

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD ABUSE

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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal cross sectional 10 year study was conducted measuring public attitudes toward the definition and criminalization of physical child abuse, psychological child abuse, and child neglect. The study found that the public endorses a fairly broad liberal definition of child abuse and that this definition of child abuse is fairly stable over time. Subjects also strongly endorsed the creation of misdemeanor and felony statutes and strongly endorsed the use of prison to punish child abusers.

Child abuse continues to be a social problem that is not easily understood. Whether a particular act is an abusive act or a justified act of a well meaning parent is often open to interpretation. While parents have a duty to their children, they have few restrictions on the manner in which they choose to raise their children. In matters of discipline, religious instruction, style of living, and support, parents are permitted to apply their own values. Only in extreme situations will the court intervene in the family's affairs. In regard to children, the court will intervene in three areas: neglect, sexual abuse, or violence. While child abuse has been identified as one of the more serious domestic issues of our time that must be addressed (Flowers 2000), sound empirical investigation of the extent to which people identify child abuse as serious has been limited. This article reports a longitudinal cross sectional study of public attitudes toward child abuse based on data gathered from one medium sized southern city.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Change in the orientation of society to children has developed slowly. The Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries brought the beginning of recognition that children had individual personalities and needed special care and attention. By the seventeenth century, children were dressed differently than adults and harsh treatment of them was criticized (Aries 1962). By the late nineteenth century, a new concept of childhood was emerging which held that children must be safeguarded and properly prepared for adulthood (Hobbes 1972). In the United States, under pressure from the child savers, the juvenile court emerged and society accepted responsibility for assuring a safe and correct up-bringing for all children (Platt 1969). It should be noted that, at the same time, discipline was stressed as an essential ingredient in child rearing and the use of physical force in

this context was to be anticipated rather than criticized (Bremmer 1970).

The concept of a public interest in protecting neglected and abused children did not emerge until late in the nineteenth century. The first highly publicized case of public intervention occurred when neighbors reported the abuse of a young girl named Mary Ellen. When the friends of Mary Ellen sought to intervene in her behalf in 1874 after finding her undernourished and apparently physically abused, they discovered that such treatment of a child was not a violation of the law (McCrea 1910). Until quite recently, the juvenile court has hesitated to extend its broad powers to exert control and discipline over the abusing adults. In most jurisdictions, adults who abuse children had to be charged with an offense in the adult courts. The appropriateness of the referral of child victims to the juvenile court has been argued from the earliest years of the juvenile court based on the assertion that the court will damage rather than assist child victims because of its basic orientation (Flexner & Balwin 1914). Public acceptance of child abuse as a social problem was still slow to develop. It was 1962 before a national survey of the prevalence of child battering was reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The report introduced the battered child syndrome and produced movement toward public awareness and public concern (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller & Silver 1962). The feminist movement, in raising public awareness of the plight of women in the home, developed an environment receptive to the pleas of those who sought to place boundaries around those behaviors that are unacceptable when directed toward children.

DIMENSIONS OF CHILD ABUSE

Child abuse includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, neglect, and abandonment (Larson 2001; Sigler 1989).

Each of these reflects damage to the child; some reflect acts of commission, and others reflect acts of omission.

Neglect and abandonment are acts of omission that are not consistently classified as abuse (Sigler 1989). The adults responsible for the child fail to provide for the child the things needed for healthy development. Neglect cannot be defined clearly as there are no standards available that address the minimal needs of growing children. In addition, some parents who provide few resources would provide more for their children if they had the means to do so. In evaluating the care and support provided for children, cultural or class values frequently come into conflict, and questions are raised as to the proportion of the family resources which should be allocated to meet specific family needs. While some degree of consensus on these issues has been identified among middle-class mothers, working class mothers, and social workers (Dubowitz, Klockner, Star & Black 1998; Polansky 1978; Rose 1999; Rose & Selwyn 2000; Scourfield 2000) lack of resources and the perspectives of the very poor have not been assessed.

