 15- to 16-year-olds classified as alcohol consumers declined by approximately 13% between the preban and postban cohorts. With regard to amounts of alcohol consumed, data were not available prior to 1979, so cohort analyses could not be performed.

DRUG USE

Trend analyses. The proportion of 15- to 16-year-olds who have tried drugs decreased between 1971 and 1997 ($n = 13, t = 13, p = .0000$; range = 3% to 15%, $M = 6.7\%$) (FHI & CAN, 1997, 1998). The proportion of individuals in this age group who continued to use drugs also declined during this period ($n = 10, t = 10, p = .0000$; range = 0% to 6%, $M = 1.7\%$) (FHI & CAN, 1997, 1998).

Cohort analyses. The percentage of youth age 15 to 16 who have ever tried drugs decreased by more than one quarter between the preban and postban cohorts; the percentage who continue to use drugs was more than halved (see Table 1).

SUICIDE

Trend analysis. The rate of suicide among youth age 15 to 19 (per 100,000) showed an overall declining, but nonsignificant, trend between 1970 and 1996 ($n = 13$, $t = 7$, $p = .2905$; range = 4.5 to 10.5, $M = 6.79$).

Cohort analysis. The youth suicide rate declined by approximately 20% between the preban and postban cohorts (see Table 1).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to address the question of whether the Swedish corporal punishment ban has been followed by increased social unrest among Swedish youth. Data collected from a range of official sources indicate that Swedish youth are functioning more adaptively today than they were before the ban was passed.

YOUTH CRIME

The involvement of youth in theft and narcotics trafficking has declined substantially since the 1970s. This finding has been supported in other research on youth crime in Sweden. For example, an earlier investigation of age cohorts (Olsson, 1996) found that among those born in 1958-1959 (who were 15 years old in 1973-1974), many more were convicted of serious drug offences than among those born after 1966 (who were 15 years old in 1981 or later), despite a police enforcement wave in the early 1980s.

ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE

Consumption of alcohol and drugs by Swedish youth also has declined since the 1970s. On average, fewer than 6% of the postban

cohort have ever tried drugs; the proportion that use drugs on a continuing basis is virtually nil. Other studies have shown similar trends. For example, two national surveys were carried out in 1979 (Untredningen om narkotifamissbrukets omfattning, 1980) and 1992 (Olsson, Byqvist, & Gomér, 1994). These surveys used case-finding techniques and included an estimated measure of unrecorded cases. The findings suggested that individuals under the age of 20 in Sweden are extremely unlikely to be heavy drug users. They also indicate that youth who were age 10 to 19 (the most susceptible age for drug recruitment) in 1982 were only half as likely to become heavy drug users as those who were in this age group in 1969.

Clearly, trends in alcohol and drug use among youth cannot be attributed directly to the effects of the corporal punishment ban. Alcohol consumption, in general, is lower in Sweden than it is in many other countries (CAN & FHI, 1993; FHI & CAN, 1997), partially due to a long history of temperance, as well as government regulatory policies and public health prevention programs. In addition, Sweden has a highly restrictive drug enforcement policy (since the 1980s), a highly centralized and independent police organization, low unemployment rates, a coherent set of active social policies, a geographical position that minimizes exposure to the major European drug routes, and a well-developed drug treatment system (Lenke & Olsson, 1996). Furthermore, drug education in schools began in the 1970s, and charging policies were tightened in the 1980s (Knutsson & Kühllhorn, 1996; Olsson, 1996). These factors undoubtedly have contributed to the patterns seen over time in alcohol and drug use among youth.

SUICIDE

The suicide rate of Swedish young people is also lower among those raised following the ban's passage than those raised before it. International comparisons of youth suicide rates show that Sweden is one of few countries to show a decline between 1970 and 1991 (UNICEF, 1994). In contrast, youth suicide rates doubled in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada between 1970 and 1991, and tripled in New Zealand (UNICEF, 1994).

It should be noted that such comparisons are exceedingly difficult to conduct due to differences in willingness to record such deaths. Fur-

thermore, suicide is a highly complex phenomenon mediated by factors including depression, substance abuse, mental disorders, personal crises, and family disturbances. Therefore, no causal connections may be drawn between trends in suicide rates and the corporal punishment ban. However, it is clear that youth have not become more self-destructive following the ban's passage.

VIOLENCE

The only variable in the present study for which findings were equivocal was youth assault rates. Although the proportion of assault convictions composed of youth remained steady overall, when the preban and postban cohorts were examined, an increase was found on this variable. This finding raises the question of whether a true increase in youth violence has occurred in Sweden since the corporal punishment ban was passed.

Four sources of data can help to answer this question. The first source is victimization studies, which are based on the reports of young people with regard to their experience of "street violence," and self-report studies, which are based on juveniles' reports of commission of violence. Rates of victimization and self-reported violence, which are not subject to fluctuations in enforcement, may better estimate the true rate of youth violence. The findings of these studies, carried out annually by Statistics Sweden, indicate that the victimization rate of young people age 16 to 20 remained steady between 1976 and 1994 (Qvarnström & Mårtensson, 1996; von Hofer, 1995). Self-report studies have yielded similar findings (e.g., Qvarnström & Mårtensson, 1996; Ward, 1998).

Second, the number of youthful homicide victims and the number of young people suspected of homicide can clarify the picture of major youth violence, because homicides are relatively unequivocal as indicators of major violence. The rate of homicides against young people age 15 to 19 remained consistently low from 1975 to 1994 (range = 0.2 to 1.6 per 100,000) (von Hofer, 1995). Similarly, the number of young people suspected of homicide remained low and stable during the same period (range = 0.8 to 3.2 per 100,000) (von Hofer, 1995). Third, no increase was seen between 1975 and 1996 in the proportion of individuals convicted of homicide who were age 15 to 17 (the average an-

nual number of such convictions was 3.3) (Durrant, 1999). Fourth, it was found in the present study that youth involvement in rape has declined since 1975. Together, these findings suggest that major violence by and toward young people has not increased since the mid-1970s.

