

RESEARCH BRIEF: CHILD PUNISHMENT IN GUATEMALA

INTRODUCTION

Physical punishment of children, also known as corporal punishment or physical maltreatment, is an important international child health and welfare issue.¹ The World Health Organization defines child maltreatment as “acts of commission by a caregiver that cause actual physical harm or have the potential for harm.”² Examples include spanking, slapping, shoving, kicking, beating, or throwing items at the victim.^{3,4} According to U.S. data, physical punishment tends to begin as early as a child’s first or second birthday, ages when children are the most vulnerable both physically and emotionally.^{5,6} Various data also suggest that child physical punishment is common in Latin America as well as in other parts of the world.^{1,5,7} Few countries, however, including those in Latin America, have implemented formal policy or program interventions to reduce the problem.¹

A 1996 study conducted in the United States found that approximately 80 percent of U.S. parents spank their children,⁸ similar to the prevalence found in a Costa Rican study.^{1,7} In a study recently conducted in eight Latin American cities, the prevalence of child physical punishment ranged from 13 to 72 percent.¹ Associated factors included young parental age, limited parental education, low socio-economic status, caring for young children, and believing that corporal punishment is necessary.² Parents who were punished physically while growing up had a greater tendency in adulthood than parents who were not physically punished as children to perceive such punishment as an effective form of discipline.⁵

Research shows that severe physical punishment of children is associated with subsequent aggressive child behavior, childhood depression, adolescent and adult violence, and alcohol consumption.^{1,9,10} Some researchers theorize that young children who face harsh physical punishment from their parents learn to respond with violence to behavior that they dislike in others.¹¹ Other research, however, has found that many adults who suffered abuse as children mature into nurturing, non-abusive parents.³

This research brief is one in a series of related publications intended to contribute to our understanding of the complex dimensions of violence in three Central American countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. This particular brief focuses solely on data from Guatemala in order to examine (1) types of punishment Guatemalan women and men experienced as children growing up; (2) types of punishment parents use with their own children; (3) adult attitudes about physical punishment; and (4) whether severe physical punishment experienced by women during childhood is associated with being in a violent relationship as an adult.