Child psychological abuse is the exposure of a child by an adult to experiences that can cause psychological or emotional distress (Russell & Bolen 2000; Sigler 1989). Psychological abuse is more difficult to address than other types of abuse because of issues such as intent, level of knowledge, difficulty of diagnosis, and difficulty of obtaining proof. Psychological damage can occur even when the adults in the child's environment have no intention of abusing the child. The adults are meeting their own needs or are doing things that they think are right. In some cases, not only do they lack intent to do harm, but they will argue that no harm is occurring or likely to occur from their acts and that they are doing the best that they can do with the resources which are available to them (Sigler 1989). Psychological and emotional abuse of children is a cause for concern, but the potential for effective intervention is very low; thus causing psychological abuse to be a neglected area.

Child sexual abuse is the exposure of a child by an adult to any experience that is designed to or which could be reasonably expected to produce sexual stimulation in either party. This is also a form of abuse that is difficult to process (Stroud, Martens & Barker 2000). There is usually no physical evidence of the abuse, the victim is not a reliable witness, and

there is usually a denial of the situation by the child victim and other children and adults in the environment. Cases are rarely successfully prosecuted. Frequently a complaining adult will regret statements made to the police and will recant his or her testimony. In these cases, the adults will bring pressure on the child to recant his or her statements, sometimes with no more pressure than the need to protect daddy (or some other relative) from a bad justice system (Stroud, Martens & Barker 2000).

The remaining area of child abuse, physical abuse, is the form of child abuse that is most often the focus of successful intervention efforts; however, it defies precise definition (Larson 2001). The definition of physical child abuse contains subjective components because of the lack of consensus about the extent to which adults can use physical force to discipline their children (Sigler 1989). As a practical matter, only extreme use of physical force is defined as abuse. Even with this limitation of definition, physical abuse is more amenable to intervention than other types of abuse. Because the abuse must be extreme, it leaves physical traces which can be introduced as evidence and which are difficult to deny. Intervention can be maintained even if the key witnesses recant. The abuse can't be concealed as bruises are visible and broken bones, bad sprains, and burns must be treated. The offender can not deny the damage, but denial can be maintained if the damage can be successfully blamed on another cause; however, if there is a consistent pattern of "accidents", system interest can be justified and intervention can be initiated and sustained.

PREVALENCE AND INCIDENCE OF CHILD ABUSE

The incidence of child abuse in the United States (Larson 2001) and around the world is difficult to assess (Forrester & Harwin 2000). Much of the behavior that could be classified as child abuse is hidden and known only to the actors in the situation. A national report stated that 631 children died in 1974 due to abuse (Kadushim 1978). This number seems small for a nation the size of the United States and seems suspect, especially when one considers that in 1973, 41,104 cases of child abuse were reported for the ten largest states alone (Cohen & Sussman 1975), and that this number of reported abuses does not take into account the large numbers of cases that undoubtedly go unreported. It is probable that many

deaths caused by child abuse were officially attributed to other causes such as accidental death. In general, it is probable that only cases of abuse severe enough to require treatment in the emergency room of a hospital were reported. There is a hesitancy on the part of health care providers to report all of the cases which are suspect because of potential liability and because of the risk that a vigorous program of reporting abuse to the authorities would cause parents to withhold treatment from their children because of fear of investigation and possible prosecution (Fontana & Besharov 1977). One estimate suggests that about 5 percent of all cases involving injured children treated by health care providers involves a case of child abuse (Gelles 1985). Reported prevalence of physical abuse has varied with 23 per 1,000 children reported exposed to serious violence in the early 1980's (Straus & Gelles 1988). These same authors found that rates of severe violence decreased by about 47 percent from 1975 to 1985 (Gelles & Straus 1987). Official reports indicated 4.3 physically abused children per 1,000 children in 1988 raising to 5.7 per 1,000 children in 1993 (Sedlak & Broadhurst 1996). The recent Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Maltreatment found 3,780 cases in which child maltreatment was substantiated from October to December of 1998 for selected communities (Trocmé, MacMillan, Fallon & De Marco 2003). A similar assessment in Australia found an increase in cases from 27,367 in 2000 to 30,473 in 2001 (Colman & Colman 2003).

Under-reporting is influenced by the fact that the natural parent is the most likely abuser. Two early studies focused on family abuse. In one, it was found that 55 percent of those who abuse children were fathers and that 68 percent of those who neglect children are mothers (American Humane Society 1978); while in the other study 50 percent of the abuse was attributed to mothers and stepmothers while fathers were held accountable for 40 percent (Gil 1979).

