

# Sexual Abuse and Corporal Punishment During Childhood: A Pilot Retrospective Survey of University Students in Costa Rica



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**ABSTRACT.** A sample of 497 students at the University of Costa Rica completed a survey on perceptions and experiences with various forms of punishment and experiences with sexual abuse during childhood. Spanking was shown to be the most widely accepted and most common form of discipline. The majority of the students considered most types of punishment forms of abuse. This study lacks a comparison group and cannot be generalized to the entire Costa Rican population. The section on sexual abuse demonstrated that 32% of the women and 13% of the men experienced some type of sexual abuse during childhood. The abuse mainly occurred between the ages of 5 and 10, and men were most often perpetrators. *Pediatrics* 1992;90:157-161; corporal punishment, sexual abuse, child abuse, Costa Rica.

Child abuse is emerging as an international issue as awareness of its high frequency and significance in social pathology increases. Although little research has been done in developing countries, it is widely believed that child abuse is prevalent in them.<sup>1</sup> In the United States surveys of adults and college students reporting on past histories of child abuse have yielded important knowledge about the nature, prevalence, and impact of child sexual abuse in the United States.<sup>2-5</sup> Payne<sup>6</sup> also utilized a survey to determine the Barbadian's perceptions of corporal punishment.

In Costa Rica, the existence of child abuse has been recognized,<sup>7,8</sup> but there is limited information on its prevalence. One organization (the PANIAMOR Foundation) exists to prevent all forms of child abuse and to advocate for children's rights. Other government agencies work to recognize abuse cases. However, as of 1990, the country lacked an organization dedicated to the treatment of child abuse (one is in the beginning stages of formation), and recognition of children's rights in the judiciary system is limited.

The purpose of this study was to obtain some preliminary data on the prevalence and nature of child sexual abuse and perceptions and experiences with corporal punishment in Costa Rica. The data offer a base for comparison with other nations. The survey was conducted at the University of Costa Rica in San José, Costa Rica. The institution has 25 187

students (full- and part-time) and the majority come from the capital province and other urban centers.

## METHODS

### Instrument

A printed questionnaire contained four sections: background information, experiences with various forms of punishment, perceptions on these forms of punishment, and experiences with sexual abuse. This form was filled anonymously and then placed in an envelope so that absolute anonymity was maintained (ballot survey) (L.M., unpublished observations). The corporal punishment items were in table form and contained two parts: experience and perception. The punishments, 11 in all, were partially selected from the Payne survey<sup>6</sup> and from regional forms of punishment. The list was far from complete and gives little insight into the child-rearing patterns of the country. Furthermore, the question was complicated, yielding a large number of invalid responses which had to be excluded from the analysis.

The sexual abuse questions were taken from the 1985 LA Times national sexual abuse survey.<sup>2</sup> The four questions asked about experiences with attempted or actual sexual intercourse; touching, grabbing, or kissing; exhibition, photos, or performance; and oral sex or sodomy.<sup>2</sup> Questions on the nature of the experience followed each screening question and were completed after a positive response to having an experience. These questions also have their limitations. The definition of sexual abuse is left open to the student. This openness may have caused some false-positive and false-negative responses.<sup>2</sup> Also, the translation of the question about sexual intercourse from English to Spanish was slightly flawed, leaving the possibility that intercourse or attempted intercourse did not occur (but some kind of "relation" did happen). Finally, the questions following the screening question did not include the age of the abuser; thus some of the responses may have been peer sexual activity or "child's play." This seems unlikely, however, because the question explicitly stated "sexual abuse" and most people would not categorize child's play as a form of sexual abuse. Some experts are inclined to include these experiences as sexual abuse if the experience was unwanted or exploitative,<sup>5,9</sup> whereas others do not include peer abuse at all.<sup>3,4,10</sup> This analysis included all types of abusive experiences as perceived by the victim, regardless of the age of the perpetrator. Despite these limitations, questions of this nature (multiple and specific screening questions) elicit more reports of sexual abuse than general screening questions because they provide cues which trigger memories of past experiences.<sup>9</sup> Finally, even though there may be some debate as to the exact type of abuse or age of the abuser, it is likely that some type of traumatic experience happened to all those who gave a positive response to the screening questions.