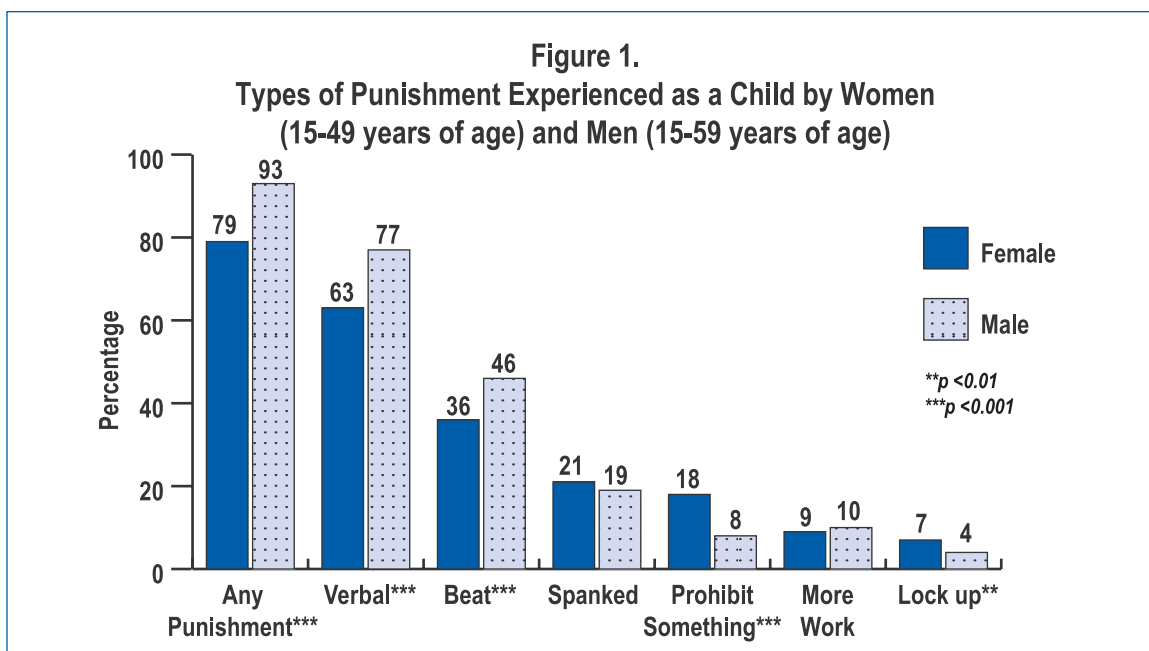
METHODS AND DEFINITIONS

Data were examined from the Guatemala National Maternal and Child Health Survey, 2002 (Encuesta Nacional de Salud Materno Infantil [ENSMI] 2002).¹² A nationally representative sample of women (ages 15-49 years old) and men (ages 15-59 years old) were asked the following question about the type of punishment that they may have experienced as children: “What form of punishment did your parents usually use?” Pre-coded response options included spanking, verbal reprimands, prohibiting something, beating, lock up or confinement, among others. Women and men who were parents were also asked how they punished their own children. “Beating” was considered the most severe form of physical punishment and was the focus of the analysis. Using STATA software, Version 7 SE, responses to these questions were analyzed to provide insight on child punishment patterns. Chi-square tests and multivariate logistic regression analyses controlling for key independent variables were performed. All analyses adjusted for the complex survey design and included sampling weights.

KEY FINDINGS

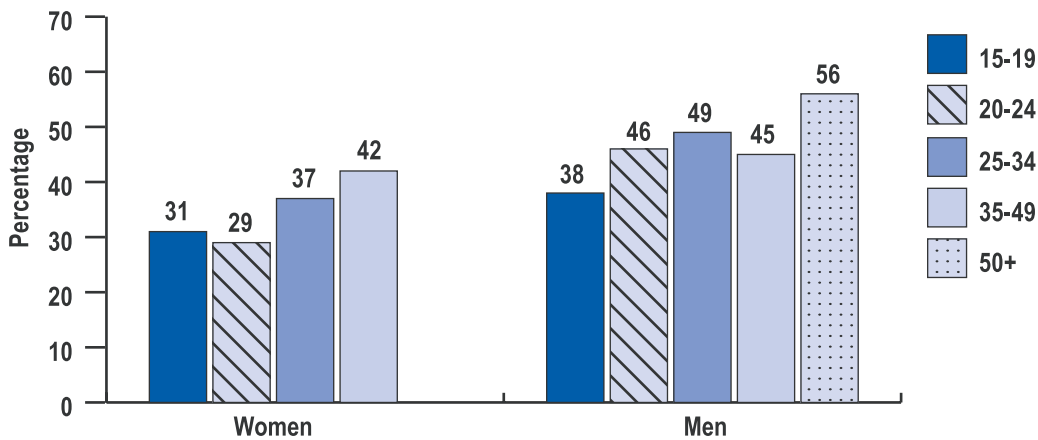
CHILDHOOD PUNISHMENT EXPERIENCED BY SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

According to the ENSMI 2002, 93 percent of the men and 79 percent of the women reported that they had experienced some form of parental punishment as children (Figure 1). The most common type reported by both sexes was verbal reprimands. Beating, the second most common form of punishment for both sexes, was reported by 36 percent of the women and 46 percent of the men. Smaller percentages of both women and men had experienced spanking, with no significant difference by sex. Finally, nearly twice as many women as men reported having something prohibited (e.g., having something they liked taken away) or being locked up or confined (e.g., not allowed to go outside and socialize).



To understand how patterns of child punishment may have changed over time, Figure 2 shows the age-group-specific proportions of men and women who reported being punished with beatings as a child or adolescent. The percentage of women and men who reported being beaten was significantly lower among the youngest age group (15-19 years old) than among the older age groups (20-24, 25-34, 35-49, and 50+ years old). Multivariate regression analyses (data not shown) confirmed that after controlling for gender, residence, education level, and indigenous status, women and men who were younger than age 25 were less likely to report that they had been spanked or beaten than women or men older than age 35 ($p \leq 0.01$). These data suggest a possible decrease in the use of severe physical punishment within the past decades. Similar findings were documented by a national survey of women and men conducted in El Salvador during 2002-2003.¹³

Figure 2.
Figure 2. Percent of Women (ages 15-49) and Men (ages 15-59) who Reported Being Beaten as a Child by Age Group at the Time of Survey