Sexual abuse of children is also under-reported, possibly for the same reasons. Incidences of sexual abuse of this type have been estimated at from fifty thousand to seventy-five thousand incidents a year (De Francis 1971). More recent studies have found that prevalence increased from .7 per 1,000 children in 1980 to 3.2 per 1,000 children in 1993 (Sedlak & Broadhurst 1996) and that girls are more likely to be victims than boys (US Department of Health

and Human Services 1998). Finkelhor (1994) reviewed the data from 19 surveys and found that at least 20 percent of US women and 5 percent of men reported some form of sexual abuse as children. Attempts to predict or identify potential abusers have met with limited success (McMurtry 1985; Wolfe 1985) with contemporary programs which use broad based peer group counseling with a focus on coping skills and anger management demonstrating some success (Winton & Mara 2001) in treatment of abusers.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD DOMESTIC ABUSE

Very little empirical research has focused on public attitudes toward domestic abuse. There is abundant information available regarding rates of physical and, to a lesser extent, sexual abuse and an equally rich body of research focusing on the impact of abuse on victims such as the recent Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Maltreatment (Trocmé, Tourigny, MacLaurin & Fallon 2003). More recently, social scientists have focused on public attitudes toward justice system responses but interest in the criminalization process as reflecting changes in public attitudes has been limited at best.

Amanda Robinson (1999) reviewed the studies that have focused on attitudes toward domestic violence as a part of her report on public attitudes toward arrest policies. Most of the studies that she reports focused on justice system responses and the attitudes of justice and social service agency staff. In addition to citing Johnson and Sigler (1995) she presents facts reported by Rossi, Waite, Bose and Berk in 1974. The Rossi et al study measured the relative ranking of offenses by the general public. Consistently, subjects rated offenses against spouses as substantially less severe than the same offenses when committed against other actors such as strangers and neighbors. Korbin and Coulton (2000) also measured community attitudes in 20 neighborhoods in Cleveland. While they found minor differences by race, they concluded that the subjects demonstrated substantial consistency in their definitions of child abuse and neglect. Greene, Glenwick, and Schiaffino (1999) also found substantial consistency when they measured the definitions of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse of children among social workers and attorneys. Price, Islam,

Gruhler, Dove, Knowles, & Stults, (2001) found similarity in attitudes among subjects from urban areas in Canada and the United States.

A number of studies have measured attitudes and definitions relating to defining child abuse in other countries. Variation in definitions and attitudes related to culture have been found in the literature and in studies conducted in Singapore (Chan, Elliot, Chow & Thomas 2002). Horn measured a limited number of attitudinal variables in her study of sexual and physical abuse of children in Germany (Horn 1996). She identified reasons why the subjects believed that people abused children, willingness to intervene, and the extent to which professionals working with abused children were willing to endorse a legal remedy. Christopherson (1998) measured social work student's perceptions of child abuse finding differences between English and Swedish students while Elliot, Tong, and Tan (1997) measured the attitudes of the Singapore public on the acceptability of abusive behaviors. Segal and Iwai (2004) found that social workers, lawyers, doctors, and the general public in Japan held similar definitions for child abuse. Paavialainen & Tarkka (2003) measured the attitudes and definitions of child abuse held by nurses in Finland.

This line of research was designed to provide a specific measure of the public's definition of various types of domestic abuse and to assess the stability of these definitions over time. The present study focuses on public attitudes toward child abuse. Willingness to identify specific acts as child abuse and the willingness to criminalize child abuse were measured on three occasions over a ten year period.

METHODOLOGY

Design Characteristic

Data were collected with four self-administered questionnaires that were delivered and retrieved from randomly selected households within the city limits of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a southern city with major educational and mental health institutions and a light industrial base. The four separate surveys shared a common sampling frame, common variables, and common data collection techniques. Each survey was an independent project focusing on one aspect of violence or domestic violence. Data were collected in

1986-87, in 1991-92, and in 1996-97.