Why, then, have convictions of young people for assault increased? Junger-Tas (1996) argues that the increase seen in reports of youth violence against peers is more a function of enforcement than of change in the behavior of young people. An example of such a shift in enforcement policies is the recent campaign that has been waged against bullying in schools (von Hofer, 1995). What was once considered common, even expected, behavior among young males is now defined as assault. Bullying became defined as a social problem during the 1980s and was the focus of major public education efforts by the early 1990s. It is now stated in the Education Act that schools are responsible for counteracting bullying. In 1990, the Occupational Safety and Health Act was extended to include pupils; this act states that the authorities responsible for the school should have rules and regulations for countering bullying. The organization of the police has been changed recently so that police officers work actively in the schools on this issue. School principals now routinely report to the police any instances brought to their attention, including threats and minor assaults. The police, in turn, have no discretionary power in registering such reports; all are entered into the criminal statistics. Therefore, the apparent increase in youth violence against peers may be the result of a redefinition of violence and increased enforcement.

An analysis of seasonal trends in the reporting of youth violence (Olsson, 1995) indicates a clear pattern of increased reporting of assault against older children (age 7 to 14) during the school months and decreased reporting during vacation months. Furthermore, approximately 60% of reported assaults against 7- to 14-year-olds take place on weekdays; in contrast, only 20% to 30% of reported assaults against adult men take place on weekdays (Olsson, 1995). Together, these findings suggest that the apparent increase in youth violence is at least partially accounted for by a recent school enforcement wave.

It appears, then, that Swedish young people have not become more violent following the abolition of corporal punishment. In fact, "self-report studies from Denmark and Sweden indicate that the youth

of today are more, and not less, disciplined than juveniles in the 70s" (Estrada, 1999).

CONCLUSION

The findings reported here indicate that Swedish youth have not become more unruly, undersocialized, or self-destructive following the passage of the 1979 corporal punishment ban. In fact, most measures demonstrated a substantial improvement in youth well-being.

As a multitude of social forces interact to shape the well-being of any particular society and its children, it is important to emphasize that direct causal relationships between the passage of the corporal punishment ban and the trends reported here cannot be inferred. Each of the variables measured in the present study has complex determinants; to suggest that any social trend can be fully accounted for by one legislative reform would be exceedingly reductionistic.

The present findings do, however, suggest that legislative reform may play a role in altering parental attitudes and behavior. Through its symbolic function, law shapes and confirms public values, which, in turn, are a primary contributor to child-rearing practices (Lenton, 1990; McGillivray, 1992; Moore & Straus, 1987; Verdugo, Bermejo, & Fuertes, 1995).

When the present data are considered together with findings with regard to the internationally low rates of child abuse mortality found in Sweden (Belsey, 1993; Durrant, 1999), the steady decline seen in out-of-home placements of children by Swedish social authorities (Durrant, 1999), and the dramatic decrease in support for corporal punishment witnessed since the mid-1960s among the Swedish public (SCB, 1996; SIFO, 1981), it seems reasonable to conclude that parents are decreasingly using physical coercion as a child-rearing method.

There is empirical support for this conclusion as follows: whereas in the 1950s, virtually all Swedish mothers reported having used physical punishment (Stattin, Janson, Klackenborg-Larsson, & Magnusson, 1995), a majority of today's Swedish youth report never having been physically punished by their mothers; a majority of the remainder report having been struck only once or twice in their entire childhood (SCB, 1996). These rates can be compared to those seen in the U.S., where more than 90% of American parents have adminis-

tered physical punishment to their children (Straus, 1991) and 93% report having received it as children (Buntain-Ricklefs, Kemper, Bell, & Babonis, 1994), and Canada, where estimates suggest that at least 70% of parents have spanked their children (Durrant, Rose-Krasnor, & Broberg, 1999; Lenton, 1990) and one quarter of mothers of preschoolers do so at least once a week (Durrant et al., 1999). This dramatic cultural difference demonstrates that the Swedish approach to corporal punishment—legislative reform, supportive measures to parents, and a sociocultural context responsive to children’s needs and rights—certainly has been effective (see Durrant & Olsen, 1997, for a detailed analysis of the historical and political context of the corporal punishment ban).

As Ziegert (1987) has stated, “Far from being only a declamatory ‘icing on the cake’ of children’s rights, the differentiated nature of the Swedish society and legal system ensures that the perpetration against children is stopped before it begins, by refusing formal recognition or benign acceptance of violence in the ideological disguise of ‘deserved punishment’ ” (p. 169). Although the relationship between shifting public attitudes and legislative reform is undoubtedly an intricate one, the result of this mutually influential process has been a society that no longer relies on or condones the use of violence against children in any form, including what might be termed in North America “normative” or “customary” physical punishment. As predicted by the findings of many studies demonstrating the relationship between corporal punishment and negative developmental outcome (Gershoff, 2000; Straus, 1994), such shifts in parental attitudes and behaviors have been followed not by chaos, but by improved functioning among Swedish youth.

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Joan E. Durrant, Ph.D., is a child-clinical psychologist and associate professor of family studies at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada. Her primary research interest is in parental use of corporal punishment and the cultural contexts and belief systems that support or deter it. She has lived in Sweden to study the history and effects of the world's first corporal punishment ban. Her research has most recently been published in the Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law, Child Abuse and Neglect, and New Directions in Child Development.