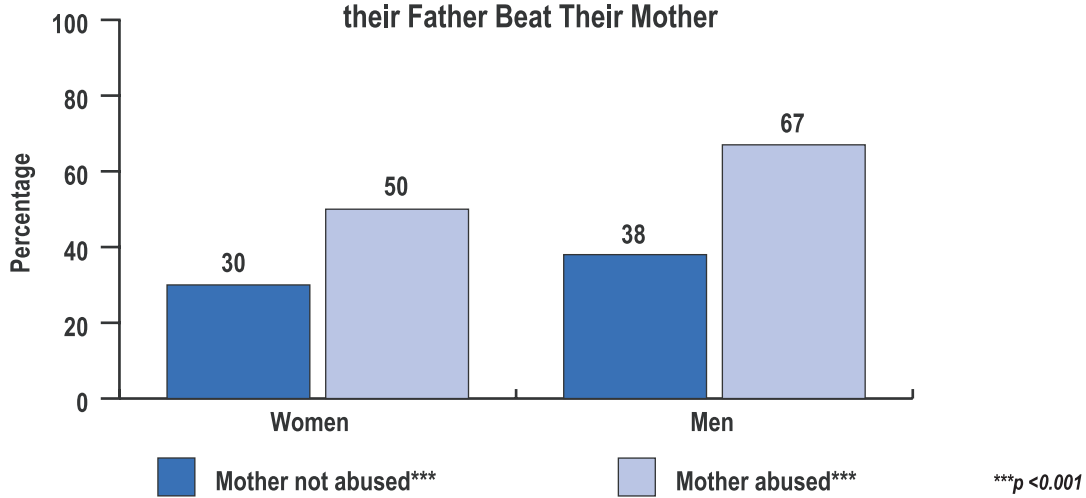


In the ENSMI 2002, survey participants were asked if as children they were aware whether their father beat their mother. A total of 28 percent of the women and 26 percent of the men reported that they had witnessed parental violence. Figure 3 depicts the association between having been beaten as a child and having witnessed their father physically abuse their mother. Among the women who had observed this type of violence, 50 percent were punished with beatings. Similarly, among