The first instrument focused on the location of domestic violence within the broader context of social violence. The second, third, and fourth instruments focused on the dimensions of domestic abuse and perceived need for criminalization for specific types of domestic abuse. The types were determined by victim profiles presently in use. They were spouse abuse, child abuse, and elder abuse. Each survey focused on one victim type in an attempt to avoid generalization to a common victim group by the subjects. The decision to conduct four relatively short surveys produced high response rates but limits analysis across types of abuse. This report focuses on data gathered with the child abuse instrument.

Variables

While the variables remain fairly constant across the four instruments, there are some differences from one instrument to another in the scales used to measure some of the variables. In the child abuse instrument, the subjects' willingness to label specific acts that could be seen as neglect or as psychological or physical abuse was measured by a set of 15 items (see Appendix) that they were asked to label as: always child abuse, sometimes child abuse, or never child abuse. Physical acts were measured in terms of degree of force and in terms of frequency of use of force. Additional items measured willingness to criminalize child abuse and preferred penalties. Attitudes toward child sexual abuse were not measured. It is the authors' belief that including child sexual abuse measures would distort measures of attitude toward other forms of child abuse.

In addition to the primary variables, a number of standard demographic variables were measured. These variables included gender, race, age, education, occupation, marital status, religious activity, and political activity. The last two variables were measured on scales that measured affiliation and perceived level of activity.

The Population

The population for the four surveys was the adult resident population of the city of Tuscaloosa. The geographical boundaries of the city constituted the physical boundaries for the study. Several areas within these boundaries were excluded to eliminate non-

resident adults in order to obtain a sample that would be representative of the permanent residents of the town. The campuses of Stillman College and the University of Alabama and the student housing area adjacent to the university campus were excluded to eliminate non-resident students from the population. The inclusion of large numbers of students in the sample would have made the sample less representative of the residential population. The reservations of the mental health facilities and the Veterans Administration Hospital were excluded to eliminate non-resident patients from the population. This process may have excluded a small number of Tuscaloosa residents, introducing a small bias, which is outweighed by the bias that would result if the student and patient populations were included.

The Sample

In the first data collection period (1986-87) four separate stratified random samples were drawn from the population. The questionnaires for the acceptance of violence and elder abuse were administered at separate times. Spouse abuse and child abuse instruments were administered at the same time to different samples. The data were collected in three separate two to three month periods. In the second and third data gathering period (1991-92 and 1996-97), a single stratified random sample was drawn from the population, with all four instruments delivered during a nine-month period.

At the beginning of each data gathering session, a city map was obtained from the City Engineer's Office. The grids formed by the latitude and longitude lines on the maps constituted the first set of strata, and city blocks constituted the second strata. The number of city blocks in each section were counted, and a number of units were assigned to each section based on its portion of the total blocks in the city. Most sections were roughly equivalent, producing a situation in which all of the main sections were assigned the same number of units with four peripheral sections assigned a reduced number of units. In all, 150 units were selected for each instrument in the first period, and 200 units were selected for each instrument in the second and third periods. The blocks were selected from each grid using a table of random numbers. One house was selected from each block using a list of two-place

random numbers drawn from a table of random numbers by the researcher during the first collection period. Four houses were selected from each block during the second and third data gathering period. Each randomly selected household received one questionnaire. If an apartment building was selected, the list of random numbers was used to select an apartment. The next-oldest-birthday method was used to select one adult from each household. Adult was defined as a permanent Tuscaloosa resident over eighteen years of age.

The Collection of Data

The questionnaires were placed in campus mail envelopes (reusable nine by twelve manila envelopes) for delivery. All of the campus mail envelopes had been used several times and listed a lead researcher as the last recipient. These envelopes were delivered and retrieved by research assistants working in teams. Each team consisted of one driver and one contact person. All of the contact persons were women. The research assistants working for the researchers during the first data collection session were all women. While the use of women might introduce a bias, restricting the data collection to women in the second and third sessions made the potential bias consistent over time.

The team would locate a block. Using the list of random numbers they would select a house. The contact person would introduce herself and ask for the adult with the next birthday. If the subject was not at home, the contact person would leave the questionnaire with the person who answered the door with instructions to give the questionnaire to the subject with an explanation and request for assistance. She would leave the envelope and questionnaire with instructions to place the questionnaire in the envelope when completed or to place the uncompleted questionnaire in the envelope if the subject decided not to participate.

