

Swedish Trends in Assaults Against Minors Since Banning Spanking, 1981-2010

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The past 60 years has seen a long-term international trend away from authoritarian toward permissive parental discipline. Corporal punishment by parents has been banned in some sense in 29 countries, starting with Sweden in 1979 (Center for Effective Discipline, 2011). Nonphysical disciplinary consequences are also falling into disfavor, sometimes explicitly as in New Zealand's ban of all use of disciplinary force (e.g., responding to defiance by taking a toddler to the time-out location against his will), sometimes implicitly with prohibitions generalized to include grounding and privilege removal (Janson, 2001; Patterson & Fisher, 2002). Overgeneralizations of spanking bans may undermine the type of firm control that is part of optimal authoritative parenting when combined with nurturance (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Owens, 2010; Steinberg, 2001).

Unfortunately, there have been no objective evaluations of the effects of spanking bans or of overgeneralizations to alternative disciplinary consequences. In 1999, Larzelere and Johnson (1999) and Durrant (1999) published nearly contradictory evaluations of the effects of the Swedish spanking ban even though they used mostly identical data. The debate focused on interpreting statistics relevant for child abuse and other criminal assaults and has continued on a Child Maltreatment listserv and in unpublished papers. (Durrant, 2005; Larzelere, 2004, 2005). Durrant, an international spanking-ban advocate, concluded that physical abuse was almost non-existent in Sweden and that children raised since the spanking ban were less violent than previous generations. In contrast, Larzelere and Johnson (1999) found no evidence that child abuse had declined after Sweden's spanking ban and reported some evidence that it had increased, as well as assaults by minors against minors through 1994 (see Figure 1). Durrant did not report these child abuse statistics, although she and Larzelere and Johnson (1999) both reported that Swedish deaths due to child abuse were so low both before and after their spanking ban that a further decrease was nearly impossible. Her evidence that children who grew up after the spanking ban were less violent than older age cohorts was questioned by Larzelere (2004), who showed that her evidence was based only on those who were 10 to 14 years old when the ban was passed in 1979 (see Table 1). Percentagewise, that age cohort increased their violence against minors less than any other age cohort, but younger cohorts had the largest percentage increases in assaults against minors through 1994, especially those born after the spanking ban.

Nonetheless, Durrant's hypothesis was ingenious: If the spanking ban reduced violence in society, the age distribution of perpetrators of criminal violence should change to show the reduced violence of those raised after the spanking ban. This paper presents updated trends from those same Swedish criminal assault statistics through 2010 to test the hypothesis that spanking bans will eventually reduce criminally violent acts in a society. If so, physical child abuse rates and rates of assaults by minors against minors should start decreasing. Further, those born after

the spanking ban should represent a lower percentage of the perpetrators of criminal assaults than older age cohorts who grew up before the ban.

Method

We obtained criminal assault data from the Official Swedish Crime Statistics published by The National Council for Crime Prevention (2011)(www.bra.se). These data have been used previously in Swedish reports to track trends in assaults against children (Wittrock, 1995) and were used by both Durrant (1999) and Larzelere and Johnson (1999). The child abuse data are alleged criminal assaults against children under 7 committed indoors by someone known by the child. The data on alleged criminal assaults against minors is based on victims between ages 7 and 14. Annual tables categorize these assaults by age of the alleged perpetrator.

Results

Figure 1 presents the total number of alleged cases of physical child abuse and of assaults by minors against minors from 1981 through 2010. According to these criminal statistics, physical child abuse continued to increase in the past decade, at a slower rate from 1994 through 2005, followed by a steep increase in rates thereafter. The number of cases in 2010 was over 21 times more than in 1981. Cases of criminal assaults by minors against 7- to 14-year-olds also continued to increase, until the cases in 2010 were more than 23 times the number in 1981. The temporary decrease from 2000 to 2003 was apparently due to many assaults being categorized under two “Other” categories rather than under the “minor-aged perpetrator” category during those years (see Figure 1).

Relevant to Durrant’s hypothesis, however, the children who were born in the first decade after 1979 were under-represented as perpetrators of criminal assaults against minors (see Table 1). By 2010, they were 20 to 29 years old, but the number of perpetrators in their 20s had only increased 287% since 1984, nearly 4-fold, but a slower rate of increase than either younger or older age cohorts of perpetrators. On the other hand, the number of criminal assaults by minors against minors was over 20 times as many in 2009 as in 1984 (a 1941% increase), and perpetration rates by older teenagers increased over 6 times (539%) during that period.