### Procedure

Over a period of 2 weeks, 30 classes were sampled in six departments (History and Geography, Political Science, Law, Medicine, General Studies, and Electrical Engineering). The classes for this nonprobability sample were selected at different times of the day throughout the week. Students from each class were also selected at random (for example, all students with a student number that ended in an even number were asked to fill out the survey), and all students in their first class of the week were given a chance to complete the survey, to give equal opportunity to students who take one class a week as opposed to those who take four. The surveys took 15 minutes to complete and were passed out and

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Received for publication Jan 21, 1992; accepted Mar 10, 1992.

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collected on the spot (self-administration). This procedure yielded a 99.6% return rate with various unanswered questions on some of the surveys (analyzed as missing values).

### Sample

The sample consisted of 54% male students and 45% female students (0.8% did not respond). The majority of the respondents (77%) were aged between 17 and 22 and the rest between 23 and 71 (due to a program for the elderly to take classes). The students tended to be from the capital providence (54%) and come from middle- to upper-class backgrounds (approximately 60%).

## RESULTS

### Experiences and Perceptions of Corporal Punishment

Table 1 presents the experiences and perceptions of various forms of punishment. The most common forms of punishment were spanking (80%), hitting other parts of the body (not the head) with the hand (46%), and whipping (30%). The two most violent forms of punishment, burning and tying to a tree, were the least common (0.2% with each experience). The men experienced statistically equivalent amounts of punishment as the women, except for whipping, of which they experienced more ( $\chi^2: P = .03$ ). The two most violent forms of punishment (burning and tying to furniture) were experienced solely by women.

The perceptions of abuse are concordant with the degree of violence of the punishment. The two least violent punishments, spanking and removing toys, were generally regarded as accepted forms of discipline (around 80%). Hitting other parts of the body was also fairly accepted (38% considered it discipline), most likely because it was also widely experienced. The rest of the forms of punishment were considered abuse by more than 75% of the students.

### Sexual Abuse

Table 2 shows the compilation of the four questions on sexual abuse. Overall, 32.2% of the female students and 12.8% of the male students disclosed a history of abuse (anyone who answered all four questions and marked "yes" to one or more of them). Tables 3, 4, and 5 contain information about the nature of the abuse. The median age at the time of abuse was 7.0 for boys and 8.0 for girls. Forty-six

percent of the boys and 35% of the girls (who had experiences) were abused before age 7. Boys were more likely to be abused by a neighbor (53.4%), while girls were equally likely to be abused by a stranger (23.2%), a neighbor (25.3%), or a relative (30.5%). Of the female experiences, 6.3% were caused by a step-father and 3.2% by a natural father. A total of 3.5% of all women in the sample had an experience with either type of father. Also, 2.1% of the female experiences were caused by a natural mother. Men were the perpetrators of most of the abuse: 63.2% of the offenders against boys and 92.0% of the offenders against girls. The majority of the experiences were one-time events: 69.6% of the male experiences and 65.2% of the female.

## DISCUSSION

### Corporal Punishment

To identify child abuse in a given culture, it is necessary to understand the specific child-rearing practices of that culture.<sup>11</sup> This survey touches the disciplinary practices of Costa Rica but cannot demonstrate the reality of the situation. The primary problem is a lack of comparison. No previous studies have been done in Costa Rica about punishment, leaving these results as a base. It is impossible to know whether the perceptions and experiences of the university students reflect those of the rest of the country. A nationwide survey dedicated to child-rearing practices would provide the needed comparison for this study.

These students' ideas about physical punishment can be given some international perspective, though. In Barbados, Payne<sup>6</sup> showed that 70% of the Barbadian adults approved of the use of corporal punishment. Among those who approved, 76.5% sanctioned the use of whipping or flogging as an appropriate method of punishment.<sup>6</sup> On the opposite side, Sweden has made considerable efforts to eliminate corporal punishment, passing a law to make it illegal and starting a massive parent education campaign.<sup>12</sup> In the United States in 1988, 62% of the parents in a national survey used hitting or spanking as a form of punishment, 9% more than six times during the year.<sup>13</sup> One recent