The contact person would make arrangements to return to retrieve the questionnaire two days later. Subjects were asked to leave the completed instruments outside the front door for retrieval if they left home. If an instrument was not retrieved on the return trip, the team would make up to three additional trips in an attempt to retrieve the questionnaire.

If no one answered the door at the first house selected, the next house in the ran-

Table 1: Endorsement of Types of Behavior as Child Abuse by Year

Type of behavior	Year								
	1986-7			1991-2			1996-7		
	never	sometimes	always	never	sometimes	always	never	sometimes	always
PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE SUBSCALE									
Criticize child publicly*	12.6%	64.7%	22.7%	8.9%	61.5%	29.6%	14.1%	45.6%	40.3%
Call child worthless	10.1%	15.1%	74.8%	4.4%	11.8%	83.8%	14.8%	18.1%	67.1%
Curse child	11.8%	25.2%	63.0%	3.6%	13.8%	82.6%	10.7%	24.8%	64.4%
Not loving child***	9.4%	8.5%	82.1%	3.7%	9.6%	86.7%	20.1%	35.6%	44.3%
NEGLECT SUBSCALE									
Make child stay in house	10.9%	43.7%	45.4%	4.4%	46.0%	49.6%	18.1%	24.8%	57.0%
Tie or lock up child***	6.7%	.8%	92.4%	3.6%	2.2%	94.2%	14.8%	20.1%	65.1%
Deny child food	6.8%	15.3%	78.0%	2.2%	13.0%	84.8%	16.8%	12.8%	70.5%
Provide poor clothing***	10.1%	26.1%	63.9%	2.2%	30.4%	67.4%	19.5%	35.6%	45.0%
PHYSICAL ABUSE SUBSCALE									
Put child in extremely hot water****a	8.4%	0.8%	90.8%	2.9%	1.4%	95.7%	17.6%	10.8%	71.6%
Hit with open hand occasionally***	14.4%	67.8%	17.8%	8.7%	63.0%	28.3%	15.4%	8.7%	75.8%
Hit open hand frequently	7.6%	20.2%	72.3%	3.6%	21.9%	74.5%	16.1%	4.0%	79.9%
Hit with fist occasionally**	5.9%	3.4%	90.8%	2.9%	2.2%	95.0%	15.4%	4.7%	79.9%
Hit with fist frequently****a	5.9%	0%	84.1%	2.2%	0.7%	97.1%	16.1%	1.2%	90.4%
Hit with stick occasionally***	11.0%	45.8%	43.2%	3.8%	54.1%	42.1%	16.1%	3.4%	80.5%
Hit with stick frequently	8.4%	13.4%	78.2%	2.9%	16.2%	80.9%	16.8%	2.7%	80.5%

*p less than or equal to .05 Pearson's for chi square

**p less than or equal to .01 Pearson's for chi square

***p less than or equal to .001 Pearson's for chi square

a Never and sometimes combined for tests of significance

dom sampling sequence on the block was selected. If the door was not answered at the second house, the researchers returned to the original selection at a later date. If the selected subject refused to accept the questionnaire, the next house in the sampling sequence was selected. If a block had no homes, the next block in the sampling sequence was selected.

This approach was relatively successful in delivering the questionnaires. There were only five refusals to accept a questionnaire, and about 75 percent of the instruments were retrieved in completed usable form from each sample. All blocks selected had more than ten homes.

In the first data gathering period, 120 child abuse instruments were returned from the 150 instruments distributed. In the second data gathering period, 139 completed instruments were returned of the 200 delivered. In the third data gathering period, 149 completed instruments were returned of 200 delivered.

Limitations of the Study

The decision to conduct the four surveys as independent research projects limited the breadth of statistical analysis that can be conducted. Each data set is analyzed as an independent set with different measures of abuse thus comparisons across data sets can not be conducted. In particular, spouse abuse and child abuse have been found to be co-occurring (Williams 2003). With a major university and college presence and four mental health facilities, Tuscaloosa is a unique city to the extent that it has a larger than average professional population. The presence of this group might limit the generalization of the findings to towns of similar size without this presence.