The number of rapes in these same statistics has increased recently to a 6-fold increase in 2010 compared to the number in 1981 (see Figure 2). This provides an opportunity to test whether increases in violent assaults are due to an increasingly mild threshold for reporting, as Durrant (2005) has claimed, or whether increases in violent statistics represent increases in severe criminal assaults. Reported rapes include both completed rapes and attempted rapes. If a decrease in the threshold for what is considered reportable explains these increases, then the increase should be greater for attempted rapes than for completed rapes. Sweden also breaks down their rape statistics into whether victims are under 15 year old or older than that. Thus we will focus on whether the increase in rapes applies more to victims at the most vulnerable ages or not. We had access to distinctions between age of victim and completed vs. attempted rapes only back to 1995.

The increases in rape categories since 1995 are shown in Figure 3. Completed rapes against victims under the age of 15 increased 8-fold during that time period. In contrast, attempted rapes

against victims under the age of 15 increased only 79%, whereas all reported rapes against older victims increased 185% from 1995 to 2010.

Discussion

It is encouraging for spanking-ban proponents to find that those born in the first decade after Sweden's spanking ban were no longer overrepresented as perpetrators of criminal assaults against minors when they were in their twenties. Whereas they had exhibited a 6-fold increase in assault perpetrations against minors in 1994, they showed only a 4-fold increase compared to 1981 cohorts of 20-year-olds in 2010.

On the other hand, it remains a concern that the numbers of physical child abuse cases and of assaults by minors against minors have continued increasing into the 21st century. A major motivation for spanking bans is to reduce the rate of physical child abuse, so the failure to document decreased rates of physical child abuse after spanking bans is concerning. In the only known evidence of reduced rates of severe physical violence following a spanking ban, the majority of parents were unaware that mild spanking had been banned (in Germany: Bussmann, 2004).

Possibly these large increases in criminal assaults could reflect changes in reporting standards rather than actual increases (Durrant, 1999; Larzelere & Johnson, 1999; Wittrock, 1995). We know of no convincing evidence that the entire increase is due only to increasingly mild assaults. Nilsson (2000), for example, claimed that the increase in reported child abuse consisted mostly of milder assaults, but, using his own statistics, the number of child abuse cases with serious injuries increased by 65% from 1990 to 1998. Durrant (1999) highlighted aggravated assaults, which are punishable in Sweden by 1 to 10 years in prison. The percentage of all assaults that were aggravated did not decrease between 1984 and 1994, however (Larzelere, 2005). Unfortunately, statistics on aggravated assaults were discontinued after 1998, at least in the summary tables used for this study. The recent increase in completed rapes against the most vulnerable victims suggests the possibility that the increase in societal violence in Sweden is real, perhaps because a small, but increasing percentage of boys grow up without learning to control their impulses and disrespecting their mothers, which becomes generalized to other females. On the other hand, perhaps Swedish women and girls are now over six times more likely to press charges after completed rapes than in 1981. Moreover, the increase in probability of reporting rapes would have to be greater for completed rapes than for attempted rapes and for younger victims than for victims over 14 years of age.

Spanking bans continue to be adopted despite the lack of objective evidence of their success. Their success may depend upon parents learning effective alternatives to use in disciplinary situations in which spanking was a traditional option. Neither supporters (Gershoff et al., 2010) nor critics of spanking bans (Larzelere, Cox, & Smith, 2010; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005) have been able to identify alternative disciplinary tactics that are more effective than nonabusive spanking in reducing behavior problems in children. Indeed, a brief forceful room isolation is the only enforcement for time out that has proven to be as effective as the traditional spank enforcement for clinically defiant 2- to 6-year-olds (Roberts & Powers, 1990), yet it is prohibited explicitly in New Zealand and implicitly in Sweden and Norway. Alternatives such as grounding and removing allowances have also fallen into disfavor in Sweden (Janson, 2001). Clinical cases

indicate that antisocial behavior is now more associated with permissive parenting than with authoritarian parenting in Norway, according to professionals personally opposed to spanking (Patterson & Fisher, 2002). The recent erosion of support for nonphysical disciplinary consequences in Sweden may account for the recent increases in all three types of criminal assaults from 2005-2010. Many of the non-empirical arguments against spanking apply also to nonphysical disciplinary consequences: "Children are the only people that are allowed by law to be placed in isolation [time out] against their will. Time out teaches children to isolate others when they don't like what they do." Larzelere and Johnson (1999) suggested that the decreased support for mild spanking may have increased the risk for escalating parental frustration in difficult disciplinary episodes, thereby accounting for the apparent increase in physical child abuse. The decreasing approval of alternative nonphysical consequences might be further exacerbating parental frustration in disciplinary situations with oppositional children. These issues need to be addressed objectively to decrease societal violence, whether we support or oppose bans of mild spanking.

