



## Community characteristics, conservative ideology, and child abuse rates<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Authoritarian ideology, including religious conservatism, endorses obedience to authority and physical punishment of children. Although this association has been studied at the level of the family, little research has been conducted on whether conservatism in the broader community context correlates with the mistreatment of children. The purpose of this study was to determine whether this relation between conservatism and physical punishment of children extends to child abuse rates at the community level. Predictors included county-level religious and political conservatism and demographic variables. Political and religious conservatism covaried, and both were inversely related to child abuse rates. Population density was strongly related to rates of maltreatment and with demographic factors controlled, religious conservatism but not political conservatism continued to predict rates of child abuse. The results suggest that community factors related to social disorganization may be more important than religious or political affiliation in putting children at risk for maltreatment.

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### Introduction

Authoritarian child rearing can be defined as parents' attempts to control children's behavior in a way that often adheres to theologically motivated and absolute standards (Baumrind, 1991). These rigid standards of conduct and the bestowal of ultimate power to parents originated in Puritan Christianity, where the goal of socialization was to impose submission to parental authority (Kuczynski & Hildebrandt, 1997). As Wesley (1783/1973, pp. 59–60) preached, "A wise parent . . . should begin to break [children's] will, the first moment it appears. In the whole art of Christian education there is nothing more important than this." Thus, authoritarian parents not only endorse parental power and rigid obedience, they are more likely to use physical punishment to enforce these beliefs (for a review, see Kuczynski & Hildebrandt, 1997).

Although the relation between corporal punishment and religiously based authoritarian ideology has been documented in multiple studies (Straus, 2001), relatively little research has been conducted on the association between child abuse and authoritarianism, represented in the current study by conservative religious and political affiliations. The purpose of this study is to begin to fill in this gap in the extant literature. Unique to this investigation is the use of county-level data, which may provide insights into how local social norms contribute to harsh child-rearing practices (Klebens & Whitaker, 2007).

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The research question that framed this study is: Do U.S. counties with higher rates of religious fundamentalism and political conservatism also have higher rates of child maltreatment?

### *Authoritarian Ideology and Punishment*

Many Christian religious fundamentalists believe that the Bible is a traditional source of moral justification to support their ideas on obedience and punishment (Straus, 2001). In particular, prominent evangelicals are vocal defenders of the rights of parents to be in control of their household, and to use physical punishment to curb children's misbehavior and ensure obedience (Danso, Hunsberger, & Pratt, 1997; Dobson, 1992). Indeed, parents who value obedience on religious grounds are more likely to support and rely on corporal punishment (Ellison & Bartkowski, 1995; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001).

Some studies have tried to pinpoint which American religious sects are more in favor of corporal punishment (e.g., Grasmick, Bursik, & Kimpel, 1991). Among the major religions in the United States, both conservative Protestants and Catholics value obedience to authority more than other Americans. However, conservative Protestants expect obedience and endorse spanking much more than Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants, even when religiosity and demographic variables are controlled (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993b; Gershoff, Miller, & Holden, 1999). As well, parents who more frequently attend church place greater emphasis on child obedience (Alwin, 1986). Such research on parents' authoritarian ideology, which in the present study is viewed in the context of Christian fundamentalism, is important because it demonstrates an association between attitudes and subsequent use of corporal punishment (Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006).

Conservative, traditional views in other religions, however, are not as consistently associated with endorsement of obedience or spanking. For example, both Arab and ultra-Orthodox Jewish societies tend to be conservative and traditional yet they have lower rates of child maltreatment than other religious groups in Israel, perhaps because their collectivistic values emphasize sensitivity to others' needs (Attar-Schwartz, Ben-Arieh, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2011). Giladi (2014) noted that although Islam is diverse in culture and has complex views of children, Islamic parents generally value the protection of children and are encouraged to be affectionate and compassionate with their offspring. In parallel with some Christian interpretations of the Bible, corporal punishment may be viewed as consistent with Islamic law, yet many Islamic scholars repudiate this form of punishment.

Other studies also present a less consistent picture of the association between Christian religious affiliation and use of corporal punishment. For example, Ellison and Bradshaw (2009) found no relation between membership in a conservative Protestant denomination and attitudes toward corporal punishment. Other research has found fundamentalist Protestant fathers to be more affectionate and emotionally involved because of the high value placed on family (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000). More broadly, religiosity may be beneficial to the extent that parents are more consistent disciplinarians, couples experience less marital conflict, and family members are more affectionate (for a review, see Mahoney et al., 2001). In terms of values and moral principles, several authors have pointed out that organizations such as World Vision and religious leaders, regardless of faith, make significant contributions to social justice and protection of children's rights (Bunge, 2014a, 2014b; Melton, 2010).

One explanation for the contradictory findings related to religious denomination and parents' use of punishment is that specific ideological beliefs are more potent than religious affiliation as predictors of rearing practices. For instance, Ellison and Bradshaw (2009) found that endorsement of specific aspects of conservative doctrine, such as biblical literalism and belief in Hell, predicted support for harsh punishment whereas membership in a conservative Protestant denomination did not. In addition, sociopolitical conservatism predicted attitudes toward punishment whereas affiliation with the Republican Party did not. In a nationally representative sample of parents, Jackson et al. (1999) found that conservative sociopolitical ideology was associated with attitudes that devalued children and greater endorsement as well as use of physical punishment. Rodriguez and Henderson (2010) found, in their study of religious orientation and abuse potential, that biblical literalism as well as social conformity were significantly related to scores on the Child Abuse Potential Inventory. These studies suggest that dogmatism or rigidity related to child obedience may be the "active ingredient" linking religious conservatism to corporal punishment or child abuse (also see Mahoney et al., 2001).

To date, most extant research on authoritarian ideology or religious beliefs and child-rearing practices has focused on corporal punishment; rarely has physical abuse been examined (Mahoney et al., 2001). The present study attempts to fill this gap by examining whether religious and sociopolitical indices of conservatism are related to child abuse rates. For several reasons, one would expect the same variables to predict child abuse as predict corporal punishment. First, religious ideology, particularly biblical literalism, has been implicated as a risk factor for child abuse (Greven, 1990; Rodriguez & Henderson, 2010). Second, although corporal punishment and child abuse are not synonymous, it is well-recognized that both exist on a continuum of parent-child aggression (Straus, 2001; Whipple & Richey, 1997). In some cases, there is not a clear distinction between acceptable forms of physical punishment and physical abuse (Youssef, Attia, & Kamel, 1998) given that corporal punishment commonly includes not just spanking and slapping but also use of a rod and hair pulling (e.g., Zolotor, Theodore, Runyan, Chang, & Laskey, 2011), which may leave injuries that are diagnostic of physical abuse. Also, spanking can become abusive when parents' emotional arousal is combined with the punishment (Gershoff et al., 1999), and for many families and in most cultures, parental warmth does not mitigate the harmful effects of corporal punishment on children (Lansford et al., 2014).

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