FINDINGS

A comparison of totals from the 1980 (1986-87) and 1990 (1991-92) census adjusted for the removal of students and patients found a number of irregularities. There were more women in the sample than in the population for all three sessions. While women are slightly over-represented in the population of Tuscaloosa, they are moderately over-represented in the two samples. In the first sample 71.5 percent of the subjects were women, and in the second sample 68.8 percent of the sample were women. In

Table 2: Differential Endorsement of Abuse Items by Race and Sex

Race and Sex	Means ^a		
	Neglect Abuse	Physical Abuse	Psychological Abuse
Race			
Black	9.726	17.299	
White	10.388	19.083	
Other	10.767	18.000	
Sex			
Male	9.357	16.808	8.870
Female	10.951	19.329	10.691
Sex and Race			
Male			
Black	8.910	15.765	8.570
White	10.089	18.789	9.626
Other	8.500	14.000	7.500
Female			
Black	10.538	18.834	10.499
White	10.686	19.377	10.476
Other	11.900	20.000	11.300

^a Only means for significant relationships for analysis of variance are displayed.

the third sample, 60.5 percent of the sample were women. Instruments were delivered in afternoon and evening shifts. While the day shifts were expected to encounter a greater number of women as first contacts, the next birthday method should have neutralized this potential bias. While there were differences in the three other samples, the variations tended to be much smaller than in the child abuse sample. Disparities were also found for race. Americans of African decent were underrepresented in the 1991-2 (21.0%) sample, slightly over represented in the 1986-7 (49.1%) sample, and over represented in the 1996-7 samples (51.4%). Married subjects were underrepresented in the 1996-7 sample (43.2%). None of the comparisons between marital status and measurements of attitude were significant, however, all of the measures between race and gender and the measurements of attitude were significant. Race and gender were not significantly related ($p=.80$).

First, it should be noted that the subjects strongly endorsed all of the physical force items in all years as child abuse (see Table 1). While there was some fluctuation from 1986-7 to 1996-7, the trend was for some milder forms of physical force to be more strongly endorsed with some reduction in

Table 3: Perceptions of the Impact of and Potential for Criminilization by Year

Criminalization Item	Year					
	1986-7		1991-2		1996-7	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Others will see child abuse as wrong if illegal	77.9%	22.1%	76.7%	23.3%	82.5%	17.5%
If child abuse were illegal, law would be enforced	68.4%	31.6%	64.2%	35.8%	66.0%	34.0%
A new law would prevent child abuse	56.9%	43.1%	56.3%	43.7%	57.4%	42.6%
In favor of a new misdemeanor statute	63.7%	36.3%	69.0%	31.0%	64.3%	35.7%
In favor of a new felony statute	91.1%	8.9%	86.2%	13.8%	84.9%	15.1%
Punish by putting child abuser in prison	67.6%	32.4%	68.2%	31.8%	74.3%	25.7%

endorsement of the more extreme forms of force. There was a general reduction in level of endorsement for most of the non-physical force items. As mentioned earlier, when comparing sex and race by these measures, significant relationships were found for all comparisons. Women were consistently more likely to define an act as always child abuse than men by more than 10 percent in all comparisons. With the exception of criticize publicly, more white subjects than black subjects defined the acts as always child abuse but the differences between the groups were smaller than those for sex.

In order to investigate the interaction among the three factors, year, sex, and race, three subscales were constructed by summing the values for neglect, physical abuse, and psychological abuse items. The neglect and abuse subscales were composed of four items each and had ranges of 4 to 12 with means of about 10 and medians of 11. Physical abuse was composed of 7 items with a range of 7-21, a mean of 18.5 and a median of 20. All comparisons for all scales with year, sex, and race were significant using chi square with the scales truncated by combining lower values (less than 7 for physical abuse and psychological abuse and less than 17 for physical abuse) to eliminate cells with low values. Although these scales are high level ordinal data, they were treated as low level interval scales to allow the use of a univariate analysis of variance to examine the interplay between the three factors. In all three cases, the relationship between year and abuse was not significant. For psychological abuse, only sex was significant with a significant interaction between sex and race. Women are more likely to label acts in the subscale as abuse with white males and

females classified as other by race more likely to label the items in the scale as abuse while other males and black females are less likely to label the acts in the scales as abuse (see Table 2). For both physical abuse and neglect, race, sex, and the interaction between race and sex are significant with the same pattern—white males and women who are classified other by race are more likely to label the items in the scale as abuse while other males and black females are less likely to label the acts in the scales as abuse.