TABLE 1. Perceptions and Experiences With Corporal Punishment

Punishment	Male					Female				
	Experience		Perception (n = 162)			Experience		Perception (n = 162)		
	%	n	Disc*	Abuse	Don't Know	%	n	Disc*	Abuse	Don't Know
Spanking	81.7	263	82.1	16.0	1.9	77.4	221	79.5	19.9	0.7
Hits with hand to other parts of body	44.4	259	38.3	59.9	1.9	48.9	221	39.1	58.9	2.0
Whipping/flogging	35.2	261	23.5	74.7	1.9	24.5	220	17.2	82.1	0.7
Removing toys	26.5	260	80.2	16.0	3.7	21.1	218	72.8	25.2	2.0
Hits with hand to the head	19.1	257	19.8	78.4	1.9	18.0	217	19.9	78.8	1.3
Hits with an object	17.4	258	16.0	82.1	1.9	20.5	220	15.9	83.4	0.7
Locking in a room	12.4	258	26.5	71.6	1.9	8.2	219	20.5	78.8	0.7
Covered with cold water	3.9	256	21.6	75.3	3.1	5.9	219	22.5	75.5	2.0
Suppressing food	2.3	257	20.4	79.0	0.6	2.3	220	21.9	77.5	0.7
Tying to furniture	0.0	257	14.8	84.0	1.2	0.5	218	12.6	87.4	0.0
Burning/scalding	0.0	257	15.4	83.3	1.2	0.5	219	12.6	87.4	0.0

\* Discipline.

**TABLE 2.** Percentage of Students Experiencing Sexual Abuse: Compilation\*

Form of Abuse	Men		Women	
	N	n (%)	N	n (%)
Sexual intercourse	265	17 (6.4)	222	24 (10.8)
Touching/kissing/etc	261	24 (9.2)	214	62 (29.0)
Exhibition/photos	258	7 (2.7)	212	11 (5.2)
Oral sex/sodomy	260	11 (4.2)	208	5 (2.4)
Total: one or more experiences†	257	33 (12.8)	202	65 (32.2)

\* N = number of students who answered (who answered all four in the total); n = number who had the experience.

† Answered all four questions.

study found that 73% of the parents of 2-year-olds used pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping, or spanking as a form of punishment.<sup>14</sup> Another study by Straus<sup>15</sup> showed that more than 97% of American children experience physical punishment. The students of Costa Rica reported widespread use of spanking and hitting, with limited use of flogging. These attitudes seem to reflect those in the United States, where physical punishment is generally accepted, and do not seem to be as severe as those held by Barbados. But it is necessary to reiterate that these attitudes and experiences apply only to a small population of Costa Rica, and it is necessary to study further the actual child-rearing patterns of the country.

### Sexual Abuse

The similar design of this survey to the LA Times survey of 1985 makes the data comparable, recognizing the population difference between the two surveys. Using a more equivalent population, these data can also be compared with US college student surveys done by Finkelhor<sup>3</sup> and Fromuth.<sup>4</sup> The overall percentage of female students with a history of sexual abuse (32%) is not statistically different from the LA Times national survey, which found that 27% ( $\chi^2: P = .61$ ) of the women had had a childhood sexual abuse experience.<sup>2</sup> Other studies showed slightly lower prevalences: The 1979 sample of New England college students found that 19.2% of the women had had a sexual abuse experience.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Fromuth<sup>4</sup> found that 22% of Auburn University female students had experienced an incidence of sexual abuse. Two other studies found much higher prevalence rates. Russell<sup>5</sup> showed a prevalence rate of 54% in 1983 and Peters et al<sup>10</sup> showed a rate of 62% in 1985, in

**TABLE 4.** Distribution of Sexual Abuse Experiences: Responsible Person\*

Characteristic	Men	Women
Sex	(n = 57)	(n = 88)
Male	63.2	92.0
Female	36.8	8.0
Relationship to victim	(n = 58)	(n = 95)
Stranger	19.0	23.2
Neighbor	53.4	25.3
Relative	19.0	30.5
Stepfather	0.0	6.3
Parent	0.0	5.3
Other	8.6	9.5

\* Values represent percentages.