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Table 1. *Criminal Assaults Against 7- to 14-Year-Olds in Sweden by Age of Perpetrator*

Age of Suspect	1984		1994			2009		
	Num. of Suspects	Birth Year	Num. of Suspects	Birth Year	% Gain from 1984	Num. of Suspects	Birth Year	% Gain from 1984
< 15	116	1970+	718	1980+	519%	2368	1995+	1941%
15-19	107	1965-69	354	1975-79	231	684	1990-94	539
20-24	12	1960-64	28	1970-74	133	41	1985-89	242
25-29	19	1955-59	29	1965-69	53	79	1980-84	316
30-39	68	1945-54	151	1955-64	122	386	1970-79	468
40-49	47	1935-44	116	1945-54	147	372	1960-69	691
50+	25	< 1935	57	< 1945	128	183	<1960	632

Note: Age cohorts born after the 1979 spanking ban are indicated in **bold**. Note that this table reports percent increases since 1984 to be consistent with earlier trends debated by Larzelere (2004, 2005) and Durrant (2005).

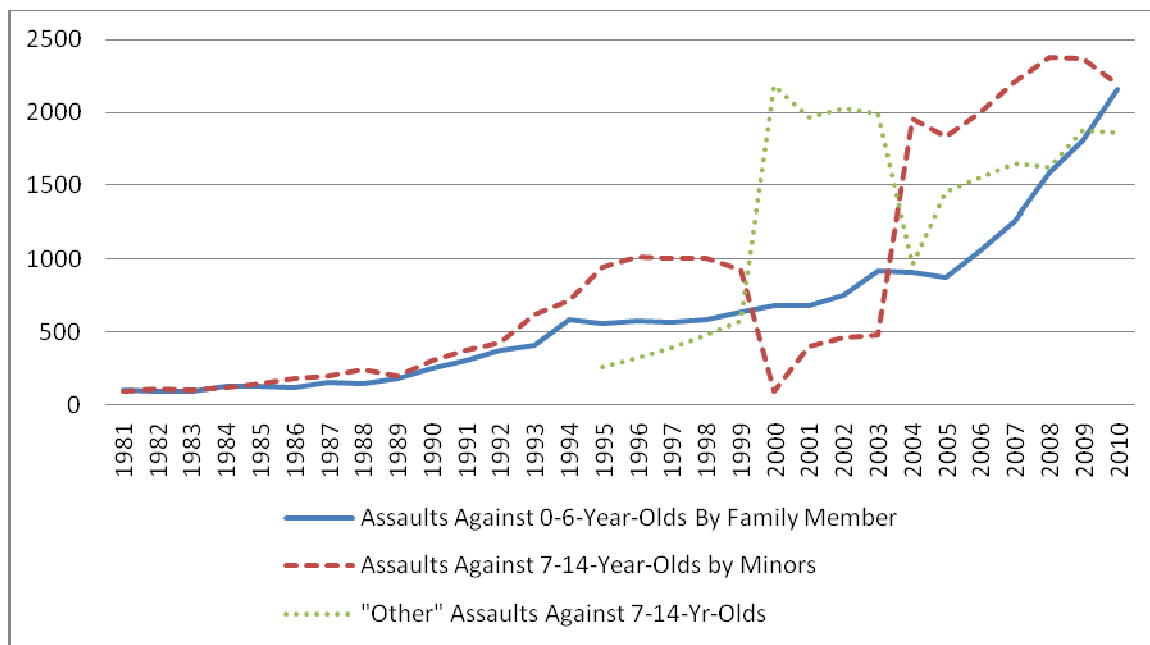


Figure 1. Criminal assaults against children in Sweden, 1981-2010

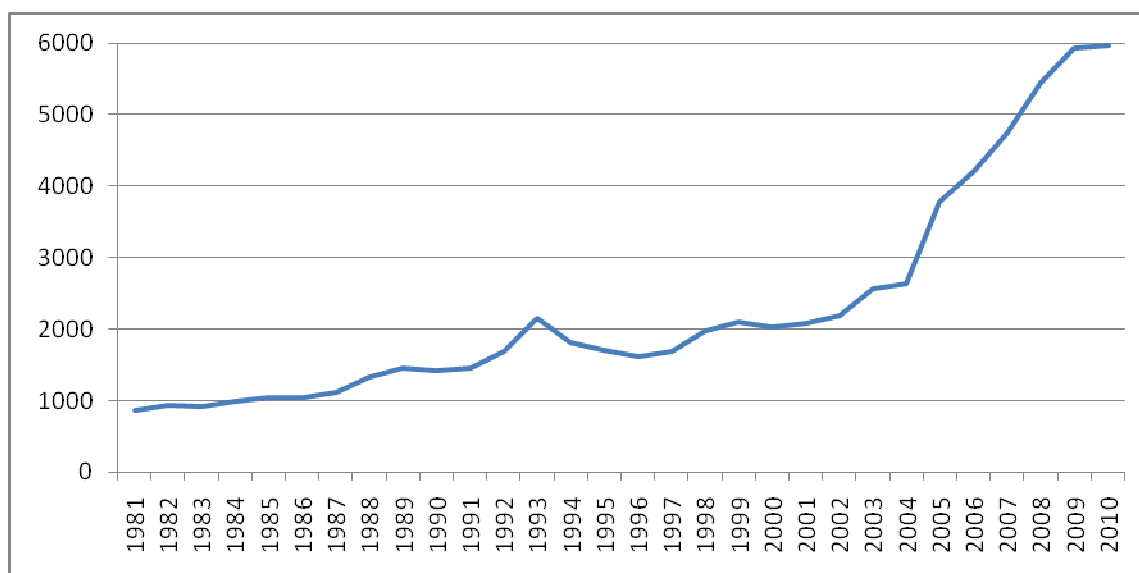


Figure 2. Number of Rapes in Sweden, 1981-2010

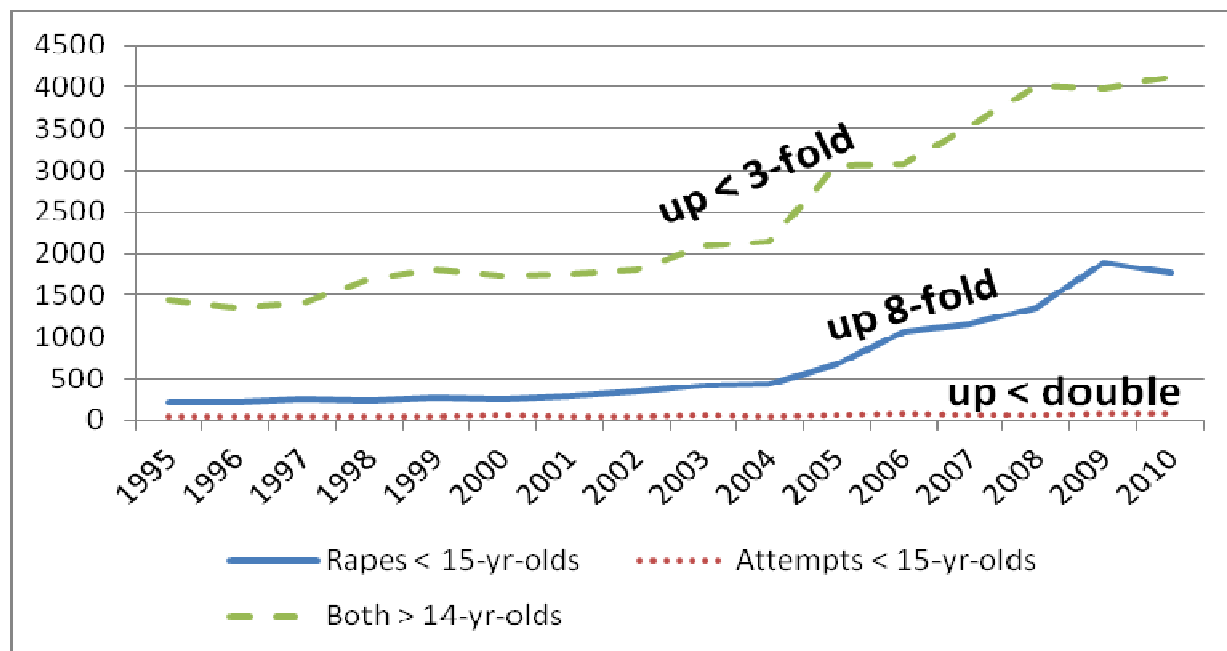


Figure 3. Number of Rapes in Sweden by Type and by Victim's Age, 1981-2010