There were no significant shifts in orientation toward criminalization from 1986-7 to 1996-7 (see Table 3). The subjects tended to endorse new criminal legislation at relatively high levels (65% to 85%), thought that child abuse would be more likely to be seen as wrong if it were criminalized but were less certain that it would be enforced (about 65%) or that it would prevent child abuse (about 45%). About 70 percent of the subjects believed that child abusers should be punished by being sent to prison. There were no significant differences for race or marital status. For sex, while men tended to endorse higher penalties ($p=.011$) women were more likely (92%) than men (77%) to endorse the need for a new felony statute ($p<.001$).

DISCUSSION

Given the distortions in the sample, confidence in the accuracy of the levels of endorsement of various attitudinal items is less than ideal. It should be noted that the levels of endorsement are relatively high for the child abuse items regardless of the patterns among the demographic variables. The fact that we have more women responding than men might be attributable to time of day but given that this pattern did not appear in the

other samples, which were measured at the same time using the same procedures, it is possible that women were more likely to respond because women are still held responsible for matters involving children. Neither our experience nor the data we have collected provides a basis for addressing the differences by race. We will note, however, that Americans of African descent were more likely to respond in all of the samples than their white counterparts.

SUMMARY

Child abuse has been identified as a major social problem in the United States today. While the figures are not necessarily reliable (probable high levels of under reporting), statistical data are regularly collected from each state by the federal government. The official rates are still substantial, reflecting a need to better understand both the nature of child abuse and the position of the public regarding the criminalization of child abuse. Presently there is a substantial volume of research and theory that focuses on the dynamics and impact of child abuse. We know quite a bit about the damage suffered by child victims and about the characteristics of the offenders. Treatment programs are in place and are being evaluated with mixed results as to effectiveness. What has been missing is attention to the willingness of the public to identify child abuse and the willingness of the public to endorse a justice system response.

The data here indicate that the general public has a clear, relatively broad, definition of child abuse. The subjects also support the criminalization of child abuse. As concern for children's rights has matured, the willingness to take child abuse out of the family context has increased. Conventional wisdom holds, however, that this willingness is limited by concepts of parental rights and responsibilities. That is, parents have the right to treat and control their children as they see fit. These findings indicate that this wisdom may not be founded in reality. With exception of hitting with an open hand occasionally in 1985-6 and 1991-2, over 70 percent of these subjects stated that use of physical force is always child abuse with the rate of endorsement increasing as the level of force increased. These subjects also endorsed items measuring psychological abuse and neglect as child abuse at sub-

stantial levels. More than two thirds of the subjects were in favor of a new misdemeanor statute, a new felony statute, and the use of prison to punish child abusers. These subjects appear to support the use of the justice system to enforce a fairly liberal standard for child abuse through the justice system and these positions have been fairly stable over ten years.

These data support a more aggressive public response to the control of Child abuse. Public policy driven by an unwillingness to develop aggressive intervention programs based on a belief that the public will not accept aggressive intervention should be re-evaluated.

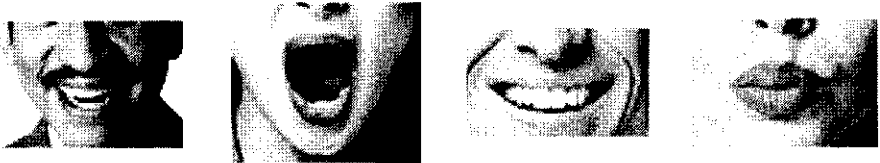
Future research should focus on a broader population and should expand the measurement of the variables of interest to provide more precise measures of public sentiment regarding the appropriate disposition of cases of child abuse. In particular, public perceptions of the effectiveness of various approaches to treatment and the addition of discipline as a variable might clarify public sentiment in this area.

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