**TABLE 5.** Distribution of Sexual Abuse Experiences: Frequency of Abuse\*

Frequency	Men (n = 56)	Women (n = 92)
Once	69.6	65.2
2-5 times	17.9	27.2
>5 times	12.5	7.6

\* Values represent percentages.

local studies. The male student prevalence rate was not statistically independent from the LA Times national survey rate (13% vs 16%) ( $\chi^2: P = .16$ )<sup>2</sup> nor the college student survey rate (8.6%) ( $\chi^2: P = .48$ ).<sup>3</sup>

When comparing the prevalence percentages between surveys, it is necessary to note the differences in methodology. The LA Times national survey was done by telephone, Finkelhor's college survey was a 45-minute self-administered written questionnaire accompanied by personal interviews in social science classes, and Fromuth's survey was completed by volunteers recruited from psychology classes. This survey, as stated, was self-administered, short, general, and done in a wide variety of classes. The differences in methodology may be a factor in the variant prevalence rates.<sup>10,16</sup>

More specific comparisons can also be shown between surveys. The percentage of students in Costa Rica with an experience of attempted or actual sexual intercourse (barring the translational limitation) is statistically similar for both sexes (6.4% of the men and 10.8% of the women) to the LA Times national survey values (9.5% of the men and 14.6% of the women) ( $\chi^2: P = .12$  [men];  $P = .14$  [women]).<sup>2</sup> However, the percentages of students experiencing kissing, touching, or grabbing in Costa Rica are sig-

**TABLE 3.** Distribution of Sexual Abuse Experiences: Percentage of Victims by Age and Sex: United States (US) and Costa Rica (CR)\*

Age (y) at Time of Abuse	Men		Women	
	CR (n = 48)	US (n = 169)	CR (n = 85)	US (n = 416)
3-6	46	12	32	14
7-9	29	28	38	27
10-12	12	29	27	37
13-15	8	22	2	14
16-18	4	6	1	6
Mean age, y	7.9		8.0	
Median age, y	7.0	9.9	8.0	9.6

\* US data from Finkelhor et al.<sup>2</sup>



nificantly higher than Finkelhor's values (9.2% of the men and 29.0% of the women vs 4.5% of the men and 19.6% of the women) ( $\chi^2$ :  $P = .006$  [men];  $P = .008$  [women]).<sup>2</sup> The percentage of students in Costa Rica experiencing oral sex or sodomy is quite high: 4.2% of the men and 2.4% of the women (Finkelhor's values were 0.4% of the men and 0.1% of the women).<sup>2</sup>

A comparison of the age at the time of abuse between this survey and the LA Times national survey is presented in Figs 1 and 2. The median age of abuse of the students in Costa Rica was lower than those found by Finkelhor in 1979 and 1990. This survey showed median ages (male and female) of 7.0 and 8.0, while Finkelhor's college student survey showed mean ages of 11.2 and 10.2,<sup>3</sup> and the national survey showed median ages of 9.9 and 9.6.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that the abuse in Costa Rica appears to peak before 10 years of age, whereas in the United States, prepubescent children are more likely to be abused.<sup>3</sup>

The characteristics of the perpetrator are also of interest. This study shows a high number of women abusers: 36.8% of the male experiences and 8% of the female experiences were caused by women. The percentage of male experiences caused by women in this survey is significantly higher than those in both Finkelhor's college survey (16%,  $\chi^2$ :  $P = .089$ )<sup>3</sup> and his national survey (17%,  $\chi^2$ :  $P = .003$ ).<sup>2</sup> The per-

centage of female experiences caused by women was significantly higher in the Costa Rican survey than the Finkelhor national survey, where he found only 1% ( $\chi^2$ :  $P = .007$ ).<sup>2</sup> Strangers were responsible for more of the male experiences in the Finkelhor national survey (40%) than in the Costa Rican survey (19%) ( $\chi^2$ :  $P = .004$ ).<sup>2</sup> The college survey value of 30% of the male experiences caused by a stranger was not statistically different from the Costa Rican percentage. Exactly like both of the Finkelhor surveys, no sexual abuse between a natural parent or stepparent and a boy was found. Furthermore, the Costa Rican survey and Finkelhor's national survey found similar rates of incestual relationships between natural parents or stepfathers and girls. In Costa Rica, 6.3% of the female experiences were caused by a stepfather, compared with 3% in the LA Times national survey ( $\chi^2$ :  $P = .25$ ); and 5.3% of the experiences were caused by a maternal parent, also compared with 3% in the same US survey ( $\chi^2$ :  $P = .22$ ).<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that two of the experiences were caused by a natural mother in this survey. The overall percentage of women having a sexual abuse experience with a father or stepfather (3.5%) is concordant with US values. The LA Times survey found that 2% of the women had had an incestual experience,<sup>2</sup> and Russell found that 4.5% of the women in her sample had had a similar experience.<sup>5</sup>

