CHANGING PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS CORPORAL PUNISHMENT: THE EFFECTS OF STATUTORY REFORM IN SWEDEN

JULIAN V. ROBERTS
Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

Objective: One justification for a statutory ban on physical punishment is that passage of such legislation changes public attitudes towards the use of this form of parental discipline. The experience in Sweden is often cited as an example of legislation which changed public opinion. The aim of this brief article is to review the public opinion findings in Sweden in order to evaluate in greater detail the impact of changing the law.

Method: A search was conducted to generate all published and publicly-available quantitative surveys of the public in Sweden and elsewhere.

Results: The results of time-series analysis of the data are clear. The 1979 legal reform in Sweden did not reduce the level of public support for parental use of corporal punishment as a means of disciplining children. Support for physical punishment began declining years before the reform was passed and the decline was in no way accelerated by the law reform. Changes in public opinion may have generated the legal reform, but the reverse is not true. Data from other jurisdictions also support the view that there is no relationship between the status of the law and the nature of public views with regard to corporal punishment. This result is consistent with analyses of the effects of legal reforms in other areas.


Key Words—Public opinion, Corporal punishment.

INTRODUCTION

IN 1979, SWEDEN passed legislation which effectively abolished corporal punishment as a legitimate child-rearing practice. Proponents of a ban on the use of corporal punishment in the home frequently point to the example of Sweden as a jurisdiction in which legislative reform changed the views (and subsequently disciplinary practices) of the public. The experience in that country is therefore of considerable interest to other jurisdictions considering adopting similar reform legislation.

In Canada and New Zealand, for example, attempts have been underway for several years to repeal provisions in these countries’ Criminal Codes which permit parents to administer physical punishment if it is reasonable and for the purpose of correction. A provision (S. 43) of the Canadian Criminal Code protects parents (and persons acting in loco parentis) who physically punish their children from a charge of assault (as long as the application of force is for the purpose of correction and is “reasonable”). A private member’s Bill introduced in 1999 in the Canadian Parliament calls for the repeal of this provision. The effect of the proposed Bill would be to remove this protection
against a charge of assault arising from the use of corporal punishment by a parent or person acting
in loco parentis. At the same time, a constitutional challenge has been launched to the same
provision of the Canadian Criminal Code. Similar reform proposals have been advanced in a
number of other jurisdictions, including Germany, Poland, Spain, and Scotland.

Changing public attitudes towards the use of physical punishment is one of the principal
arguments used by advocates of a statutory prohibition. Durrant and Rose-Krasnor (1995a) for
example, argue that “law shapes and confirms public values” (p. 37). It is critical therefore, to have
an accurate understanding of the effects of the Swedish reform on public opinion.

This is a propitious time to revisit the Swedish experience for two reasons. First, after a hiatus
of some years, additional data regarding Swedish public opinion with respect to corporal punish-
ment are now available. Second, the public opinion data with respect to corporal punishment have
never been assembled in a single article and evaluated. This brief article examines all publicly-
available survey data bearing upon this question. Closer inspection of the trends reveals some
surprises, and suggests that accepted wisdom with respect to this issue may be in error.

Purpose of the Swedish Legislation

As a recent Swedish government publication notes: “In 1979, any form of spanking children was
made against the law” (Statistics Sweden, 1996, p. 5). There is little doubt that the principal goal
of the Swedish reform was to change public attitudes towards corporal punishment. Writing shortly
after the new law was passed, Ziegert (1983) observed that “the intended immediate effects of the
legal prohibition of corporal punishment are the strengthening of a general and increasingly
positive attitude on the part of the Swedish public to childrearing without the use of corporal
punishment and the weakening of the traditional attitude of its harmlessness” (p. 921). Bitensky
(1998) wrote that “the Swedish Parliament enacted the law without express reference to sanctions
because lawmakers conceived of the prohibition as having its primary effect by influencing societal
attitudes rather than by more immediately deterring individuals with the threat of penalties” (p.
363, emphasis added). Most recently, Durrant (1999) notes that “The ban had three primary
objectives. First, it was intended to alter attitudes toward the use of physical force with children”
(p. 436, emphasis added). The critical research question, then, is the following: What effect did the
legal change in 1979 have on Swedish attitudes towards the use of corporal punishment against
children?

There is one additional reason to look to the Swedish experience with legal reform. As Ziegert
(1983) notes, by 1981, survey research conducted 2 years after the law changed revealed that
“nearly every adult Swede knew that the law forbids corporal punishment” (p. 922). Since public
knowledge of the law, and legal reforms in particular, tends to be poor (see Roberts & Stalans,
1997), if Swedish attitudes failed to change as a result of the law, this cannot be attributed to
ignorance of the reform legislation. First, however, it is worth noting the interpretation that has
been placed on the Swedish law with respect to public opinion.

Views Regarding the Effects of the Swedish Legislation on Public Attitudes
to Corporal Punishment

Published evaluations have concluded that the Swedish law achieved its stated goal of changing
public attitudes towards corporal punishment. As well, the language used to describe the Swedish
experience clearly identifies the direction of causality. Thus Durrant and Rose-Krasnor (1995a)
ote the decline in public support for corporal punishment and argue that “cultural norms are
changeable and that legislation can be a key tool in enacting such change” (p. 29). Burns (1992)
concludes that in Sweden, there was “a major shift in opinion after the legislation” (p. 47).
Similarly, Straus (1994) writes that: “A rapid and dramatic loss of support for corporal punishment
in all Scandinavian countries began almost immediately after these countries made it illegal for
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