the men who reported having observed their father physically abuse by the father toward their mother, 67 percent received severe physical punishment as children, compared with 38 percent of the men who had not witnessed violence against their mother. These findings suggest that violence against mothers is associated with physical punishment of the children.

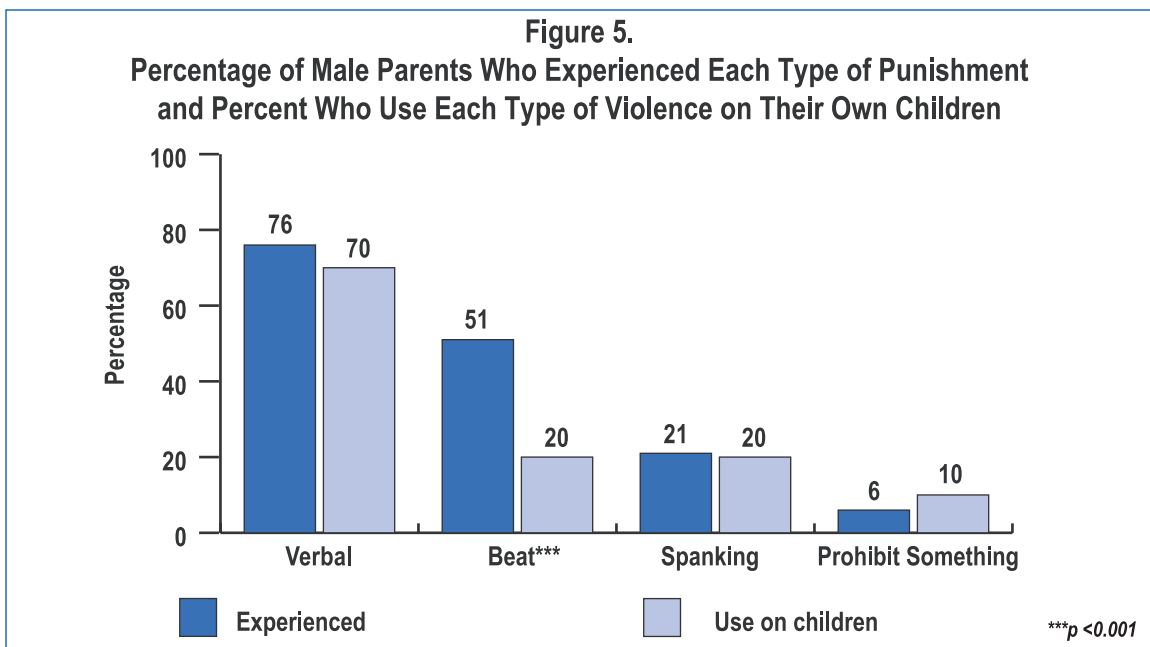
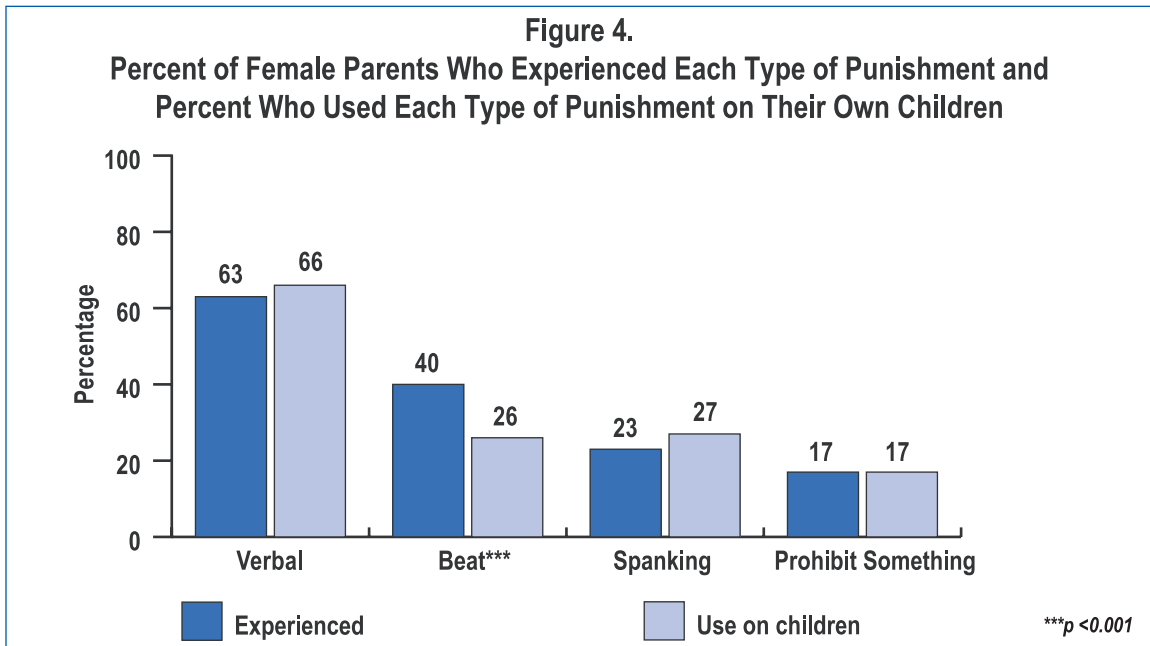
PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN BY PARENTS INTERVIEWED