The final comparison relates to the frequency of the abuse. Like the two Finkelhor surveys, this study showed the majority of the experiences were one-time events: 70% of the male experiences and 65% of the female experiences. Finkelhor's college survey found 60% of the experiences to be one-time events,<sup>3</sup> and the national survey found that 73% of the male experiences and 65% of the female experiences occurred once.<sup>2</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This survey is a preliminary look at the prevalence rates of sexual abuse and experiences and perceptions of corporal punishment in Costa Rica. The study was a pilot and has a few limitations to its results. The high rate of abuse disclosed has led the PANIAMOR Foundation to embark on two nationwide surveys, one on child-rearing patterns and the other on sexual abuse. These two upcoming surveys will yield valuable comparison information for these data and verify the results obtained.

Overall, although this work gives little insight to the child-rearing practices of Costa Rican parents, it does appear that the use of physical punishment is at least as widespread as it is in the United States. The prevalence rates of sexual abuse in Costa Rica also fit within the accepted rates in the United States. Although the percentages reported here should not be generalized to the entire population (because of the kind of population, size of the sample, and methodology), they do demonstrate that sexual abuse and incest are not negligible in Costa Rica and that they may be as prevalent as in the United States.

The need for more field research is clear. Sexual abuse prevalence studies can be accompanied by studies of risk factors and consequences of abuse.

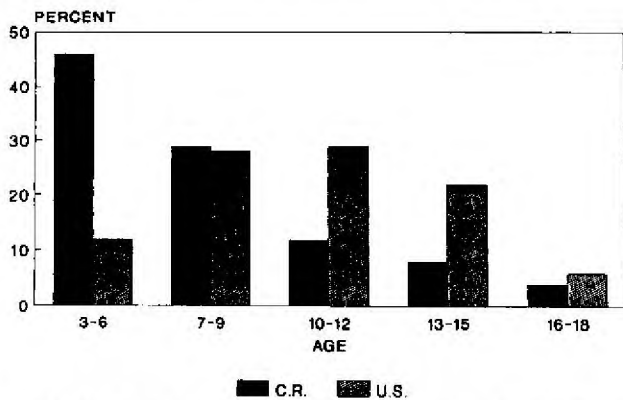


Fig 1. Distribution of experiences of male victims by age: Costa Rica (CR) and United States (US). US values from LA Times survey.<sup>2</sup>

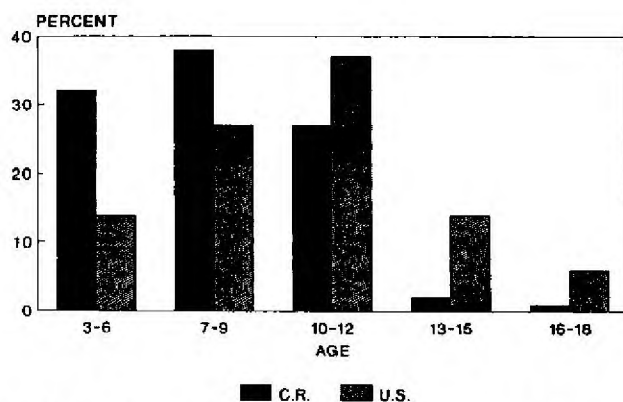


Fig 2. Distribution of experiences of female victims by age: Costa Rica (CR) and United States (US). US values from LA Times survey.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, further studies of the child-rearing patterns will provide insight into the extent and perceptions of physical abuse in Costa Rica and other developing nations.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to The C. Henry Kempe National Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect for all information and support; Daniel Antich at Instituto de Investigaciones en Salud and Tom Miyoshi at the Kempe Center for computer assistance; Tom Davis for statistical knowledge; and the students, faculty, and administration of the University of Costa Rica for their unselfish cooperation.

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