



Research article

Change over time in parents' beliefs about and reported use of corporal punishment in eight countries with and without legal bans



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ABSTRACT

Stopping violence against children is prioritized in goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. All forms of child corporal punishment have been outlawed in 50 countries as of October 2016. Using data from 56,371 caregivers in eight countries that participated in UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, we examined change from Time 1 (2005–6) to Time 2 (2008–13) in national rates of corporal punishment of 2- to 14-year-old children and in caregivers' beliefs regarding the necessity of using corporal punishment. One of the participating countries outlawed corporal punishment prior to Time 1 (Ukraine), one outlawed corporal punishment between Times 1 and 2 (Togo), two outlawed corporal punishment after Time 2 (Albania and Macedonia), and four have not outlawed corporal punishment as of 2016 (Central African Republic, Kazakhstan, Montenegro, and Sierra Leone). Rates of reported use of corporal punishment and belief in its necessity decreased over time in three countries; rates of reported use of severe corporal punishment decreased in four countries. Continuing use of corporal punishment and belief in the necessity of its use in some countries despite legal bans suggest that campaigns to promote awareness of legal bans and to educate parents regarding alternate forms of discipline are worthy of international attention and effort along with legal bans themselves.

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Protecting children against violence has become a major priority for international organizations as well as many governments and has been enshrined in major treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by all countries in the world (except the United States). In the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, preventing violence against children is prioritized in target 16.2: *End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2015a)*. The percentage of children aged 1 to 17 who experienced any physical punishment and/or psychological aggression

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by caregivers in the past month has been adopted by the United Nations as the indicator of achievement of SDG 16.2 (The Human Rights Guide to the SDGs, Danish Institute for Human Rights, p. 5).

In part response to these international efforts, as of October 2016, 50 countries outlawed all forms of child corporal punishment, including by parents in the home (endcorporalpunishment.org). Although these legal bans represent progress for children in and of themselves by virtue of institutionalizing children's right to protection, there is little comparative evidence across countries regarding changes over time in use of corporal punishment and belief in the necessity of using corporal punishment in countries that have passed legal bans versus those that have not (see [Bussmann, Erthal, & Schroth, 2011](#), for an exception).

1. Previous evaluations of legal bans

The most systematic investigations of corporal punishment bans have been conducted in Sweden, the first country to outlaw corporal punishment (e.g., [Durrant, 1999](#); [Edfeldt, 1996](#); [Janson, Långberg, & Svensson, 2011](#)). Prior to the passing of the Swedish law banning corporal punishment in 1979, intermediary legal proceedings occurred over the course of decades of reform (such as removing in 1957 the section of the Penal Code that exempted parents from physical assault charges in disciplinary cases; [Durrant & Janson, 2005](#)). Swedish beliefs in the appropriateness of corporal punishment were already declining, enabling the ban to be passed in the first place ([Edfeldt, 1996](#)). The legal ban of corporal punishment was widely publicized (e.g., with announcements on milk cartons). These efforts seem to have been successful in promoting knowledge of the law. More than 90% of the Swedish population was aware of the law one year after it passed ([Ziegert, 1983](#)). After the legal ban, endorsement and use of corporal punishment continued to decline ([Durrant, 1999](#)). Further legal refinements also continued to reaffirm and extend the protection of children's rights ([Durrant & Janson, 2005](#)). In Sweden, corporal punishment has been treated not just as its own discrete category of parenting behaviors but framed in the context of other humiliating treatment of children ([Janson, Jernbro, & Långberg, 2011](#)). Subsequent to implementing the ban, there have been lower rates of youth crime and suicide and less alcohol and drug use among youth than was the case prior to its implementation ([Durrant, 2000](#)). These trends offer reassurance that legal bans of spanking do not lead to out-of-control, poorly socialized youth.

Legal bans in other countries also have evolved over time, albeit without a common pattern of evolution. For example, although 1987 is generally identified as the year in which Norway outlawed corporal punishment, a court case in 2005 demonstrated that the 1987 law did not explicitly outlaw all corporal punishment; an explicit ban was not achieved until 2010 ([Sandberg, 2011](#)). Twenty-eight years after the 1983 legal ban in Finland (see [Husa, 2011](#); for a review of legal reforms leading up to the ban), a representative sample of 4609 15- to 80-year-olds reported whether they had been corporally punished. Those who were born after the legal ban were significantly less likely to have been slapped and beaten than those who were born before the legal ban, but there was no significant decline in corporal punishment in the 39 years prior to the legal ban, suggesting that the law itself marked a turning point ([Österman, Björkqvist, & Wahlbeck, 2014](#)). Nevertheless, even in Sweden and Finland with their longstanding legal bans, some parents continue to endorse and use corporal punishment. Such reluctance to embrace more child-centered approaches to discipline means that ongoing educational efforts are needed to continue to shape parents' beliefs and behaviors ([Ellonen, Jernbro, Janson, Tindberg, & Lucas, 2015](#)).

Countries that have passed legal bans have been inconsistent with respect to their broader treatment of children's rights and the extent to which changes in laws regarding corporal punishment have been publicized ([Durrant & Smith, 2011](#)). One year after Germany outlawed corporal punishment, for example, only 30% of German parents knew about the legal ban ([Bussmann, 2004](#)). It is unclear whether simply knowing that corporal punishment has been outlawed is sufficient to change parental beliefs and behaviors in the absence of public awareness campaigns and attempts to educate caregivers about alternative methods of discipline. Knowledge about the law as well as alternatives to using corporal punishment would seem to be precursors to changes in beliefs and behaviors. In New Zealand, which outlawed corporal punishment in 2007 (see [D'Souza, Russell, Wood, Signal, & Elder, 2016](#), for a history and review of beliefs before and after the ban), a number of government programs and services (such as referrals to parenting programs) have been implemented to promote non-violent discipline. New Zealand police reports between 2007 and 2012 found no major issues with the enforcement of the law ([Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2015b](#)); although police investigated more child assaults after than before the ban, consistent with increased reporting, minor offenses were no more likely to be prosecuted after the ban (e.g., [New Zealand Police, 2010](#)).

In a study of five Western European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Spain, and Sweden; [Bussmann et al., 2011](#)), rates of corporal punishment varied both as a function of legal prohibition and presence of campaigns publicizing the negative effects of corporal punishment (which along with knowledge of the law and alternatives to using corporal punishment might be important to decreasing its use). The highest rates of corporal punishment were found in France, which had neither banned corporal punishment nor launched a public awareness campaign about the detriments of corporal punishment, followed by Spain, which had not outlawed corporal punishment at the time of the study but had launched national public awareness campaigns about the risks of violent childrearing ([Bussmann et al., 2011](#)). The lowest rates of corporal punishment were in Sweden (where corporal punishment has been illegal since 1979), followed by Germany (where the legal ban of corporal punishment was accompanied by a public awareness campaign) and Austria (where there was no public awareness campaign following the legal ban). The authors concluded that legal bans are more likely to change beliefs and behaviors than are public

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