Among survey participants who had children, 72 percent of the mothers and 74 percent of the fathers reported having used some form of punishment (including non-physical forms) on their children, and 26 percent of the mothers and 20 percent of the fathers reported that they had punished their children with beatings. According to the ENSMI, 37 percent of the mothers and 32 percent of the fathers believed that physical punishment was a necessary discipline. Interestingly, among parents who reported beating their children, only 50 percent of the women and 38 percent of the men believed that physical punishment was necessary.

Figure 3.
Percent of Women (ages 15-49) and Men (ages 15-49) Who Were Punished with Beating as a Child, by Whether or Not They Observed their Father Beat Their Mother

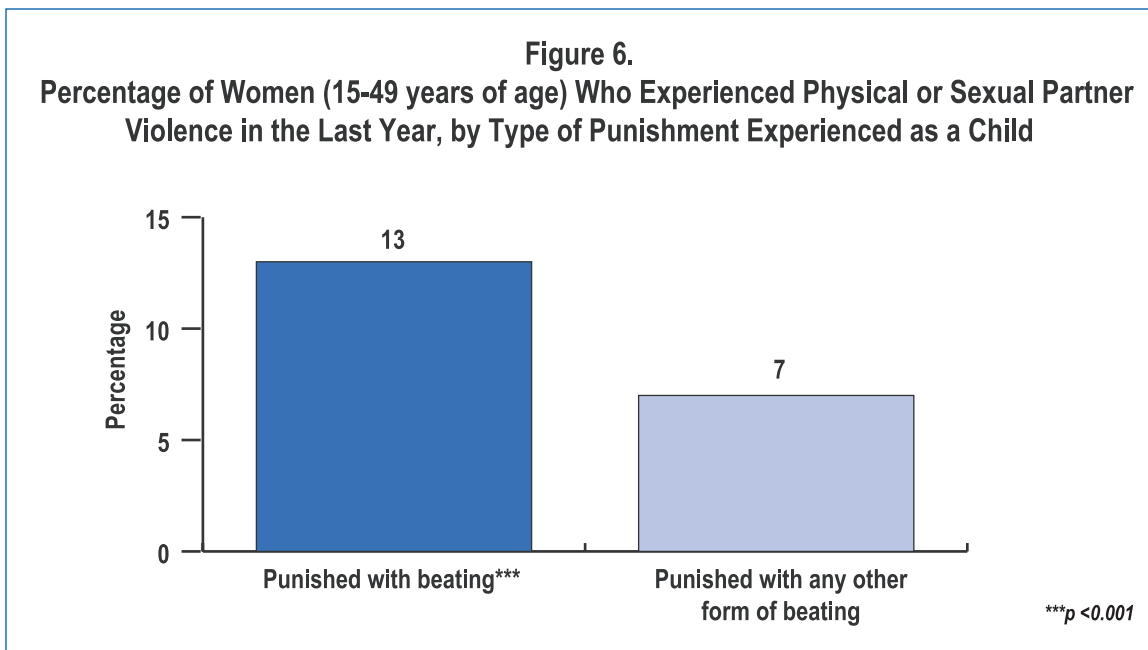


Using the ENSMI 2002 data, researchers can explore the association between experiencing beating by parents as a form of punishment during childhood or adolescence with future use of beating one's own children. Figures 4 and 5 compare the four most commonly reported types of punishment experienced by female and male parents, respectively, during their own childhoods and the types of punishment that they reported using to discipline their own children. For both parents and their children, the most common form of punishment was verbal, and proportions experienced and used were similar. Similar levels of spanking and prohibiting of something were also found; however, both women and men reported less use of beating or physical punishment than they reported having received during their own childhood. Notably, controlling for demographic factors found to be associated with childhood punishment, including age, education, residence, and ages of children, both women and men who were beaten as children were significantly more likely to use this form of punishment on their own children than women and men who were not beaten.



Does an association exist between severe physical punishment during childhood and later involvement in a violent intimate partner relationship as an adult? According to the ENSMI 2002, among the Guatemalan women who were married or in union at the time of the survey, 11 percent reported having experienced physical violence or forced sex by an intimate partner during the past year (i.e., the woman's partner hit, kicked, or slapped her; forced her to have sex; or threatened to beat her, kill her, use a weapon on her, or throw objects at her). Figure 6 shows that a greater percentage of women who were beaten as children (13 percent) than who were punished by any other method (7 percent) were currently in a physically violent relationship.

Key factors associated with intimate partner violence, including current age younger than 30 years, young age at first marriage, multiple unions, higher number of live births, lower socioeconomic and educational status, and history of witnessing the father abusing the mother may contribute to a woman's chances of being in a violent intimate partner relationship. Controlling for these factors using multivariate analysis, women who were beaten as children were 1.4 times more likely than women who were not beaten to currently be in a violent relationship.



CONCLUSIONS

- The most common type of punishment reported by both women and men was verbal reprimands. Beating, the second most common form of punishment among both sexes, was reported by 36 percent of the women and 46 percent of the men.
- Both women and men who were younger than age 25 were less likely than those older than age 35 to report that they had been physically punished (either spanked or beaten) as children. This finding suggests a possible trend away from severe physical punishment of children.
- Guatemalan women and men who grew up in households where they witnessed their fathers using violence against their mothers were more likely to have received beatings as children than women and men who did not witness parental violence as children.
- Parents tended to use the same type of punishment on their own children that they received during their childhood; however, both women and men who had children reported using significantly less physical punishment than they had received during their own childhood.
- Women who were beaten as children were 1.4 times more likely than women who had not been beaten to currently be in a violent relationship.

POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC IMPLICATIONS

The results of this analysis reveal that child physical punishment with beating is a common problem in Guatemala for both men and women. The 2002 World Report on Violence and Health and other recent studies have suggested the following approaches to reducing the prevalence of harsh child physical punishment:

- Parenting educational programs that provide critical information regarding children's developmental needs and necessary resources to address those needs have been found to be effective. Counseling programs for parents and caregivers can help them alleviate stress and provide alternative forms of child discipline other than severe physical punishment.^{2,14}
- Although most parents in different cultural settings have some understanding of the damaging impact of severe child maltreatment, definitions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors have to be defined within a cultural context in order to challenge beliefs that support the use of physical punishment.¹⁵ In cultures where the extended family and community have a strong impact, such as in Latin America, it is important to include these social networks in programs that address child punishment.^{15,16}
- As demonstrated in this study, living in a household in which the father abuses the mother is associated with child beating. Moreover, women who were beaten as children may be at greater risk than women who were not beaten of entering or remaining in a violent relationship. Programs that screen women for intimate partner violence need to recognize that the violence experienced by women may also be suffered by their children. Health professionals need to be trained to identify the warning signs of violence in the home and be encouraged to take the time to identify and refer victims of violence to appropriate services.^{2,5}

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