

# College Students More Likely to Be Lawbreakers if Spanked as Children, New UNH Research Finds

**Global Findings Evaluate Repercussions of Corporal Punishment in 15 Nations**

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*MURRAY STRAUS, CO-DIRECTOR OF UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE FAMILY RESEARCH  
LAB*

DURHAM, N.H. – No matter where they live in the world, university students who were spanked as children are more likely to engage in criminal behavior, according to new research by Murray Straus, co-director of University of New Hampshire Family Research Lab. Even young adults whose parents were generally loving and helpful as they were growing up showed higher rates of criminal behavior.

Straus will present the research results, “Crime by University Students in 15 Nations: Links to Spanking and Positive Parenting at Age 10 by Father, Mother, And Both Parents,” today at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology in Atlanta.

“The results show that spanking is associated with an increase in subsequent misbehavior, which is the opposite of what almost everyone believes. These results are consistent with a large number of high quality peer-reviewed studies,” Straus said.

Straus looked at criminality trends of university students in 15 countries using nine measures of criminality. The measures are criminal beliefs, antisocial personality, father assaulted by child in previous year, mother assaulted by child in previous year, physical assault of partner in previous year, severe physical assault of partner in previous year, physically injured partner in previous year, attacked someone intending to seriously injure them, and stolen money from anyone, including family.

The 15 countries are Hong Kong, Taiwan, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Norway, Poland, Russia, Scotland, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Israel, Canada, and the United States. Straus took into account the influence of such factors as parental education, misbehavior as a child, loving and positive approach to correcting misbehavior, student gender, student age, and nation. One of the most interesting findings was related to the effect of parents who took a loving and positive approach but who also spanked their children.

“So many parents and child psychologists believe that if spanking is done by loving and helpful parents, it has no harmful effect,” Straus said. “This study and only one other study I know of that empirically investigated this belief found that it is not true. Spanking seems to be associated with an increased probability of subsequent child behavior problems regardless of culture and, regardless of whether it done by loving and helpful parents.”

“Children need lots guidance and correction, but not by being physically attacked under the euphemism of ‘spanking,’” Straus said.

Straus found that positive parenting decreased the probability of subsequent crime but mainly for nonfamily crime. And even though positive parenting was associated with less crime by students, the relation of spanking to crime remained for all nine aspects of crime.

“Most people will find these results hard to understand because parents spank to correct misbehavior and to teach the child to be law-abiding citizens,” Straus said.

Straus also investigated the criminal behavior of university students who were spanked just by their fathers, just by their mothers, or by both parents. He found that university students who were spanked by both parents are associated with the greatest increase in criminality for eight of the nine criminality measures.

In most of the 15 nations, two-thirds of university students said they were hit when they were age 10, and among those who were hit, they said it typically was between once and twice a week. If university students were hit by only one parent, more often than not the mother was the parent carrying out the punishment.

Straus's findings are based on data from the International Parenting Study of 15 nations and 11,408 university students.

Widely considered the foremost researcher in his field, Straus is the co-director of the Family Research Laboratory and professor emeritus of sociology at UNH. He has studied spanking by large and representative samples of American parents since 1969. His newest book is *The Primordial Violence: Spanking Children, Psychological Development, Violence, and Crime* (Routledge, 2013). He also is the author of *Beating The Devil Out Of Them: Corporal Punishment In American Families And Its Effects On Children* (Transaction, 2006).

He has been president of three scientific societies including the National Council on Family Relations, and has been an advisor to the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. Much of his research on spanking can be downloaded from <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2>.

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